

40 Days of Lenten Meditations

2017



*Daily Devotionals on Prayer Written by Ministry Leaders
of The Church of North Portland*

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Taking Up Our Crosses

David Libby – St Johns Christian Church

Mark 8:34-36: He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

The Christian life is a life of dying to self. Dying to self is an active choice. It is not something passive. When Jesus took up his cross, it was an active choice that he made. He came to bring the kingdom of God to the world, and in doing so, took up his cross.

When we use the phrase, "_____ is my cross to bear," we are describing something that has happened to us. This is not the call that Jesus is making. Jesus is calling people to make an active choice. A choice, as verse 35 says, "for my sake."

Christ calls us to take up our crosses out of faithfulness to him.

Our faithfulness and loyalty to Jesus require us to give of ourselves.

The season of lent is a season in which we can actively give of ourselves out of faithfulness to Christ.

I've known people that gave up things like television, sugar, extra spending money, or certain foods for lent. Others have given up time. A friend of mine gave up an hour each day that he normally spent sitting in front of the television and went for a jog during that time.

Some of these things appear to be large sacrifices, while others may appear less sacrificial. In each circumstance, however, it took a considerable amount of prayer and effort to abstain from these habits during the weeks leading up to Easter.

As we give up a normal part of our daily lives during the season of Lent, let us remember that in a small way, we are dying to ourselves. We are making an

active choice for Jesus' sake. The Christian life is a life of dying to self. It is a life of taking up our crosses. As we feel the loss of what we've given up for lent, let us remember that it is for the sake of Jesus that we've done so.

PRAYER

God, help us to remember that the Christian life is a life of losing. It is a life dedicated to giving of ourselves for Your sake.

Vulnerable, Messy and Authentic

Katherine Schmitt – St Johns Wesleyan

Portland's snowfall this winter left my lawn in a sparkling cascade of white. My children's laughter echoed down the street as they galloped across the road. Underneath the beauty of the snow lay the freshly deposited dog poo my neighbor's dog had left just moments before the snow fell. The snow sure looked pretty though.

Sunday morning, I obediently went to church ready to lead the congregation in worship. My cheeks were still flushed from the bitter fight with my husband, my eyes still bright from crying. My dress sure looked pretty though.

Monday morning my daughter arrived at school with her hair done, uniform on and homework completed. Never mind the sad look in her eyes after a morning of rants and yelling from all members of the household. She sure looked pretty though.

A lot of us church goers are really good at faking it - showing up on Sunday morning and putting on our "best selves." We know how to be polite, we know how to look, what to sing, what to say and where to turn in our Bibles. We have our priorities wrong. Focusing on what we are saying and how we are looking - while ignoring the mess underneath. Many of us have been doing this for a while. But this isn't our authentic selves and it is not sustainable. Our closest friends, confidants, and families don't only see us at our best or when we choose to be presentable. They see all of us - the messy us. When we fail to show those closest to us our struggles and our deepest desires, we miss out on the emotional connection that relationship deserves. We fail to enter into the true intimacy of friendship.

The same is true of our relationship with God.

"After Jesus had taken the wine he said, "It is fulfilled"; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit... One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water. This is the evidence of one who saw it- true evidence, and he knows that what he says is true- and he gives it so that you may believe as well. Because all this happened to fulfill the words of the scripture: ... They will look to the one whom they have pierced." – John 19:30, 34-37

The work Jesus did for us on the cross was not dressed up fancy. It was not pretty or composed. It was not polite or palatable. It was messy. It was suffering.

It is in the suffering of Jesus on the cross that we saw the fullness of God's love. His love was made known to us in the darkest way possible- through the death of His son. Jesus came to save us from the bonds of sin and enter us into the divine intimacy with the Father. That is the work of Jesus. Jesus' ministry was not pretty, composed, polite or palatable. It was messy. It was full of suffering people. It was authentic and met people where they needed to be met.

The work Jesus did in his ministry and on the cross shows us how to enter into the divine intimacy God calls us into. We are called to be vulnerable with God. To cry out to God. To praise God. To serve God. It is only through a faith which has the strength to be vulnerable, messy and authentic will we experience the fullness and understanding of God' love.

PRAYER

"Lord, forgive me the times when I showed up to pray pretending to be stronger than I am. Forgive me when I showed up to sing and listened only to my voice- forgetting to listen for yours.

Lord help me be open to you.

Help me to show you my wounds and my baggage.

Help me to understand that your grace and your love know no bounds.

I long to enter into divine intimacy with you.

I long to know you more.

Thank you for your faithfulness, Lord.

It is in your beautiful name I pray.

Amen"

Deny Yourself

Linda Jo – Community of Hope

Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23 (NIV)

A friend challenged me recently to think about what my crosses are. Some of them are very challenging. Others are just petty annoyances that I would prefer not to have to deal with. If I think about it, I can make a long list!

Jesus said I have to deny myself. What does that mean? What do I deny? Wanting my own way? Wanting things to be easy, comfortable, etc? Do I have to be miserable all the time, never getting things the way I want? I'm not sure that's worth it! Especially when I feel like my personal space and time are invaded, I rebel! I would almost rather endure a hard thing than a petty annoyance!

I am reading a book called *Qualities of a Spiritual Warrior* by Graham Cooke. He presents another point of view that I find striking. He suggests the challenges we experience in life are opportunities to see God acting in us in ways we would not otherwise experience. We have a chance to grow in our ability to trust Him and to build our joy as we focus on His victory in faith rather than seeing the struggles on the way there. We don't embrace the cross for the sake of the cross. We take up the cross as a way to the resurrection.

I can encounter a crisis and be defeated. Or I can encounter a crisis and deliberately praise God for how He is both working in the situation and how He is working in me. What is He teaching me? How can I grow in love, trust, and deep faith in Him? How does he want to purify my heart so I can see with his eyes and be united in His love? If I do that, the crisis is a chance to experience great joy as I wonder at the great work that He is doing in both me and in my circumstances. What a gift!

Father, increase my trust in you. Help me to see even the slight annoyances I experience as opportunities to see you working in me. Help me be willing to build my ability to be uncomfortable as a means to becoming a stronger person so I can deal with any larger crisis that arises. Help endure and grow in anything I experience out of love for you and those you place in my life.

Ecclesiastes 9.7-10

Aaron Morris - Hope Presbyterian Church

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

It probably seems mismatched to read passages about eating and drinking merrily in a season of fasting, but by verse 10 you can feel echoes of Ash Wednesday: “to dust you will return.” Lenten fasts help us savor the goodness of God’s gifts to us as we enjoy them the rest of the year. Likewise we look forward to resurrection with more fervor, because we give time for sober acknowledgement that our days are numbered. God loves mystery and the Bible is full of paradox – tensions that keep us coming back with better and deeper questions. The realities of death, fasting, sin, and sacrifice seem like they should make us nothing-else-matters nihilists. But all of these live in the shadow of fuller, better realities on the horizon. Resurrection, feasting, holiness, and flourishing will take over, and in the meantime, we live in the mysterious contentment of striving. We apply wisdom and sweat to the things that God places in front of us, knowing that his approval and his promises allow us to enjoy life now in the shadow cast by the light of the life to come.

