

THE NIGHT COMETH

2017 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



BAYLOR
TRUETT SEMINARY

As we follow along on the journey with Jesus to the cross, the season of Lent engages our hearts and minds so that we are truly ready to celebrate once we arrive at Resurrection Sunday. Lent is a time of contemplation, a time of dedication, and a time of preparation.

Students of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary have written the Lenten devotionals from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Each of the Sunday devotionals are written by a Truett faculty member, ending with Easter Sunday, written by Truett's Dean Todd Still.

Our hope and prayer in compiling and sharing these reflections is that they might encourage you and enhance your experience of the Lenten journey this year.

The scripture readings have been selected from the Revised Common Lectionary's daily readings for Lent. We have included passages from the New Testament and the Psalms and have provided a selection for each day throughout the Lenten season.

May you be blessed and inspired by these words.

Shawn Boyd
The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching

Dr. Matt Homeyer
Office of Ministry Connections

Cody Creel
Office of Spiritual Formation

"I must work the works of Him that sent
me while it is day; the night cometh
when no man can work."

John 9:4

DEDICATED TO DR. PAUL POWELL

*"The tower of the Baugh-Reynolds Campus at Truett
Seminary holds a beautiful clock inscribed with the
words, 'The night cometh.' Those words should remind
us that time is passing, the lost are dying, and churches
are hurting... God is nigh, but so is the night. That's
why we must hurry before sundown."*

Dr. Paul Powell
2002, Waco, TX

DR. PAUL POWELL

December 1933 – December 2016

Remembering Mr. Texas Baptist:

What John Wayne was to Westerns, Arnold Palmer was to golf, or Hemingway was to short stories, Dr. Paul Powell was to Texas Baptists. There was just nobody like him. For the most part, one preacher may be likened in many ways to other preachers. With Dr. Paul Powell, the Lord broke the mold. No one since George W. Truett himself better deserves the title, “Mr. Texas Baptist.”

Paul was born into rural Texas poverty of extreme need. He showed up at Baylor University with hardly two dimes to rub together. No one could have wildly guessed that the freshman would one day chair the board of the largest Baptist university and then become dean of its seminary. Between those bookends of life, Paul Powell became the stuff of Baptist legends.

Beginning in small churches in Central Texas, he landed at Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler. In so doing he led one of the phenomenal church growth stories in the 20th century. In a small city that already had 40 Baptist churches, he led Green Acres to be the largest church in a small city in the nation. His leadership was legendary, his messages unforgettable, his evangelism irresistible, and his persona inimitable.

Yet there was more. Guidestone, then the Southern Baptist Annuity Board, tapped Paul to become its chief executive. Tens of thousands of ministers, professors, missionaries, and others depend on that institution for retirement. When the choice came for a leader, the board turned to Paul Powell to lead a multi-billion-dollar fiduciary institution. Typically, Paul said, “I do not know anything about investments but I can get the best people who do.” He became the face of that enormous stewardship.

When it was time for Paul to put his feet up back in Tyler, the president of Baylor University asked him to become the dean of its fledgling seminary. George W. Truett Theological Seminary began as something of a surprise to Texas Baptists. Just as the case with any infant seminary, it needed an identity. For seven years Paul Powell stamped the institution with its identity as a new place for Texas Baptists to entrust their young women and men to prepare for service to church and mission. At the same time, his gifted and irresistible fundraising efforts led to a \$40,000,000 endowment. This is an astonishing and perhaps unprecedented feat in American theological education over such a short time. The average endowment of any seminary at that time was \$8,000,000.

Retired three times, full of vitality and great personality, Paul returned to his beloved Tyler where he continued preaching, sitting on boards, encouraging young ministers, and writing his memoirs. Then, suddenly by a stroke, living his full life up to its last few days, Paul moved upstairs to the Lord he loved and served. He was, in so many ways, the last of a kind, the end of a type of leader whose giant steps we may trace in more ways than we know right now.

Dr. Joel C. Gregory

Professor of Preaching

Holder of the George W. Truett Endowed Chair in Preaching and Evangelism

ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20 - 6:10

What is the cost of serving Christ? Depending on one's context, this is a question which might elicit a broad range of responses.

According to Paul, following Christ brings afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. None of these sound appealing, and I don't believe many would be drawn to Christ if that was the end of the story.

But Paul goes on to say that being a Christian also includes purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and [ultimately] the power of God. The reason we have hope to receive these attributes, "become the righteousness of God," is because of Christ's sacrifice for us.

When Jesus, fully man and fully God, lived, He exhibited those positive character traits that Paul defined but also faced every act of persecution and hardship Paul describes, ultimately leading to death on the cross. Jesus tells us we will have our own crosses to bear. Can we as Christians expect to escape hardship and pain?

For most of us, we will never face shipwreck or a public stoning, but we will face different hardships and persecution. We are present to a world of heightened individuality. We have bought into the lie that society is better when we keep to ourselves. Instead of touching people's lives with Christian love and conviction, we leave society untouched. We have become spectators of homelessness, hunger, violence, ignorance, racism, hatred, and secularism. Our reason for not stepping in is, "that is his choice" or "that is the result of her choices." We as Christians have a call to something different. One that is willing to face awkwardness, hate, violence, persecution, and public shame for the sake of the fruits of the spirit.

The important thing to glean from this passage is that we have a different way than the world. The journey of the cross, no matter how hard and painful, is our call.

Prayer:

Father God,

Thank you for coming to this earth and being the perfect example of what it means to live for God. As a follower of Christ, I pray that you fill my life with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God so that I may stand strong and persevere against the persecutions of this world.

Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 2

ROMANS 1:1-7

“through whom [Jesus] we received grace and apostleship, for the purpose of the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name.” - Romans 1:5

What does it mean to be a Christian? To be a part of and participant in the lifestyle that Jesus taught, the gospel that Paul preached, and the community founded on Peter? On this second day of Lent, we would be wise to take a second look at ourselves, a second look at what most deeply and fundamentally defines who we are as people; to take a second look at Christianity itself.