PRAYER

O Lord, you give many gifts, and every gift from you is deeply, truly good. Your grace in the mundane, and your presence in eternity; both are ours through the faithful life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Let our fasting enrich our feasting. Let our relationships swell with the love of the Spirit. Put to death apathy and greed in us, and resurrect faithfulness in our work and contentment in our rest. Amen.”

James 5:13-14

Matt Shea – St Johns Wesleyan

Is any of you in trouble he should pray. Is anyone happy let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone of you sick he should call the Elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord

Have you ever wanted someone to pray for you before you pray for yourself? I have. We need be able to run to God first before anyone else. When we are in trouble we should run to God. When we are happy we should sing songs of praise to God. And when we feel like we made it we should ask someone to pray for us like when we are sick. We should ask people to pray for us but first we should pray ourselves.

I challenge all of us to seek God first this lent.

“...Your Kingdom Come on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

Josh Hawk – AllOne Community Services

I was recently asked the question, “How do you get to heaven?” Of course, there is the proper theological answer of only through Christ, through his grace, confessing our sin, and asking him into your life, but I have since pondered this question with much thought. It is of course easy for us to think of Heaven as a far-off place we go after we die. We all have our own interpretations and understandings of exactly what it will look like and the steps to take in order for us to take residence there. However, I think we all can agree that God wants to build his kingdom on earth *as it is in heaven*.

The season of Lent is a time for me to reflect on the culmination of God’s incarnation through Christ. It is through the person of Jesus Christ that God brought heaven to earth. As a pastor I am constantly challenged with the task of making Christ known, bringing God’s kingdom to earth, through my relationship with him and my relationship with those around me. I am continually reminded that it is not about me and my ideas, but rather it is about obedience and discernment. I often find myself being a bridge between this world and God’s world. His desire is to build his kingdom on earth and he wants to use me.

May we be attentive to his spirit and his leading as we avail ourselves to this kingdom, one that is much bigger than us and our finite understanding, and submit ourselves to full obedience to God and his desire to set up his kingdom in our midst.

Unity – John 17:20-25

Luke Glover – People of Praise

I was recently reading and meditating on this scripture. Here Jesus prays for the generations of believers that will come after hearing the disciple's testimony about him.

The Lord revealed something about this scripture that I had never really pondered. I normally take the "let us all be unified" as to mean in church, ecclesial bodies, etc. Yes it does mean that but the Lord was saying to me that he wanted us to be unified completely with him and to the father. To not know where I end and where he begins. To be completely and utterly complete in the father through the reconciliation that Jesus offers.

He says in verse 21 *"that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* (NIV)

Jesus set the standard and made it possible for us to be reconciled with the Father. Using Jesus' example, how often do we seek to be completely unified with the Father? How often do we walk in that reconciliation?

The very next chapter Jesus illustrates this reality by saying he is the vine and we are the branches. That apart from unity with him we can bear no fruit. Attached to the vine we are our truest self.

Too often I get distracted from all of the "noise" of the world and have to reorient myself to this reality. All of the demands on my life can get me off course from operating daily knowing that I am in Jesus and Jesus is in me just as Jesus and the father are one. It's a win-win!

Jesus, we pray for unity among all believers and reconciliation of all mankind. We also pray for greater unity with you and with the father. Thank you for making it possible to walk in a new identity. May we increase in greater awareness of our unity with the Father through what you've done and continue to do. Amen

Lessons from Nehemiah

Stephen Dilworth – Youth Dynamics

The story of Nehemiah has always been one of my favorites from scripture. I am not sure what draws me to it so much. It might be because Nehemiah was a man of action, or because it really is an underdog story. It also has great leadership attributes that catch my attention. I love how he breaks down the task, which seems to overwhelm the people, into smaller pieces that they can handle. Basically, “Hey you, worry about the part of the wall next to your house.” And, when everybody comes together the wall is accomplished. There is also this part where the people have to overcome significant negativity from those around them. I’d encourage you to read through Nehemiah again, at least through the first four chapters.

But at one point they are almost shut down completely from words, and threats. Without a single stone or stick lifted against them, fear cripples them. There is a lot of fear in our country and community right now. Fear on both sides of issues. Media makes it loud. Maybe you have heard the term fearmongering?

Fearmongering means “the action of deliberately arousing public fear or alarm about a particular issue.” FEAR... and lack of resources is the number one reason that the walls around Jerusalem laid in ruins for so long. Fear seems to be polarizing our communities and especially our country.

But what can you do? If you were to survey your city like Nehemiah did in Chapter one, what would you see? What report would you get? Nehemiah deliberately surveyed the city without his “advisors.” He wanted to look with God’s eyes. For us, I think it means exploring our communities without the direction of media, or to not be reactionary to someone’s post. Take time to explore/ survey/ investigate (talk with your neighborhood) with God’s eyes, and see just what He has in store.

PRAYER

Lord in troubling times, in confusing times, let us rally to support one another. Let us press into you. Give us eyes to see as you do. Let us return to the foundational prayer, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Joshua 1:9 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Lessons from Nehemiah....

Continued

Stephen Dilworth – Youth Dynamics

In yesterday's devotion I encouraged everyone to read through the book of Nehemiah, or at least the first four chapters. I want to look at another piece that has stood out and challenged me for some time. This is more about the heart of this man Nehemiah.

Some quick background. God, all powerful, all sovereign God throughout the old testament, often used other nations as instruments of discipline against Israel when they, as a people group, would stray away from the Lord. This often lead to a prophet being raised up, some sort of climactic encounter where there is a confrontation and the people or leaders repent and turn back towards God. (overly simplified I know)

Pre-Nehemiah the nation of Israel is overrun, conquered. The majority of people are taken into exile, into forced service for the conquering nation, slaves. This group included nobility, the extremely talented in crafts and trade, as well as general laborers. This was long before Nehemiah's birth. Nehemiah was actually born in captivity, in exile. Which means, that none of the actions taken against Israel, the captivity, the slavery, the exile is his fault. He wasn't even born yet, there is no way, fully impossible for any responsibility to be placed at his feet for what had happened to his nation. Guilt free baby, and now he had worked his way up in service in the royal court. He appears to have a cordial relationship with the King. Maybe even pulled himself up by his own boot-straps.

However, listen to his heart as he cries out to God, after he hears the terrible news of how badly things are going back in his homeland. "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the

commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses."

We see a broken and repentant man. Not blaming things on others, not justifying himself. He even takes personal responsibility, " We have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house..." Repentance is such a beautiful thing. The fruit of repentance is reconciliation and redemption. Why then are we so afraid to repent? Why are we so resistant to taking any of the responsibility? I hear excuses like shaming. But isn't it pride that keeps our hearts from being broken like Nehemiah's? Is it not pride that keeps us from repentance?

I am not trying to attack anyone, or make people feel bad. I just don't want us to miss out on the beauty of redemption. Our land is broken, and people are hurting and gripped with fear. Surely everyone can come together around the acknowledgment that we want God to show up in a big way and bring healing.