The gospel as Paul understood it was a message that provoked faithful obedience, faithful obedience, “the obedience of faith.” Although we are accustomed to our freedom, to choosing how and why we live our lives, the gospel invites us to a death- and life-giving alternative. By choosing to “die to ourselves,” by drinking the poison which puts an end to our selfish and self-aggrandizing lives, we in turn come alive. This means practically that, in order to come alive in Jesus, we must begin to prune out of ourselves those aspects of our lives that are displeasing to Jesus. It means that we must begin to speak kindly to and about one another, rather than demeaning or mocking each other in order to become the social superior. It means that we must refuse to worry about the future, and instead live the trusting life of the lilies and sparrows whom God feeds and clothes. It means that we must refuse to hoard our money and other resources for our own personal benefit and security, and instead begin to live a modest lifestyle and give the remainder of our money away. If we claim to have “faith” then we must enact and prove it through our obedience. That list and no less, though quite a bit more, is the “obedience of faith,” is the gospel that Paul preached and that we have found our death-and-life in.

Lent is the perfect time for us to measure ourselves up against the gospel of Paul, the community of Peter, and the cross of Christ. In Lent, as we imitate Christ’s desert preparation for his ministry, we are invited to prepare and purify ourselves to become more and more like Christ. We are invited to more closely follow Jesus. We are invited, not merely to abstinence and asceticism, but to a greater Christian purity.

Spiritual Practice:

If you are reading this in the morning, take a moment and decide on three specific, concrete ways in which you can follow Jesus more closely today. Write those three resolutions on a note-card and prayerfully read over them throughout the day, perhaps at the turn of each hour.

If you are reading this in the evening, think back on your day and determine three ways in which you faithfully followed Jesus during the day and three ways in which you failed. Write those six things on a note-card and prayerfully read them tomorrow morning, before the day begins.

FRIDAY, MARCH 3

ROMANS 1:8-17

Upon reading these verses, I am reminded of the past Christmas break. The two young men on either side of me in the artwork have allowed me to engage this passage in a deeper way. All three of us went through some unyielding trails during the break. My parents lost their home when the landlord told us to move out right after we paid our rent for the month. "I'm selling my home. Please be out by the 28th." We were just getting adjusted for the Christmas festivities. Again, we paid our month's rent just the day before. My brothers, Tyrell and Brandon, were also facing their own challenges and losses. We dealt with the problems on our own far away from one another.



It is a struggle to deal with life encounters we are not prepared to face. Surviving life's drawbacks that seem to keep coming at a great pace. I found refuge calling my brothers, hearing and sharing the covenant words, "I'm praying for you." The words we spoke in those dark moments ignited our faith. There is nothing like having a brother, or sister, with a fresh perspective of having faith in God. Our prayers sharpened our relationship with God. We were able to pull ourselves out of the pit of our deprived moments of faith. It gave us hope to see each other again, bruised but not broken, cut but not scared, limping but still walking.

Our Brotherhood increases the faith we have in God because through one another we encounter Jesus in a real way.

Spiritual Questions:

- *How have you encouraged a leader's faith?*
- *Are you broken from past relationships with the Christ believers?*
- *Are you willing to forgive those in order to have new relationships with other people in the faith?*
- *Have you prayed for your fellow leaders in the church?*

SATURDAY, MARCH 4

MATTHEW 18:1-7

It was the final day of six long weeks of day camp. Six weeks of 40 5- to 12-year-old children doing everything that 5- to 12-year-old children typically do had left me filled with many emotions and empty of many others. It was near the end of the day and a small, but not the smallest 5-year-old named Amir walked up to me with his head hung low, tears falling slowly down his cheeks, and breathing short gasps of breath as he tried to form words. I waited with anticipation to find out what could possibly be wrong. After a few moments, Amir began to speak. Despite living his entire life in inner city Washington, D.C., he spoke with the slow drawl of an elderly woman from rural Georgia. His voice was mesmerizing and always brought a smile to my face. But as his words left his lips on this last day of camp, they did not draw a smile. He looked at me and with a big breath uttered, "I boo-booed in my shorts." As empathetically as I could without making physical contact for fear of what might constitute "boo-boo," I walked him to the nearest bathroom. I will spare the details, but they involved new clothes for Amir and as much anti-bacterial soap as was available at the time for me.

When Jesus called the disciples to the humility of children, it is easy to appeal to the idyllic innocence children often exhibit. Welcoming the innocence of a child is certainly welcoming of Christ, but when Amir came to me that afternoon, it was not in innocence. He was, quite literally, a mess. I often wonder if this is what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand. Amir knew nothing other than that he was covered in "boo-boo" and needed help to clean it up. I am not quite sure why, but Amir trusted that I would not turn him away. What a joy it would be to have faith like Amir's, faith that leads us to Jesus even when we are a mess, faith in the full assurance that Jesus will never turn us away.

Questions for Reflection:

- 1. Who are the messy children (or people) you need to welcome in the name of Jesus Christ? For whom have you been the stumbling block? Spend some time in prayer and reflection asking God's forgiveness for not welcoming the messes of others, and ask God to guide you as you welcome Jesus by welcoming others.*
- 2. How willing are you to approach Jesus, even when you are a mess? How assured are you that Jesus will not turn you away? Spend time in prayer asking God to remind you of the steadfast love of Christ that will never turn you away, and has to power to make you clean.*

SUNDAY, MARCH 5

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Throughout the Bible, the “wilderness” plays a significant role in spiritual formation. It is not surprising, then, that immediately after the voice from heaven announces at his baptism that he is the God’ son, i.e. the messianic king (Ps. 2:7) with whom God is well-pleased, i.e. the suffering servant (Is. 42:1), Jesus is “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness. There he spends 40 days fasting and wrestling with what this identity means, or, “What does it mean to be Jesus?” (*Framing the temptations in this way was first suggested to me by Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark, New York: Harper and Row, 1988, 74.*)

The devil presents him with three alternative approaches:

“Why not turn these stones into bread (4:3-4). You’re famished, and hungry people are everywhere. You are the son of God so why not put ‘a chicken in every pot’ and the whole world will come running. Isn’t that what you want?

Or... you could jump from the highest point of the temple. As the son of God, you’d land safe and sound (4:5-7) and that would bring people from everywhere. That’s what you want, isn’t it?

Or... better still, how about this: I can give you all the kingdoms of this world (4:8-9). Isn’t that why you came? And the best part of these approaches is that they require no suffering and NO cross!”

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Each seems more “reasonable” (and certainly more comfortable) and more messianic than suffering service. They make sense; however, would adopting such “reasonable” approaches enable Jesus to fulfill the mission announced his baptism? Faithfulness to his messianic mission was at stake and the struggle with “reasonable” alternatives was a recurring one for Jesus – Peter’s rebuke at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16: 22), his Gethsemane prayer (Mt. 26:39), the taunts at the cross (Mt. 27:38-44). Jesus’ answer was always the same, “Away with you, Satan (v. 10)!”

If Jesus’ question during the 40 days in the wilderness was, “What does it mean to be Jesus?” then maybe you just leave that group the question for us during these 40 days of Lent is, “What does it mean to be Christian?” Jesus’ answer to his question was a life of sacrificial service, the “foolishness” of the cross. The world offers us many options with which to answer our question, options which avoid such foolishness. The temptations to choose more “reasonable” ways to be Christian are ever present. As for Jesus, they call us to another way. May Jesus’ answer ever be ours: “Away with you, Satan!”

For Further Reflection:

Read Mark 8:34-36; 9:33-35; 10:42-45. What are some contemporary “alternative” approaches to being Christian?

MONDAY, MARCH 6

PSALM 32

Yesterday we reflected on Matthew 18. Verse 7 says, “For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” Woe to us. This, indeed, is humbling to proclaim. Woe to me. Woe to you. Woes all around.

Is there a time when our woes must turn into action?

David in Psalm 32 seems to think so, because woe-ing is not enough. There is a time to mourn, to lament, but there is also a time to, with humility, come to acknowledge our sins before God – before the God who proclaimed “Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”

What happens if we do not confess?

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- Psalm 32: 3-4

David is describing a physical response to hiding our sins from God:

- Interior deterioration to the point that we cannot move.
- Groaning so that all can hear and pity us.
- The pressure we feel to be perfect and sinless.
- Weakness to the point that we feel there is no longer a point in trying to live a righteous life.

Have you experienced any one of those? Have you experienced the pain of hiding sin, of trying to be perfect and yet continually failing?

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Woe! Lament before God! Confess the sins that you may have hidden! Lent is the season to be broken, to trust that Jesus came for our brokenness, and acknowledge that God knows we can never be perfect until we are reunited in his Kingdom in Heaven.

But for now, in this kingdom of the world, remember:

Psalm 32:10, "Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

We will continually fall short, but with Christ we are righteous. With Christ, we find newness of life, and as we journey to our very own Jerusalem, may we see that we are never alone. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice. Don't let sin deteriorate you, let God invigorate and wholly fill you by means of confession.

Spiritual Practice:

Take this time to find a space you can sit in silence so that you can reflect on the day, and to practice the prayer of examen. I encourage you to think on these things after rereading Psalm 32:3-7.

- *Pray for illumination, for some sense in how the Spirit is leading you.*
- *Review the day in thanksgiving.*
- *Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day.*
- *Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it.*
- *Look toward tomorrow.*
- *Recite The Lord's Prayer.*

TUESDAY, MARCH 7

HEBREWS 4:14-5:10

Intimacy is defined as closeness. It is when we draw near to each other. It is when we come close, get personal, and we connect with each other. Intimacy is beautiful, or as God declared the relation on the final day of creation, "it is very good." Intimacy is also needed. We are a people who crave to be connected in deep, impactful ways. We desire this in relationships with other people, we desire this with our work, to be connected to something greater than our selves. We desire it of our faith, or at least I do. I desire to be near to God, to be close to him, to have him know me and for me to know him.

Is that not the whole goal of spiritual life? Do we not use separation as the negative effect of sin? If separation is the negative then the positive must be intimacy, to be close, to draw near. Hebrews 4:14-5:10 describes Jesus as the great high priest, the one who followed the order of Melchizedek, the one who knew temptation but did not sin. Jesus is the one who is the greatest high priest because he does not have to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins and then the sins of others, but can go directly to the Father. The one who is at the right hand of God. Jesus is OUR high priest. Jesus is our connection. It is because of Christ's accomplished work that the writer of Hebrews pens these amazing words, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

We followers of Christ, those who have accepted Jesus as their high priest, are to draw near to the very throne of the most high God with confidence. With confidence, we are to go near to the one who has created us. Why? To be intimate. We draw near so that we might experience mercy and grace when we are in need. We do it because we are tired and need rest. We do it because we feel alone and need love. We do it because it is what we were made to do. We are an intimate people who crave to be close to people and things. Praise God that we worship a King who has made a way for us to come close. So draw near!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we praise you as our great high priest, for the work that you have done on our behalf. Father, we ask that you draw us into your presence. Allow us to experience the life-giving intimacy that you provide. We long to be connected with you. Thank you for your Son, it is in His precious and holy name we pray, Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8

MATTHEW 18:10-14

Tap, Tap, Tap

I typically do the three tap check before I leave the house: Keys, Wallet, Phone. Once I have all three, I am prepared for the day. However, on occasion, I will forget my quick, pocket percussion, and I will have forgotten one of the three. If I forget my keys, it is because someone else is driving. If I forget my wallet, I have friends who are willing to buy me a meal. But if I forget my phone, I am lost. My phone serves as my clock, email, calculator, instant answer machine, entertainment, escape, and ability to always be reached. My phone has become the most important “little one” in my life.

It is the most important “little one,” until it is not. But as I press on with my day, I move from the anxiety of “no one can get a hold of me” to the excitement of the freedom “no one can get a hold of me!” My soul finds freedom, stability, and rest that I have all but forgotten. I no longer have the ability to be instantly offended by a tweet, Facebook post, or comment. My ability to engage those physically around me is enhanced. I am able to look into the eyes of those I speak with, eat with, and work. I feel the upsetting jar of when a person removes themselves from my presence, for just a moment, to pay attention to their most precious “little one,” their phone. I look into a face of someone who, for just a moment, is not willing to receive me. I am left feeling devalued, untrusting that he or she will not step away again at any moment, for just another small glance at their “little one.” I become guarded and unwilling to fully engage with him or her once they “come back” to the present. I become distant and separated. I remain present in body, but my spirit and mind are now desperately seeking a new place to be, that I will not be vulnerable to reality anymore. I need my “little one.”

I miss my phone, I want to look at mine and not feel vulnerable to awkwardness, vulnerable to being ignored, vulnerable to being unseen by those around me.