PRAYER

Just pray like Nehemiah...

Colossians 1:3- 6

Matt Shea – St Johns Wesleyan

"We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you because we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and of the love you have for all the saints the faith and love that springs from the whole that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of Truth the Gospel that has come to you."

Has someone ever come up to you and said because of what your ministry accomplished my life was changed and now I feel God has called me to do something. And when that happens you get so excited about it that you want to tell everyone. You want to write them a letter of encouragement and celebration when you hear what their ministry is doing. This is exactly what Paul is writing here to the Colossians.

Why not write a letter of Celebration to someone?

Let Us In

Adam McInturf – Church of the Servant King

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus 23.22

Fasting is the central practice of Lent. In various shapes and measures, our fast through the 40 days of Lent is an imitation of the 40 days Jesus spent alone and hungry in the desert. Jesus’s fast, in turn, was in imitation of the fast his favorite prophet, Isaiah called:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Fasting is more than skipping meals or doing without ice cream. Above all, fasting is about repenting of injustice and setting about untying the yokes of oppression. Perhaps then, as we imitate Jesus’s Isaiah fast, we should listen to the even older command of Leviticus: *do not reap the edges of your field.*

But we are not farmers, most of us. Perhaps we are not even grocers with the ability to donate day-old food to a food bank. We are asked to restrain ourselves, in order to make room for others. Perhaps God is asking us today: *do not reap the edges of your lives.*

Instead of maximizing our own material security, God asks us to make space for the poor and the foreigners living among us. God asks us to share. God asks us to *do without* in order to *do for*.

May our fasting and our praying, then, be the beginning of a refusal to reap the edges of our lives, opening our lives to the presence of the poor and the foreigner residing among us. For we were once strangers and foreigners and God chose to let us in.

Ask, Seek, and Knock

Joshua Motes – Rose City Church

"Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness."

— Martin Luther

"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you." - Matthew 7:7

Early African believers were earnest and regular in private devotions. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, "Brother, the grass grows on your path."

Prayer connects our weakness to the endless strength of our heavenly Father. That's prayer in a nutshell. We don't ask, seek, and knock because He's reluctant. We pursue God's kingdom on our knees and knuckles because God is hiding something for us. He's not hiding something from us.

Jesus was the "first fruits" of Heaven on Earth. Men and women whose knees and knuckles are marked by kneeling and knocking have also been the very ones whom God used to bring the kingdom of heaven to Earth. This is prayer's purpose: Heaven on Earth.

If we desire to be marked by prayer, we must take Jesus' words from Matthew 18:18 to heart: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." He also said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus wanted us to grasp the privilege and responsibility we have of standing with Him in bringing Heaven to Earth.

How do we accomplish this more practically? Scripture makes it clear: 1) Ask 2) Seek 3) Knock

If we look at prayer as “rubbing a magical lamp” we miss the context of much of what Jesus taught on the Kingdom. His teaching often reflected a process. Instantaneous answers only exist in myths and movies. God’s not a genie. He’s a gardener. He works within the process of seed, time and harvest. Therefore, let’s look at three distinct but interconnected seasons of prayer.

ASKING is a season that leads us into a conversation about promise. As we study the scripture we are able to discover what God’s will is and then in doing so, pray back to God that which He already wills. It is in praying the will of God that God’s will becomes unleashed on the world that we live in today.

SEEKING is the second season of prayer. The seed needs the soil of promise to fertilize it. As we seek confirmation of His promise through the Word, we will find God confirming His Word and His promise. He may give us a confirming word through a Christ follower who has no idea what we have been asking of God. He may lead you into a movie theatre where He’s going to give you a giant mirror (a movie) in which to reflect the promise He has just sowed into your heart. He is able to use non-orthodox means to confirm His Word and firm up His promise in your heart. In this season, we must mix faith with patience and not become lazy seeking the fertilization of the promise.

KNOCKING is the final season of prayer. We have now gone from our knees to our knuckles — from bowing down to rising up. We discover ourselves standing more publicly with Christ contending for the doors to be opened for His Kingdom to break through. If “asking” is a conversation, then “seeking” is a journey and “knocking” brings the breakthrough. Each of them are unique seasons, but all of them are prayer.

Praying Fully

David Libby – St Johns Christian Church

Jesus goes up onto a mountain and teaches his disciples. In the middle of this long teaching, Jesus teaches the disciples about prayer. He begins, *“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name”* (Mt. 6:9). The first quality of Jesus’ prayer is AWE. Jesus teaches the disciples to acknowledge God’s holiness; to be in awe of the God to whom they are speaking.

The next quality of Jesus’ prayer is SUBMISSION to God’s authority. Jesus teaches the disciples to pray *“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* (Mt. 6:10). He teaches that prayers are to include an element that says *“Not my will, not what I wish for, but Your will be done.”*

Next Jesus teaches that prayer should include ASKING. The next part of the prayer is *“Give us this day our daily bread”* (Mt. 6:11). In addition, the prayer closes with *“And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one”* (Mt. 6:13). Much of the time, our prayer lives focus on asking God for things. This makes sense—we have needs, and often we have hurts. However, this is only a portion of the prayer that Christ teaches his disciples. We must remember that asking God for things should only be a part of our overall prayer life.

Then Jesus teaches the importance of REPENTANCE in our prayer lives. He teaches his disciples to pray *“Forgive us our debts”* (Mt. 6:12a). We are a broken people, and we have this pattern of sin in our lives. Part of our prayer life should involve asking God to forgive us when we sin against him.

The final theme in Jesus’ prayer is FORGIVENESS. Immediately after Jesus says *“Forgive us our debts,”* he says *“as we also have forgiven our debtors”* (Mt 6:12b). In addition, he closes the prayer by saying *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Mt. 6:14-15). Jesus is tough when talking about forgiveness. We cannot expect to be forgiven when we sin against God if we do not forgive others when they sin against us. We need to understand that we are sinful in the same way that those who wrong us are sinful.

Jesus modeled a healthy prayer life, one that does not focus solely on Asking and Repentance (as our prayer lives so often do), but one that also incorporates Awe, Submission, and Forgiveness. As we pray, let us remember the prayer Jesus modeled. Let us pray fully, making an effort to incorporate all elements of Jesus' prayer: Awe, Submission, Asking, Repentance, and Forgiveness.

Psalm 24

Aaron Morris - Hope Presbyterian Church

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah”

When we know it and when we forget, the earth – in its entirety – belongs to the Lord. Abraham Kuyper personalized it for humanity this way: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” That is true, whether we recognize it or not...but projects pile up, kids run late, deadlines for work ambush us, social calendars tangle, little meddling screws need tightening around the house, and we forget. Suddenly the world only feels like mostly, or maybe even partially, Christ’s. Self-centered living, self-serving priorities, and self-oriented loves work to carve out slivers of the world where I can be sovereign. Truth be told, I’m terrible at it, but I find it difficult to admit – much less give it back. Lent is that spring cleaning for the soul, where we look at the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus, and join him. His sacrifice won him the world back from brokenness. So – as an aside – it’s his twice: once in creation, and again in redemption. Our sacrifices and reflection during Lent don’t buy us a portion of his world. Instead, it’s a chance to let him remind us, how very much it really is his, and how very good he is at caring for us in it.

PRAYER

“Lord Jesus, in this quiet moment, I am reminded that I am small, but belonging to you, I am not helpless. You are the King of all creation, Ruler of history, global and my own. Would you use this season of Lent to remind me of your good and gracious care. Remind me of the simplicity and rest that come from entrusting myself and everything in my life – things for which I am responsible, and the things I am not – to you. Let us spend more time quietly seeking you, shunning the temptations and sins that have piled up with inattention over time. Amen.”

A Faith That Will Not Let Go!

Job 19: 21 - 27

Phil Hawk – St Johns Wesleyan

Lent is a season in the church calendar that offers a great opportunity to stop, reflect and pray as we seek the heart of God for our own lives and for the lives of those that God has placed around us.

I like to go back from time to time and read through the story of Job and reflect on the incredible faith he displays. Job was a man of prayer with an incredible faith in God. He prayed for his family daily. As a priest for his family he also sacrificed burnt offerings on behalf of his family. His entire life was saturated with an incredible faith throughout. Words that were used to describe Job were; blameless, upright, feared God and shunned evil. God Himself said of Job, "There is no one on earth like him."

As a test of Job's unwavering faith, the attacks on his physical body, the loss of his family, the loss of his possessions and the scathing remarks from his "friends." Job cries out:

"Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

In the end God instructs Job's "friends" in finding deliverance for all of the accusatory things they had spoken to Job. Job performs as their "priest" as they find forgiveness.

God, grant us the grace like that of Job as he wrestled with adversity but kept on pressing in to know You. Amen!

For They

Adam McInturf – Church of the Servant King

A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over... who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Luke 6.19-21

The beatitudes are a stethoscope set on the beating heart of God. The poor, the humble, the peacemakers, they are near to God's heart, and they will not ultimately be abandoned to those who take advantage of them and grind their lives into the earth. God promises them the future: the kingdom. You can think of the two sides of each beatitude as the flow of blood in and out of the heart, and that little repeated phrase—"for they"—as the beat.

***** for they ** for they ** for they ** for they ** for they *****

In the beatitudes, Jesus draws the lives of the poor into the life of God like a heart drawing blood through its ventricles, sending them back into the world with a promissory beat: "where you go, I will go." A promise that the prayer of the abandoned will not go unanswered: "Lord when you come into your kingdom, remember me." That where anyone is being taken advantage of because they are weak, God is there with them and as the weak one. That where a refugee is scapegoated by the wealthy, warm, and well-fed, and cast out with nowhere to go, God is there with them and as the one being cast out.

Because Jesus was fully God, the poor can be confident that the Kingdom belongs to them not just because God likes them (though God does like them!), but also because *they are like God*. God is humble. God is meek. Though rich, God became poor for our sakes. God is a peacemaker. God fled a homeland in fear of violence. God was persecuted for righteousness' sake on the cross.

The transformational heartbeat of the love of God: this is the mystery of our faith. This heartbeat gives life to Scripture's written declarations of the gracious kindness of God. This heartbeat frees the poor to struggle for justice and calls all to join them, for we do not serve an idol who depends on the power we can gather by trampling others. The poor are given hope for the losses and failures of a life of meekness and righteousness, *for they* are born along by the bloodstream of grace, caught up in God's heart of love, and sent out on the beat of a promise: *for they* will receive mercy, *for they* will inherit the earth, *for they* will be called the children of God.

PRAYER

Our Father, your Son gave his life trusting the promise that the kingdom belongs to the poor. May you cause that same Spirit to dwell in us.

Put it Down

Christy Dirren – Cross Bridge

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.” Hebrews 12:1 NLT

“Gonna lay down my burdens down by the river side...” has been sung since Civil War days. Regardless of the singer’s setting or situation, the reference is to setting down what weighs us down. Burdens are a distraction, a nuisance, a diversion... anything that gets in the way of us truly connecting with God. The passage from Hebrews places us smack dab in the middle of the cross country race called life. Spectators who have already finished the race are cheering us on, calling attention to their journey of faith, giving us hope and encouragement. We’re standing there dressed in the trendiest running gear and shoes ready to dash. The starter pistol fires and we head like a herd in one direction. But we struggle to gain momentum and hit a decent pace. Each hand holds a suitcase full of habits and hobbies. Our back pack bulks out from the creature comforts we feel we cannot live without. Although equipped with the latest wireless technology, the plethora of chargers become entangled with our confused feet.

We have an endurance race to run! God has called us! And equipped us with what we need to complete the race. But dang it, we call into question God’s choice of outfitting and decide we must accessorize. Distractions. Doubt.

Start singing. Gonna lay down my burdens...

Want something more contemporary? Feel you are being judged by the crowd instead of encouraged? David Crowder invites us to lay down our burdens and lay down our shame... come as you are.

PRAYER

God, you are the great designer and have everything laid out before us. Forgive me as I waste time doubting and second guessing you. Please receive my burdens, those things that weigh me down and hinder my ability to run the race.

Amen.

Who Do We Follow?

Josh Hawk – AllOne Community Services

READ: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

As a parent, one of my greatest joys is to watch my children play together in harmony. It doesn't happen as often as I would like, but when it does I just want to take a picture and cherish the moment forever. I think this is often how God feels when he sees his children get along and work together. It is one thing merely to tolerate one another, but when we actively pursue relationships with other people in God's family, especially those we might have difficulty finding commonality with, I believe God is pleased. I like to think that this heart and attitude brings a smile to God's face.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "I wish you would all agree... some say 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.'" I have been reminded recently in some of my circles how easy it is for us to still say, "I follow Luther," or "I follow Wesley," or "I follow Calvin," or "I follow the Pope." It is interesting how even saying, "I don't follow any denomination, but only follow Jesus" even works to put us into a corner and can bring about division. Paul reminds us that Christ and his gospel is not divided. Sure, there may be room for different interpretations and teachings, but at the end of the day we are all part of the same family and are part of the Body of Christ. It is my prayer that we continue to seek out things that unite us rather than things that keep us separated as we actively work together to build up the body of Christ, and not to tear it down.

Mercy, Not Sacrifice

Charlie Fraga – People of Praise

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' [*Hosea 6:6*] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." *Matthew 9:9-13 (NIV)*

This passage reveals so very much about the person of Jesus and his mission. As I read and reflect on this passage, these are some of the things that strike me:

Jesus calls people of all walks of life to follow him, even tax collectors. (even republicans, even democrats, even anarchists, even gang members, even panhandlers, even manipulators, even the wealthy, even racists, even pastors, even ICE agents, even rebellious teenagers, even the dishonest, even the pious, even "professional Christians," even, even, even...)

When Jesus calls someone and they respond, he appears to be desirous of entering into their lives, their houses, their networks of friends and acquaintances.

Jesus is not a "respector of persons." He is unconcerned about "what people think," about what is "proper." He is counter-cultural. He goes right to the heart of things, seeking only to be marching to the drum of his Father.