The final two verses of the scripture reading tell the story of the lost sheep. Somehow, one of the 99 has become separated. One sheep has found himself distant and separated, the sheep is in a state of being unseen. The shepherd anxiously searches for the missing “little one” and when he finds her, there is a great rejoicing. The shepherd comes to a reunion of his lost sheep, and a reunion to his purpose as shepherd.

In today's digitally demanding world, more than one of the 99 is feeling lost and separated. I need to find a willingness to forget my phone, because it is a false “little one.” And to see the true “little ones” around me, God's children. I need to see the community I am called too, and rejoice in our reunion. If I cannot see my brothers and sisters, then I fear I will also miss the messiah carrying a tree up Calvary.

Practice:

Before you leave this time of devotion take inventory of what you possess for the Kingdom of God. Before you go out to serve for the Father, allow Jesus' life and ministry to tap you mind, body, and soul. When you feel an urge to check your phone today, whether alone or with company, give three small taps. Take account of your heart, and see if this is blinding you to the lost around you or if this is pushing you further away from community yourself.

Shawn Boyd, MDiv
Office Manager, Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching

THURSDAY, MARCH 9

2 TIMOTHY 1:3-7

One of my favorite movies to watch at Christmastime is the 1946 classic “It’s A Wonderful Life.” In one inspiring scene, the main character George Bailey is contemplating jumping off a bridge when his “guardian angel,” Clarence, approaches him. “I wish I’d never been born,” George says. Clarence, eager to gain his wings (no one said this was theologically accurate), responds by temporarily granting George’s wish and takes him on a journey through a world void of his influence. It is bleak. Without George around to intervene; family and friends face financial ruin, go to prison, and even face tragic deaths.

In my life, there have been a lot of George Bailey’s—people who have invested in me without realizing the difference they were making. Timothy found faith by the devotion of Lois and Eunice. I also have been nurtured by the “sincere faith” of my parents and grandparents. However, they were not alone. It took a village—the high school English teacher who spent long hours talking with me after school; the pastor who made me confront challenging questions I had not considered before; the friend’s parents who welcomed me into their home like it was my own. Each in some way modeled Christ for me and helped me prepare for the next phase of my Christian life.

One might think that with such support, my decision to pursue ministry and seminary has been an easy one. Think again. At each step, I have agonized over what to do and tried to wander towards the easy road. However, my Christian brothers and sisters faithfully and continually “rekindle the gift” within me through encouragement, support, and prayer. They drive me to seek and follow God’s call in my life. They do not allow me to give in to the “spirit of cowardice,” as many times as I have tried.

“Rekindling the gift” is not just something for “ministry types” like me to do for one another. Nearly all those who nurtured me in my journey have been lay people. God’s call in life is for all of us, and we all can be a source of encouragement and support to those we interact with. Whose sincere faith made a difference in your life? Who around you can you “rekindle the gift” in? Like George Bailey, you may find you make an impact far beyond anything you can imagine.

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for those who have invested their time and energy in me. Thank you for working through them. Lead me to those whom you might have me to minister to—to lend a listening ear, a helping hand, or an encouraging word. Help me not to be so busy in living my own life that I fail to make space for those whom you place in my path. In Christ’s name, Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 10

ROMANS 3:21-31

Faith and the Law

This scripture reading is a treasure trove of theological information. The passage gives us a glimpse of God's character and the importance of the interactive faith God expects. My understanding of this passage and my growing theology of faith moves me to deeper devotion. One verse in particular that strikes me in the reading states that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This truth comes with no distinction and clearly indicts "all." It is easy to cast judgment on those I deem less devout. I often lose sight of the essential truth that we all need Jesus Christ. No one is counted worthy by his or her own merit, deeds, or righteousness.

Not only does this passage remind me that I am flawed, it encourages me to see God's greatness. This passage reminds me that all may be justified through faith in Jesus Christ. It is easy to forget such simple and profound truths about God's character. God is good, great, and powerful. With that power he chooses to gift us his grace. Mighty God is tender in his mercy and love.

Another way this passage strikes me is the reference made to time. Jesus Christ was physically present within human history. This may sound trivial and obvious, but for me, I only know that God is present by faith. In this passage, Paul, who physically met Jesus on the road to Damascus, speaks of Jesus as still present and still the picture of righteousness and the one who justifies faith of the believer. I am glad to worship a God who stepped into history and will never step out. I am glad that through the Holy Spirit, he is still making himself known and is calling me to know him more deeply.

Charge:

As you continue through the redundancies of life, remember the simple and powerful truths that Scripture holds. Look for ways that these truths come to light in real and practical ways in your life.

SATURDAY, MARCH 11

LUKE 7:1-10

"The more we can put together, the more that we can 'forgive' and allow, the more we can include and enjoy, the more we tend to be living in the Spirit. The more we need to reject, oppose, deny, exclude, and eliminate, the more open we are to negative and destructive voices and to our own worst instincts. As always, Jesus is our model of healing, outreach, and reconciliation, the ultimate man of God." -Richard Rohr

Today's passage includes an amazing scene. It is not the miracle, though that is, well, miraculous. It is not even the Centurion's faith that amazes. It is the last statement Jesus (and Luke) makes: "When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.'" In this Roman centurion, Jesus found more faith than any among God's chosen people. Outside the group of people we would expect to find faith, Jesus found an abundance.

As I begin to reflect on this during the season of Lent, we begin the Lenten period with Ash Wednesday, where we are told "from ash you came, and to ash you shall return." This seemingly bitter end makes the present life with God so much sweeter. To echo the message of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes, our life is a vapor, wisps of ash carried in the wind of a big world.

As Lent leads us to the cross, remember our life is short. Let us hope for and love as many people as possible in the meantime, and, like Jesus, look beyond the expected. Maybe we will find ourselves like Jesus: amazed that we found the Christian faith in unexpected places.

SUNDAY, MARCH 12

JOHN 3:1-17

One of the more mystifying aspects of Christian theology is the idea that the Spirit of God somehow interacts with our spirits, bringing us new birth and new life (John 3:5-6; 16). It appears that Nicodemus was stymied by this notion, trying to make sense of a possible rebirth in physical terms. We can hardly fault him for asking Jesus some clarifying questions. Jesus explains that the Spirit of God is like the wind; in fact, the Greek word “pneuma” is translated as both “Spirit” and “wind” in this passage. The term can also describe breath and breathing.