Jesus has the "solution," the "treatment," the "cure" for what ails every person, just as a doctor has what a sick person needs. He is the divine physician.

Jesus wants us to reflect deeply on the meaning of his Father's words from the prophet Hosea "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

I find it helpful, as with all passages from the Gospels, to read, reflect...and then re-read and reflect more deeply...on passages such as this one, all the while seeking to encounter the person of Jesus in his actions and his words. If we relate to Jesus primarily as an example of moral behavior then we will benefit to some degree, but in so doing he can easily remain distant. But if we seek to go deeper and discover his very personhood, his desire to have a friendship with us, his deep love and mercy for us as persons, as his brothers and sisters, then the possibilities for joining him in his work are so much more sustainable and effective for the world that he created and loves so much.

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit, and burst forth into my life, renewing my mind and my heart, empowering me to daily experience a personal relationship with Jesus. Bring my baptism to life. Fan the embers of my baptism into a flame that grows brighter by the day. Draw me day by day into a deeper encounter with Jesus as my Lord and brother. Remove whatever blinders I have allowed to limit my view of what is possible in my relationship with Jesus. Set me free from my concerns about "what people think" so that I may join Jesus in his mission more effectively. Jesus, forgive my sins as only you can. Heal me, divine physician, of my sicknesses. I want to experience what you desire for me. Draw me to your person, yourself, more deeply than ever this Lent.

New Life Through the Resurrection of Christ

Stewart Minnieweather – Church of God in Christ

As Jesus's friend Lazarus had died his sisters felt that they would not see their brother again. But Jesus assured them if they would believe they would see their brother again. They said "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus saith unto her, "Thy brother shall rise again." Jesus said unto her, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: Lazarus, come forth." Yes the moment you and I believe on him, we pass from death unto life in him. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

John 11:24-25, 43 and 2 Cor. 5:17

Pick it Up

Christy Dirren – Cross Bridge

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”
Galatians 5:22-23*

How are you doing with your New Year’s resolution? Still avoiding soda? Hitting the gym 4 days a week? Praying for an hour every morning? If you are succeeding, Congratulations!!

If you are falling short of that goal set 8 weeks ago, fear not! Lent is here! Many Christians follow the invitation to observe this season in ways that will draw them closer to God. A few days back you were encouraged to put down a burden. Today’s invitation is to pick up a positive habit as a replacement. For some it is a matter of reframing. Want to quit drinking soda? How about, “I will be drinking a glass of water before I drink anything else.” Or chose to drink only water for a few weeks. Trouble showing up 4 days a week? Consider scheduling a date with yourself and your favorite treadmill every Tuesday and Thursday before work.

Time out... reread the scripture. It is easy to get “lost in the weeds” of devising a detailed plan to lost weight. The 9 Fruit of the Spirit are intangibles. If diet and exercise are needed to get your personal fruit basket in shape, go for it! Pray while climbing the stationary escalator carrying you nowhere. Examine each fruit and evaluate your personal supply. Picking up that habit of discernment informs what you will do after April 16th in regards to what you put down.

PRAYER

Lord, Jesus. We live in a world where success is measured in human metrics, instead of spiritual growth. Guide us to a space of clarity where we can adopt a new habit which glorifies you. Amen.

Remembering God's Promises

Julia Nielsen – University Park United Methodist/St. Johns Community Church

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Genesis 16:1-4

REFLECTION

I've been reading Genesis daily for the last few months, traveling with these early stories - stories of migration, of promise, of sin and family. The season of Lent is also infused with these themes, and it's the story of Sarai and Hagar that has hit me hardest during these scriptural wanderings.

Sarai and Abram have already received God's promise of descendants, as many as the stars in the sky. They've seen God's blessings in their own long lives. And yet, here they are manipulating God's plan because they cannot imagine it working as promised. Sarai turns her slave Hagar over to her husband as a surrogate for motherhood. Abram goes along. The child of Hagar and Abram is born and the resulting conflict rolls through generations. All because they could not wait on God. All because they took matters into their own hands... or rather, forced their own will on others, others like Hagar, who find themselves on the receiving end of more powerful peoples' anxieties, doubts, and need for control.

I find myself wondering this season about how our own inability to trust in God's promises visits hardship and suffering on the lives of others. Where my own impatience with God's timeline or my doubt in God's providence creates and multiplies pain in the lives of those around me. Love begins with first doing no harm, as we know. I draw hope from the end of the story, of course: God turns even Hagar and Ishmael's pain into blessing. No matter how we damage others with our lack of trust, God still creates good for them. They are blessed despite our brokenness.

PRAYER

God, help us to honestly witness our own pain, doubts, and lack of trust in you so that we do not visit our brokenness on others. Help us to remember and live into the promises you have made, promises for abundant life and rich blessing beyond what we can imagine. Amen.

When Does God Move?

Jay Braband – Journey3

The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you? Judges 6:14

Gideon was hiding in a winepress, a deep pit meant for crushing grapes, not for threshing wheat, which is what Gideon was trying to do. He was in the pit hiding from the Midianites, the neighboring bullies who were bent on stealing Gideon's crops. Gideon was helpless and hiding.

When does God move? I want him to move when I have a handle on the situation, when I see a clear path to the solution. I want him to do the thing I ask him to do, just when I ask him to do it. But God often comes to me when, like Gideon, I am in the pit, helpless and hiding. "Go in the strength that you have. Am I not sending you?"

I don't like feeling helpless, but I am thinking that God is honored and I that am accepting reality when I accept my helplessness. I love the Lord's response to Gideon. Go, step out of the pit, just as you are, helpless and hiding, I am sending you. Nothing more is required. Then Gideon goes, doubting and fearful, but he goes. And God moves.

PRAYER

Dear Father, I feel helpless and I want to hide. Help me to give myself to you, just as I am. Amen

All About God

Pastor Andy Gobel – St Johns Covenant Church

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6.16-18

A few years ago I really messed up Lent—and I have Facebook to blame for it (not really...it was my fault, but Facebook definitely played a part).

I had chosen to give up all beverages except for water as a Lenten fast, and I announced that decision on my Facebook page. This drew some attention from several friends and acquaintances who “liked” this decision and encouraged me in the comment section. This would have been all well and good, had I just made that one announcement and appreciated those responses. But I had to take it one step further by posting a few days later about how challenging this fast was for me, and asking my friends to pray for me.

This is when I blew it. I had completely lost sight of what Lent is all about—focusing on devotion and faithfulness to God and God’s ways—and instead I had made it all about myself. Thankfully, an old friend gently nudged me into repentance by posting the reference for the verses above. I felt embarrassed, but was thankful for the corrective nevertheless. From then on, I fasted from posting about my fasting.

I continue to be thankful for that simple comment on my self-centered Facebook post, as it is now a yearly reminder that observing a Holy Lent is not really about me at all. No, this season of intentional fasting, prayer, and service is all about drawing near to God. It’s not about accolades or atta-boys. It’s about honoring God, which is rewarding in and of itself.

In Honor of Syria: Part 1

Ryan Kennelly – Grace Christian Fellowship

A poem on Christ's resurrection from St. Ephrem, a 4th century Syrian follower of Christ, poet, and theologian:

1. The Lamb has come for us from the House of David,
the Priest and Pontiff from Abraham;
He became for us both Lamb and Pontiff,
giving His body for sacrifice, His blood for sprinkling.
Blessed is His perfecting!

Refrain: Blessed is Your rising up!

2. The Shepherd of all flew down
in search of Adam, the sheep that had strayed;
on His shoulders He carried him, taking him up:
he was an offering for the Lord of the flock.
Blessed is His descent!

Refrain: Blessed is Your rising up!

3. He sprinkled dew and life-giving rain
on Mary, the thirsty earth.
Like a seed of wheat He fell again to Sheol
to spring up as a sheaf, as the new Bread.
Blessed is His offering!

Refrain: Blessed is Your rising up!

16. His birth gives us purification,
His baptism gives us forgiveness,
His death is life to us,
His ascension is our exaltation.
How we should thank Him!

Refrain: Blessed is Your rising up!

22. Whom have we, Lord, like you –
the Great One who became small, the Wakeful who slept,
the Pure One who was baptized, the Living One who died,
the King who bore disgrace to ensure honor for all!
Blessed is Your honor!

Refrain: Blessed is Your rising up!

(*Ephrem the Syrian: Select Poems*, translated by Sabastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz [2006], 81-83, 91, 95)

Questions to think about as you read this poem:

1. What are the actions Christ is depicted as doing in the poem?
2. Who are some of the bible characters listed in the poem? What do they symbolize?
3. Twice, Christ's baptism is mentioned....why does the act of Jesus's baptism play an important role in the Easter season, and how does Ephrem use it as a symbol?

In Honor of Syria: Part 2

Ryan Kennelly – Grace Christian Fellowship

*St. Domnina was a female ascetic (severe self-discipline and avoidance of self-indulgence) in the southern part of the region of Cyrus (Cyrrhus). She lived in a cell in a garden owned by her relatives, who fed her and funded her alms. She had especially close links with the local church: she attended morning and evening prayer each day. and the parish priest put up her many visitors. In all, she belonged to the tradition of pious virgins, living at home, who first feature in Syrian writing in the early third-century Pseudo-Clementine Epistles on Virginity.

By Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus, Syria

"Emulating the life of the inspired Maron, whom we recalled above, the wonderful Domnina* set up a small hut in the garden of her mother's house; her hut is made of millet stalks. Passing the whole day there, she wets with incessant tears not only her cheeks but also her garments of hair, for such is the clothing with which she covers her body. Going at cockcrow to the divine shrine nearby, she offers hymnody to the Master of the universe, together with the rest, both men and women. This she does not only at the beginning of the day but also at its end, thinking the place consecrated to God to be more venerable than every other spot and teaching others so....

...As food she has lentils soaked in water; and she endures all this labor with a body reduced to a skeleton and half-dead - for her skin is very thin, and covers her thin bones as if with a film, while her fat and flesh have been worn away by labors. Though exposed to all who wish to see her, both men and women, she neither sees a face nor shows her face to another, but is literally covered up by her cloak and bent down onto her knees, while she speaks extremely softly and indistinctly, always making her remarks with tears. She has often taken my hand, and after placing it on her eyes, released it so soaked that my very hand dripped tears. What discourse could give due praise to a woman who with such wealth of philosophy weeps and wails and sighs like those living in extreme poverty? For it is fervent love for God that begets these tears, firing the mind to divine contemplation, stinging it with pricks and urging it on to migrate from here.

Though spending in this way both the day and the night, nor does she neglect the other forms of virtue, but ministers, as far as she can, to the heroic contestants, both those we have mentioned and those we have omitted. She also ministers to those who come to see her, bidding them stay with the shepherd of the village and sending them all they need herself, for the property of her mother and brothers is available for her to spend, since it reaps a blessing through her. To myself too when I arrived at this place - it is to the south of our region - she sent rolls, fruit, and soaked lentils."

Devotional questions to ask yourself:

1. What part of Bishop Theodoret's testimony of St. Domnina inspires you? What part of her story do you feel challenged by?
2. What seems to bring Domnina PLEASURE, and what seems to bring her PAIN?
3. What is bringing you pleasure and what is bringing you pain this Lenten season? How does your story relate to Domnina's, and how does Domnina's story relate to the story of Christ and Easter?

Imparting Wisdom

Jerome Devlaemink – People of Praise

James 1.5 - If any one of you falls short in wisdom, they should ask God for it, and it will be given them.

James 3.17 – But the wisdom that comes from above is first holy, then peaceful, gentle, compliant, filled with mercy and good fruits, unbiased and sincere.

I grew up thinking that Lent was just a time of self-denial. But I now see that Lent is so much more. As we remove distractions from our life, God wants to fill us with Himself. As James says, He wants to give to us His wisdom, which is very different from the worlds. As you recall when King Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom in order to rule his people. Wisdom is a gift that God wants to give to us so that we can serve others.

Waiting

Sandy Bass – Rivergate Community Church

“They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, They shall mount up with wings as eagles,

They shall run and not be weary, they run and not faint.” Isaiah 40:31

I remember counting the days...checking them off one at a time on the calendar. I even had the number of days left on my phone! It was both exciting and difficult, but the day finally arrived that my sister and I had awaited for months. The day we set out for two months of train rides to several key places across the U.S. sandwiched in between two weeks before and after at the coast...and paid for with a grant that we had been awarded!

We had planned the trip with much flexibility; the only schedule we had to keep was catching our trains...and I remember the freedom and the peace we both felt as we left our scheduled life behind and entered into a pace that was much slower and filled with a warm and comforting rhythm.... It did not take long for us to realize that God was going before and opening up our path as we walked through each of our days...They were so full and rich with unexpected treasures, both in the people we met and the places we visited. We knew the trip was a gift to us from our Father, but we could not have imagined what He had planned and the blessings that lay ahead for us!

G. Campbell Morgan once wrote:

“I arrive nowhere but that God has been there before me.”

We quickly adopted that as the theme for our journey. Waiting on God each morning for our day and receiving the fullness of what He gave and where He led brought us a deep inner peace and freedom, built our faith and trust in Him and developed a greater capacity in us of gratefulness and praise...something we strive to keep in our walk with Him.

Today...I did not search.....I watched I did not ask...I listened

I did not run...I waited Father, today You taught me much

May each of our days be spent watching and waiting on a Father who loves us so.

How Do We Know If It's True?

Carren Woods – Rivergate Community Church

As a pastor, I am often asked “How do you really know that Jesus died and was resurrected?” None of us who are alive now have actually seen the risen Lord. How do we really know that what we believe as Christians is true? We know that prior to Jesus' death the disciples argued about many things including who was going to be the greatest among them. They got frightened when Jesus was arrested and deserted him, and denied even knowing him. Yet, when we turn to the book of Acts after the resurrection of Jesus we see these followers acting in a very different manner. In Acts 2 we read of how when Peter stood to address the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost – the other 11 disciples stood with him – they were one body. As he began to speak to the crowd that day he had courage and power that was nonexistent earlier. He spoke of Jesus' death and resurrection and said “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” They all risked their lives that day, because they could have been arrested and killed for what they said. Yet, they stood as one and a key verse is in Acts. 2:32 “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses.” They were transformed by their encounter with the risen Christ, and they had courage and boldness to testify to what they had seen and heard – not just on this day, but for the rest of their lives. And because of their faith the church came into being and we are here today because of what they said and did. We have the assurance that it is all true because of the remarkable changes in those earliest followers. The question for us is – How are we different because of our encounter with the risen Lord? What kind of witness are we everyday of our lives?