This same Spirit was present at creation, calling all kinds of things into existence and breathing life into a human being (Gen. 2:7). The human being then took his own first breaths. It is this Spirit that the gospel writer goes on to describe as an advocate (helper, counselor) who will come alongside to teach and guide, reminding Jesus’ followers about all that he said and did (John 14:26). The Spirit of God continues to be fully present today in creation, giving birth and life to the activity of God. The Spirit is our helper and counselor who comes alongside to teach and guide in everyday life as we welcome his presence. It is easy to lose touch with this reality when our days are filled with text messages, work deadlines, family commitments, and church meetings.

We can grow toward greater awareness of God’s Spirit in our lives by drawing upon simple ways of praying throughout the day. One way of doing this is through a form of the “breath prayer.” We begin by taking slow, deep breaths. As we breathe in, we embrace the Spirit’s guiding presence, as we breathe out, we release to God distractions and concerns that fill our minds. Alternately, we might try repeating a simple phrase that draws upon the truths of scripture, such as: Spirit of God, guide me today. As we grow increasingly attentive to the presence of the Spirit, we open up to Jesus’ invitation to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3) and learn something about our place in it.

MONDAY, MARCH 13

PSALM 128

Olive trees, when first planted, do not provide a quick return on investment. Some trees take up to 12 years to produce their first fruit. The greatest thing about olive trees, though, is that once they have been planted, they will continue to produce fruit for a thousand years or more, if properly cared for.

Vines require even more work! Good grape vines take about 3 years to begin producing fruit and must be consistently cared for. When they receive the best level of care, these vines usually last between 40 and 60 years.

I have no clue if the psalmist knew how true to life this agricultural illustration in verse 3 would be, but I think he hit it spot on.

Our marriages (and closest friendships) will only last for a lifetime, but will require intensive work and care. These relationships are worth it because they produce sweet, sweet fruit. Those we have disciplined (our children and our spiritual sons and daughters), have the potential to carry on a fruit-bearing legacy for a thousand years. The psalmist hopes that we see the fruit of our children's discipling relationships as well. The fear of God and walking in his ways is the key to cultivating a legacy that is worth following.

It is fitting that this is a Psalm of Ascents as we journey through Lent with Jesus to Jerusalem. Jesus walked in God's ways perfectly while on earth and gets to see his spiritual children's children bearing fruit as we disciple others and lead them to a relationship with God through Him.

Prayer:

Parent God, thank you for the words of the psalmist. You created us to have grape and olive relationships which require our steady effort over time. Remind us that our legacy has purpose when we walk in your ways. Bless us by allowing us to see our children's children.



TUESDAY, MARCH 14

ROMANS 4:6-13

“Work hard, work hard!” cries World to all,
“Through toil and sweat you earn.
There’s nothing free that comes from life
So labor for return.”

“I’ll give a wage to all who work,
To some, prosperity;
But greatest wealth I will reserve
Based on utility.”

Thus man was told and bought the lie
That worth and works were one;
And from that point man has not ceased
his work under the sun.

And man, though stifled, trapped below,
Beneath World’s harsh decree,
Sought out a way to bear this load—
Then came Legality.

“Dear friends, come ‘round, I have good news
Your work is not in vain.
Take heart, have pride, and do your part
For there is heaven and earth to gain!”

“Just as your work on earth below
Amassed to great reward,
So too the gifts of heaven above
Will upon you, soon, be poured.”

“God loves the man that earns His favor
Through laws, and works, and deeds,
So come, work hard, and do your best
By following these few creeds.”

Among them Legality placed the “rules,”
A book of hefty size—
Yet though it promised freedom
Man’s guilt revitalized.

“Not capable are we” they cried
“of fulfilling all these demands!”
And love of God was replaced with fear
Of looming reprimand.

Yet some, the proud, the boastful type
Scoffed at the other’s fears.
For in their minds there was no doubt:
Their destiny was clear.

“We’ve followed the law faithfully,
Above these men we stand;
Our relentless zeal leaves no doubt now
That salvation is at hand.”

Then one day a man appeared,
A stranger in those parts,
Who claimed to know the Truth of God—
He told them to take heart.

“Fear not, dear friends, I bear Good News,
Good tidings do I bring!
For there is a man, He’s called the Christ,
The true and proper King.

He lived among us for a while
But on a cross He died;
Condemned by us, including me,
An Innocent, crucified.

Yet death could not hold him down
And soon He rose again;
And with His resurrection He brought
Forgiveness of all sin.

You see, my friends, just like you now
I once was told the lie.
That laws, and works, and deeds, and acts
Were needed to justify.

continued on next page...

But no, not now, not anymore!
The Truth has been revealed.
It's faith alone that saves your soul,
By faith your wounds are healed."

"How is this so?" cried one and all
"Is it true we've been beguiled?"
"Has all our hard work been for naught?"
"Yes, by Christ alone you are reconciled!"

And as these words were uttered thus
By the disciple Paul,
The ball and chain that man possessed
From neck to ground did fall.

"Your faith and trust in this Good News
Has set you captives free.
Now go and share the joyful news,
We've been given eternity!"

"And you, the few, the haughty ones
Forget not to recall,
That pride will lead you backwards still—
Christ's kindness is for all."

"And while your works don't save your soul
Faith does not nullify
The power of your faithful lives
Which serve to testify."

"So 'circumcise your hearts' my friends,
A sign of faith above,
And to your earthly brothers show
Compassion, mercy, and love."

Guided Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the free gift of salvation given to us through your Son Jesus Christ. We deserve death, yet you offer life everlasting. Remind us always of this truth. May we not be fooled by the lie that salvation must be earned—that our salvation is contingent upon our works—but convict us always of the truth that your salvation is freely given to all who place their faith in Christ. May our unworthiness not keep us from seeking proximity to you. For those of us who have accepted the gift of your salvation more readily, harbor us from the temptation of pride. Keep us from raising ourselves above others and from loving our own image rather than the image of your Suffering Servant. May we accept your gift with humility and gratitude, and may we share it with steadfast joy. And while we are not saved by works, may our faith in you and your Spirit in us transform our lives to reflect You more closely so that we may be visible expressions of your love to the world. We love you Father. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15

JOHN 7:53-8:11

A woman caught in adultery stood before her accusers and Jesus. Was this her first time committing adultery? Was this her second? Third? Or had she simply lost count?