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses.” Acts. 2:32

Becoming like Christ

Chad Nieuwendorp – University Park Baptist Church

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3.18

What began as an eternity-shaking, immediate transfer from darkness to light, from death to life, at the time of salvation, continues as a progressive work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The goal of the Spirit’s work is to glorify the Father and the Son.

Followers of Jesus are being transformed—progressively, degree by degree—into the image of Christ. That is God’s will for us. That we be progressively conformed to the image of Christ, that we might reflect his glory. We are to become like Christ and grow in our capacity to show Christ by being like Christ. To say it another way, we are transformed into his image by looking at his glory. You become like what you constantly behold.

If we want to show Christ so that people can see him in us, our strategy must be to see him. To see him for who he really is. To fix our gaze on him and look to him and think about him, and put Jesus before us again and again. This is the key to becoming like him. Seeing is the key to showing.

Holy Spirit of God, continue the work of transformation in me, that I might be made more into the image of Jesus Christ. Remove the objects of my gaze that filter out and diminish the glory of Jesus. Open my eyes that I might see his glory fully and be fully changed by it. And may this change in me become an amplifier of the glory of Jesus.

Prepare the Way

Jay Braband – Journey3

He (John the Baptist) went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Luke 3:3-4

John the Baptist is sent to prepare the way for the Lord. He does this by "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3)

In her book, *Openness Unhindered*, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield writes,

Of course, there is only one thing to do when you meet the living God. You must fall on your face and repent of your sins. Repentance is bittersweet business. Repentance is not just a conversion exercise. It is the posture of the Christian. Just like a dancer's body finds its points and an equestrian incorporates her body weight into the movement of the horse, the Christian learns how to melt her will into God's. Repentance is the threshold to God. When heat meets ice, the solid substance liquefies completely. Repentance liquefies the will of the flesh. Repentance is our daily fruit, our hourly washing, our minute-by-minute wakeup call, our reminder of God's creation, Jesus' blood, and the Holy Spirit's comfort. Repentance is the only no-shame solution to a renewed Christian conscience because it proves the obvious; that God was right all along.

This is why we seek to live humbly and confess our sins to each other and to God. We are preparing the way for Jesus to bring us his mercy and forgiveness.

PRAYER

Dear Father, thank you that you have given me the rhythm of regular repentance. Help me to cooperate with you as you do your work in me. Amen

Psalm 22:1-8

Alan Wilkerson – Kenton Presbyterian

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

⁸ "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

Long before the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, David wrote of the suffering and pain which the Messiah would undergo for the sake of His people. We are not a stranger to feeling forsaken by God. It is the natural outcome of the sin which we've chosen. It is the price we pay for 'loving the darkness rather than the light (John 3:19).

But it was an experience Jesus had never felt until that moment on the cross when he took our sins upon himself. God's perfect holiness, unable to look upon such sin, turns His back on the Son and Jesus is left truly alone.

As lent continues consider:

- What it means for Jesus to carry *your sin*.
- How have we 'mocked' our Lord by our action or inaction
- What does the fact that, God is holy mean to your daily life?
- How might you live life more aware of the depth of Christ's love for you?
- What can you do today to put this to work?

Being Overjoyed

Linda Jo – Community of Hope

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:12-13 (NIV)

I've been thinking about taking up my cross lately. Why would anyone want to endure pain of any kind, much less a fiery ordeal? Well, it can't be for the joy of being in pain, that's for sure!

I think about the reason Jesus chose to endure the cross. He loved us so much that He chose to go to the place of the greatest suffering. He wanted to be in the place He was most needed and least experienced. He did not want the pain or rejection. But if that's what it took to love, He was willing to go there. He went so that our lives would be transformed by His being with us in our pain and transforming it with His love.

Am I willing to look for places where people are suffering and most in need of God and choose to be there? Being with hurting people is not easy. I get hurt! Talk about fiery ordeals! Not to mention that I might be out of my comfort zone!

I will only do it if I am there with God, where their painful circumstances can be transformed because He and I are there in love. I want to be closer to Him, work more as His partner, and see Him work in powerful, healing, freeing ways. If that is where He is and how He works, I will take the fiery ordeals. They will become my cause for joy. I want to not just be joyful, but overjoyed! God's glory is revealed as He transforms lives through love. It doesn't get any better than that! It's worth whatever it takes.

PRAYER

Father, show me where you are working. Help me be willing to enter the lives of those who are experiencing pain, even if it is uncomfortable or even painful for me. Thank you that the overwhelming joy of being with you there is worth it. Help me to see your glory revealed as I share your love.

Suffer and Be Hated for the Sake of Christ?

Kelly Cohoe – Grace Christian Fellowship

If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you. (John 15:19, NRSV)

During Lent as we consider the suffering of Christ, does it shock us that so many have hated Him? Our blessed Savior, who only came to reconcile our relationship with God, was spat upon and ridiculed, mistrusted by those in authority, and reviled by the crowds. What did Jesus do to deserve such animosity?

In light of this I find it shocking how desperately the church longs to be loved by this world. To be fair, I think our motive is that people will remain open to following Jesus. And certainly we are not called to be jerks in Jesus' name and write the world off, quoting the words above. But sometimes I wonder if our need to be liked means that we do not stand out in the eyes of this world? We are just another voice among millions with nothing to differentiate us from the multitude of other cultural voices crying out for everyone's attention.

Jesus lived and spoke with the purest of hearts and a profound love for ALL of humanity, yet His life and actions led to His ultimate suffering and death. His words to us are *"I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you."* I realize these thoughts can stir up a lot of feelings and are deserving of more dialogue, but ultimately I ask – are we *willing* to suffer and be hated for the sake of Christ?

PRAYER

Lord, I do not want to be hated for being hateful, but I do want to be willing to suffer and be hated as one who is striving to be a faithful and loving witness to You. AMEN.

A Story of Returning

Katherine Schmitt – St Johns Wesleyan

“I will leave this place and go to my father and say, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.” So, he left the place and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.”

Luke 15:18-20

The Christian story is one of returning. We have been and are always being invited back by God, to return to our Creator. We are invited back despite what we have done. We are beckoned into worship by God. Our Loving Father longs for our return. As Christians, we strive to be the best we can, to live our lives in accordance with Scripture with all the love God has placed on our hearts and as Christians we fall short of this goal. God’s invitation back to His loving arms, his love and rejoicing of us, is not dependent on our actions.

The story of the Prodigal Son is a story of returning. The son returns to the father and the father rejoices. Here we have a father moved with compassion, gentleness and patience. A father who celebrates his son coming home!