Did she think about her sin? The man she had been with? Her family? Or the heartlessness of her accusers?

...I try to imagine her experience and the many thoughts that flooded through her head. The questions of her accusers caused a ringing in her ear. Through the cacophony of accusations, one thing rang out clearly, "In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such a woman." Her mouth went dry and her face grew pale. This is true. She thought of her foolishness in her act but could no longer retract. It had been done. Perhaps if she had just stayed home things would have turned out differently. But there was no "what if." There was only the law.

"Now, Jesus, what do you say?" The woman stood with a blank gaze, bracing herself, waiting to hear the impending "Guilty!" Instead of hearing her death sentence, she heard a scrawling sound and looked down to find Jesus writing in the dirt. She could not make out what he was writing, but somehow his silence brought her peace. The questions from her accusers kept coming to him, but his silence eclipsed their voices.

Jesus finally spoke, "Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." She waited for the impending rebuttal but only heard footsteps of retreat. The accusers were gone. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she responded humbly. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go and leave your life of sin."

She was confused by all that transpired. She did not expect to live, and yet she was alive and a recipient of grace. Jesus saw her, all of her, and gave her another chance to live. Though the experience was humiliating, it brought the forgiveness of Jesus.

Reflection:

How many times do we have to hit rock bottom to experience Jesus? For some, once, but for most of us, we may find ourselves there numerous times throughout life. Being stripped, vulnerable, and found guilty is hard and painful, but this is how all of us come to Jesus. When we stand in his presence defenseless and preparing for his judgment, we experience his grace unabated. Take time to reflect on the guilt within your own heart and give thanks to God for his forgiveness and mercy.

THURSDAY, MARCH 16

COLOSSIANS 1:15 – 23

Christ the Image of God.

In Jesus, our faith became flesh. The Creator, the King of All, the One who establishes thrones and kingdoms, became a tangent reality in our broken world. He is the beginning and the end of creation; He is the bond that holds it all together.

Christ the Head of the Church.

Not separated, but elevated. Jesus leads the fellowship of believers as part of the body. He is the servant leader, the humble King. Seated on high, He is the Church's head, guiding the hands and feet as one.

Christ the Reconciler.

The fullness of God, willing to spill blood on the cross to reconcile all things on earth and heaven to Him. His grace knows no bounds. He, who is greater than all, lowered Himself so that humanity might be rescued.

Christ our Hope.

In the presence of Christ, in the reality of his reconciliation, we have hope. His gospel is the promise of salvation. It is not by our own power that we can be saved, but through the sacrifice of Jesus. Hold fast to the hope of Jesus.

Prayer:

Jesus,

The center of all things, visible and invisible,

Be the center of our lives.

You are Reconciler and King.

You are Hope and Salvation.

You are Grace and Mercy.

Let your death and resurrection rule from deep within us.

Through your death, we live.

Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 17

EPHESIANS 2:11-22

"For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us..." -Ephesians 2:14

Perhaps now more than at any other point in history, we are a people marked by divisions, often characterized by a mindset of "us" versus "them," God's chosen versus the other.

When we examine this scripture today, we can see that this applies not only between Christians and those not yet Christ's, but also Christians amongst one another. How often do we build and support the "dividing wall" of our own making that creates hostility between our brothers and sisters? Whether it is scriptural interpretation, denominational differences, or politics, it is incredibly easy to find ways in which we disqualify each other and separate.

There is nothing more heartbreaking than the Church splintered and fragmented, a Body characterized by disagreements rather than commonalities of the Gospel, of which love should be the defining trait. As the Bride, we are gloriously diverse in spiritual gifts, personality temperaments, cultures, and worship. Beautifully designed by our Master, and for a purpose – to reach an incredibly unique world filled with incredibly unique people in need of Christ. We all claim Christ, but yet hesitate at times when faced by others who are different, perhaps they are not real disciples, we think. We are not uniform, this is true, but we were never called to be. Instead, we were called to be one – united by the centrality of Christ and His Gospel.

What if we were to claim Christ as our peace instead of the reason for hostility amongst each other? What if we allowed Him to be the Great Unifier across the global Church? What if we were to work together with our Lord to tear down the divisions and find ways to celebrate our one calling instead – to love our Savior and make His name known, the very one who reconciled all of us to Himself?

Perhaps, if we did, we would be answering the prayer our Lord prayed: "I pray that they may be one...so that the world may believe that You have sent Me."

Prayer:

Lord, help us to remember all of us are one in You in faith by grace – that we are on the same side despite our differences. As You have drawn us to Yourself in love, help us to draw near to one another with unity of heart, mind, and soul. Let Your Church be one, and may there be "in essentials unity, non-essentials liberty, and all things charity." As You are the Prince of Peace, may we strive to be Your peacemakers. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 18

JOHN 4:1-6

Many of us at some point in our lives have probably read the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost. I remember my high school English teacher reading this poem to our class. The poem ends this way:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

We all have moments of decision in our lives – moments we have to decide which path we want to follow. For every Christian, one of those moments was when we decided to follow Jesus. The Gospels insist that Jesus isn’t stationary, rather, he is constantly moving somewhere. If we want to be with Jesus, if we want to know Jesus, then we have to follow Jesus. We all have to make a decision. Do we want to follow the road of the world and culture, or do we want to follow Jesus? This seems like it would be an easy question. The catch is, Jesus never takes the road most traveled.

In this passage, the road most traveled would have been the road around Samaria. It was custom during this time to avoid Samaria when traveling from Judea to Galilee. There was a deep religious and racial divide between Jews and Samaritans. Jews habitually took the road around rather than go straight

If we really want to follow Jesus, we are going to have to follow him down the hard road, the road less traveled, the road that demands something from us. We are going to have to live with people who drain us. We’re going to have to love people who hate us. At some point, we are going to find ourselves tired, worn out, on the verge of giving up. Even Jesus found himself tired as he sat down beside the well in the middle of the day. The hard road is no easier for us.

The monastics have a word for this feeling, *acedia*. They also call it the noonday demon. It’s that feeling that comes upon us in the heat of the day when we are halfway through our work, and we feel we cannot finish the day. We sometimes call it depression or apathy. It’s an honest feeling. If you have felt it, know that you are not alone. *Acedia* is part of the experience of every person who follows Christ. We all feel it at some point or another.

Modeling Jesus in our lives means taking the hard road. It means going the extra mile to serve someone else. It means compromising our own security and comfort in order to care for the needs of others. It means going through challenges that most people would try to avoid. If we never reach the end of our rope, then perhaps we aren’t doing it right.

We follow Jesus through Samaria, down the road less traveled, because that’s where He is. Eventually, though, we find ourselves sitting by the well of life and we realize that the hard road was the easiest of all. What if we take the road most traveled? What if we skip Samaria altogether? My guess is, if we don’t follow Jesus through Samaria, then we will probably miss the well of life in the heat of the day.

SUNDAY, MARCH 19

EXODUS 17:1-7

Is God among us?

It is easy to look down our noses at these runaway slaves, especially at this early stage of their long sojourn, and wonder how they could ask such a question?

Had they so quickly forgotten the plagues and the return of Moses, their deliverer and Prodigal Prince? Had they forgotten the parting of the Red Sea? Had they forgotten the last time they complained of thirst at Marah when, after their grumbling, Moses threw a piece of wood into the water and the bitter water turned sweet? Had they not experienced their daily miracle of manna and quail on the very morning of their complaint?

Complaints about water seem trivial compared to the heaping evidence of God's abundant provision. Before we rush to judgment, we might consider their perspective and remember several things about this wandering people that help us to understand their question.

First, they were runaway slaves, only recently freed from oppression. In Egypt, slave masters carried whips and, no doubt, used them liberally. The labor was hot and brutal and many died as a result, but there was meat in the pot at the end of each day and there was always water to drink.

Thirst, like all suffering, reduces our perspective so that it is all we can think about and, as a result, even a return to oppression might seem desirable if it came with a tall glass of ice water. Freedom was new to these runaway Hebrews, and they were receiving a crash course in the trust in God freedom requires.

Second, they were a people caught between promise and fulfillment. God rescued them from slavery and promised a land that would be theirs once again, but they were presently living in the intervening time and space called Wilderness.

The journey can become quite difficult in the rough terrain between promise and fulfillment. In the wilderness, the Hebrew people were forced to choose over and over again if they would trust and follow God. They accrued a mixed record of faithful choices, but over 40 years the wilderness shaped them into God's people who were able to take back the promised land.

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Finally, they were THIRSTY! Their throats were burning. They had cotton-mouth. Their babies were crying. Their elderly were suffering. The entire people were on edge and irritable, not to mention scared, with no solution in sight.

Yes, God had worked in their midst in amazing and unfathomable ways, but every time God delivered or provided for them, their situation didn't remain improved or secure for long before some other life-threatening predicament followed that required another step of faith and trust on their part and trust and further divine intervention on God's.

Most all of us think, somewhere in our hearts and minds, that if we can only remain obedient, things will get easier, but obedience didn't lead the people to an easier road. And so, as they faced another life-threatening predicament, they complained to Moses, and the heart of their complaint is the question, "Is God among us?"

This is a fundamental question of faith all believers must turn to over and again. We look behind us and see evidence of God's faithful, guiding presence, but faced with uncertain futures we ask: Is God among us in the midst of death and grief? In the stink of cancer and disease? In waves of refugees and the systems that create them and the walls that stop them? In the throes of divorce? The wandering of depression? In the face of oppression and evil?

Can God possibly be among us when we face cotton-mouth of the soul? The people asked and God instructed Moses to strike a rock with his trusty staff, and life-giving water flowed. We ask, and God answers with the Gospel of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. We ask and God offers God's self in the person of His Son.

Reflection:

Take a few moments today to look back on the most recent season of your life: How has God been present to you? Take a few moments today to look forward to the next season of your life: What uncertainties and anxieties arise in you? How and where is God inviting you to trust and obey in this season?

MONDAY, MARCH 20

PSALM 81

This passage feels a lot like that Calvin and Hobbes comic strip wherein Calvin is trying to sell “a swift kick in the butt” for \$1.00. Hobbes strolls by and asks, “How’s business?” Astounded, Calvin replies, “Terrible!” Rolling his eyes Hobbes remarks, “That’s hard to believe.” A frustrated Calvin declares, “I can’t understand it. Everybody I know needs what I’m selling.”

Psalm 81 has this same kind of tone to it. Commentator Clinton McCann suggests that this psalm has its setting in a liturgical context. More specifically, it reads as a sermon, beginning with praise and exhortation. “Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob (Psalm 81:1, NRSV).”

But with rabbit like quickness, the passage pivots from the preacher’s voice to God’s own voice. Along with the change in speaker comes a change in tone. “Hear, O my people, while I admonish you (81:8).” At a first glance, a reader may find themselves surprised: “I thought I was lining up for worship! How did I suddenly find myself standing in the line for ‘a swift kick in the butt?’”

But is it admonishment alone that we are receiving, or something deeper? Commentator Marvin Tate suggests as much. Rather than a frustrated, reproving God, he suggests that what we are really hearing is “pathos” like that of a divine parent: “The divine pathos of Yahweh is expressed in v. 14 [English v. 13] ... Yahweh is not a God of abstract absoluteness, who holds himself aloof from the world. He is moved and affected by what his people do or do not do. He has a dynamic relationship with his people, his family, and their welfare.”

Note especially vv. 13-16. “O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! Then I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him, and their doom would last forever. I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you (81:13-16).”

Lent is a good time to listen for the “pathos” of God. Much like the Israelites, in our own journey of faith we often find ourselves led astray by strange theologies and strange gods. It may not be the god of Ba’al, but it may indeed be the god of power, money, or self-centeredness. In these times, God’s pathos is needed. It is his voice that somehow contains both love and frustration. It kindly beckons us to a vision of a better life and at the same time admonishes us for our stubbornness to accept this new life. Maybe this Lent is a good time for you to stand in line for your divinely generated “swift kick in the butt.” Everyone I know, especially myself most days, needs it!