But what of the son? What were the son’s motivations to return to his father? Was he truly repentant and broken? Were his motives pure? No. A look at the story shows the son was hungry and wanted something from his father- he wanted to be fed. He had a speech prepared for his father, nice words that would hopefully get him back in favor with his dad. The amazing part of the story is that he did not even have to say those words. His motives didn’t matter. He had chosen to return and oh how the Father rejoiced! He RAN to meet him. He recognized his son from far away. The father did not need words or pure motives. The father longed for the returning.

Our Heavenly Father longs for our returning. We get so trapped in our own shortcomings, our own desires, our own shame and guilt and we make our faith so complicated. Our responsibility is to return to God. When we return, our God runs to embrace us and gives us the love and peace we so desire.

Prayer

“Compassionate God,

Creator of the world.

I thank you for creating me.

I thank you for loving me and for giving me the chance to return time and time again.

Thank you for welcoming me back to you.

In your loving name, I pray,

Amen”

Shelter In A Storm

Carren Woods – Rivergate Community Church

We've had quite a few storms go through this winter. There were downpours of rain and then very strong wind storms brought down trees. I sat and watched as the trees almost seemed to bend in the middle as the winds carried off anything that was not tied down. We usually don't get severe weather in our area very often, but when it comes it is amazing to see the power behind the storm.

The eye of the hurricane is the place of peace and calm. There is safety in the midst of the raging winds that circle around the eye. The Lord is like that to us. In the midst of whatever storms may be raging in our lives, we can find peace and hope with the Lord. He is our rock and fortress that will protect us from the storms that try to destroy us. May we always know that we can find safety in the loving arms of Jesus.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, and my God in whom I trust.’”

Imitators of Christ – Philippians 2:1-11

Phil Hawk – St Johns Wesleyan

Christ's humility sets a clear example that we are called upon to imitate in every day living. There are a lot of voices calling out to you every day. It is important for us to know where those voices are coming from. We are given a good starting point in the verses listed above.

As we press forward in following Christ are we:

- ...Experiencing encouragement?
- ...Receiving comfort from His love?
- ...Common sharing in the Spirit?
- ...Tenderness and Compassion?

As we have received we in turn are called to give out: (with the same mind of Christ)

- ...Same mind
- ...Love
- ...Unity
- ...Without selfish ambition
- ...Value others above yourselves
- ...Look to the interests of others, not your own

BE IMITATOR'S OF CHRIST!

Expanse of the Kingdom

Derek Beaudoin- St Johns Christian Church

READ: Matthew 6.9-13

Your Kingdom come, Your will be done... do we mean it? We often overlook this part of the Lord's Prayer as we hurry to ask for our "daily bread" needs to be met. Jesus calls for our perspective to be changed, that we would be focused on honoring the Heavenly Father and praying for His Kingdom to come and for His will to be done. We certainly can agree with Jesus' sentiment and hope for God's Kingdom to be active and for His will to be obeyed, but are we doing anything about it? Sometimes we pray that part and expect nothing of it because it is a tradition we do, just words memorized. Oftentimes we pray that part and expect God to do all the work – that His Kingdom would come, and His will would be done in someone else's life. Perhaps Jesus' intention was that and more!

Will we pray for His Kingdom to come, and how we can be a part of the expansion? Can we pray that His will would be done in our lives as we obey His call to follow? Perhaps we can obey His will as we live in Christ's love and grace, extending that same love and grace with all those we come in contact. We have a response of action to those two lines of prayer. God will certainly expand His Kingdom and share His will, but it happens through our involvement as members of the Kingdom and followers of His will.

How are we helping expand His Kingdom? How are we listening to and following His will to share the love and grace of Christ?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You are truly holy and amazing. We thank You for Your gift of love and grace. God, may Your Kingdom come upon this earth as we look to help it expand into the hearts and lives of those that need Your grace. We also ask that Your will would be done in our lives and through our lives as we follow the example of Your Son, Jesus. You have loved us and called us to love, so give us the ability to do so unconditionally. You have extended grace to us through Jesus; may we offer that same grace to others. Thank You always, God. Amen.

“Follow Me” John 21: 19

Sandy Bass – Rivergate Community Church

He knew He was a merciful and forgiving friend, this Jesus....He had traveled with Him for three years. He was even the first of the twelve to declare Him Messiah! Of course Jesus had forgiven him...But.....was this some curse Jesus had left with him? No! He would never do that! He loved them....Look at how we found Him on the beach after that awful day....alive again! and cooking breakfast for us for Heaven’s sake....and...what about all the fish? We had fished all night and caught nothing! and then so many fish we almost sunk under the weight of them!

But Peter could not get that night out of his head....It seemed so dark...darker than any other night he had known...when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus...why didn’t He fight? Jesus just stood there and even admitted that He was the one they were looking for ...why did we all run and leave Him? I was so scared! I followed them from a distance and was even in earshot when they questioned Him.....

It was so cold...I could not get warm...even standing by the fire that others had huddled around...I was so cold! And that woman...why couldn’t she just be quiet? why did she keep saying that I was one of His disciples? Why couldn’t she just be quiet? I didn’t want to lie about it...I don’t know why I denied Him...I was just so scared...the words of denial came out before I could stop them....and then....

That rooster! That blasted rooster began to crow.....The words Jesus had spoken to me at supper when I swore to Him that I would even die with Him if it came to that! I meant those words....but now....His words so loud inside of me with every squawk that comes out of that bird! “Peter, do you love me?” Peter, do you love me? “Peter, do you love me?” Of course I love Him...“feed my sheep”, He said....

Was it a curse? No....not a curse at all...but a reminder...He gave me a daily reminder that keeps me humble knowing how weak I am without Him....Hearing that rooster every morning...a gentle reminder at the breaking of each new day...to pick up my own cross....to say no to my will and yes to His....Lord you know I love you.

“Feed My Sheep” John 21: 17

Not Orphaned

Kelly Cohoe – Grace Christian Fellowship

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." (John 14:18-19, NRSV)

Chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel provide us with unique insight into the concerns of Jesus as He shares with His disciples just hours before His death. Earlier Jesus spoke of His departure from this world that had left His disciples deeply troubled, but now He leaves them with these encouraging words: *"I will not leave you orphaned."* He clarifies this when He says, *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, **to be with you forever**. This is the Spirit of truth... he abides with you, and he will be in you"* (John 14:16-17). The death of Jesus makes it possible to be forgiven of our sin and to be reconciled in our relationship to God, but His death and departure also make something else possible: the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit of God in our lives – moment by moment, day by day, forever. As we meditate upon the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus, let us also contemplate the doors that are now flung open to us as a result. One is the door into our heart that is now open to the very presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit abides in the hearts of all who believe – now and forever. Amen.

PRAYER

Jesus, as we contemplate Your suffering and death – we are humbled by Your sacrifice. We are also encouraged, as Your death and resurrection have made eternal life possible – a life given to us life daily through the presence of Yourself in the Holy Spirit. Spirit of the Living God, be renewed in us today.

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