TUESDAY, MARCH 21

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-4

In classical music, there is a specific form of music called a sonata. In the traditional sonata, there are three sections. The first section of a sonata is called “A.” In this “A” section, the listener will hear a particular melody, major harmony, and a patterned rhythm. The next section is called “B.” In the “B” section, the listener will hear a completely different melody, minor harmony or harmony in a different key, and a completely different rhythm. The last part of a sonata is called “A prime.” “A prime” is similar to the “A” section but does not line up exactly in melody, harmony, and rhythm.

In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing his own sonata. It begins in chapter 8 with his discourse on meat sacrificed to idols and how we should treat the “weak” of the faith. The “B” section is chapter 9 where Paul poses the questions about true freedom. Finally, we arrive to the end of the sonata in chapter 10 where Paul is once again talking about food, but it is different this time.

Paul’s teaching takes on a spiritual role in these first four verses. There is talk about being baptized into Moses and referenced to the Exodus. Why would Paul do this? The Corinthian congregation was composed of mostly, if not all, Gentile Christians. The Exodus is not Gentile history or heritage, but I think Paul would disagree with me. Paul would say that these Gentile Christians have been grafted into this story and it is now their story. This reference to Exodus highlights Gentile Christians, who are wrestling with being a part of the family God, and we know because of this reference, and because of Christ, they are in fact part of the family of God.

There are two takeaways from these verses. The first is that it is Christ who sustains you (v. 4), not the rituals or social accouterments of this world. The second takeaway is warning. Just because you consider yourself strong in the faith does not mean you’re immune to temptation and sin. If we look at verse five, we see that just because the Israelites ate manna and drank from the rock and baptized, some were struck down because of their wickedness. Let this warning not scare us but serve as a reminder that we are not above temptation and should be aware when we are being tempted.

Questions for Reflection:

- 1. Knowing that we are a people who are saved by grace and sustained by God, why do you think we still fall into temptation?*
- 2. Do you think that Christians can participate in worldly activities and still remain faithful to God? If so, do you think that level of participation is the same for everyone? If not, how do you wrestle with the temptation of joining these worldly activities?*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22

JOHN 7:14-31; 37-39

A Note to My Sisters and Brother

We have now joined the league of orphans, having lost both Father and Mother.

We like others will find solace and refreshment,

In scripture!

For we recognize Jesus;

The giver of Living water.

We have assurance in His promise,

Of a resurrection.

As we embark on the Hope of a new morn

Perhaps with dampened desire and waning vigor;

We sally forth!

Amidst contrivances that would weigh-down lesser hearts and minds,

We take our stand!

Enmeshed in faith,

Knowing His love, grace and mercy,

We acquiesce all,

To His Will

To God be the Glory, Amen!

A particular kind of light has gone out forever. We sigh together, and separately no words are needed. As the one exhorting I do not miss its give-and-take nature for it is reviving to both giver and those that receive it. We lost our Mother November 9, 2016.

THURSDAY, MARCH 23

EPHESIANS 4:25-32

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explicitly talks about finding unity in Christ and how believers should treat one another. While Paul writes to a specific audience, there is both a reason this letter made it into the canon of Scripture and a reason we still find its contents applicable today. I cannot help but think if Paul were writing to the Church today, he may have added something like, “And let your posts on social media be an accurate representation of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

As a millennial who has grown up in the age of the Internet, I have found it becomes increasingly more difficult to find truth online, and sometimes opinions are shared as if they were factual. Along with this, my concept of “neighbor” has been shaped by anyone to whom I can click “add friend.” But Paul’s encouragement to speak truth to our neighbors is still a relevant calling, we just may need to be more careful of how we speak that truth.

As a Resident Chaplain working and ministering alongside other millennials on Baylor’s campus, my social media persona is almost as big of a platform as when I am hosting an event in my apartment. My students teach me so much. One of them just reminded me that our words should give life, not take away life and trust like a thief would. If you would not say something hurtful in person, why would you post it? And if we are to a point where we would say that hurtful thing in person, it is time for a heart check.

If the people who made up the Church in Ephesus were really to make an impact in their surrounding community, they needed to have unity in truth among themselves, then they would have something to share with those in need; then they would be able to speak truth. If we want to make an impact in our community, we must seek unity in Christ first. We need to talk about what is important and truthful to share, and that calling comes with whatever our platform may be – in our pulpit, in our cubicle, in our classroom, in our home, and in our social media.

Are we more concerned about sharing our lives and opinions on social media than we are about those who are living in need around us? This Lenten season, what about your words and actions might you need to give up to better represent the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Maybe this Lenten season, we need to give up our social media platforms and practice speaking truth face-to-face with our neighbors in love and grace. Blessings to you and your neighbors this season.

FRIDAY, MARCH 24

EPHESIANS 5:1-9

We live in a culture of doing. We have color-coded planners; digital notifications; calendars on our refrigerators, phones, and watches; sticky-note reminders... In short, we're busy. And, granted, sometimes we have to be! But this Lenten season, how might the charge in Ephesians 5 fit in our to-do lists? Feed dog. Start dishwasher. Turn in project. Meeting at 10:00. Lunch. Be imitator of God. Call mom. Get toilet paper...

The author of this epistle has laid a theological foundation in his first three chapters on which he now seeks to construct an ethical frame. Here, we find an exhortation for living into the newness of life in Christ Jesus, shucking the "old self" like a worn-out t-shirt. (As comfortable as that thing may be, it really has got to go.) "Therefore [because of the forgiveness and renewal of life in Christ] be imitators of God" (5:1). But how do we do this, we may ask? Noble as the question may be, in our "doing" culture, it is perhaps the wrong question.

We are called to be reflections of God "as beloved children, [living] in love as Christ loved us" (5:2). One does not do something to become a beloved child. It is simply a state of being. In, through, and by Christ we are no longer strangers, or even guests in the house of God – rather, we are children at home. It is the fragrant offering of Jesus' sacrifice that pleases God, not the musty odor of some works-righteousness. Dead with the old life is the former sacrificial system of ritualistic atonement! But, we still must live into the identity we now own. We are to "live as children of light" (5:8). This inherently requires us to disassociate with the darkness of impurity. The "fruit of the light" cannot flourish in the shadow of licentiousness, covetousness, gossip, idolatry, and the like.

Light has always been in the business of revealing things. Its antithesis, darkness, exists only as a privation – the simple absence of light. This light we have received exposes that which is not "good and right and true" (5:9). Thus, the fruit we are to bear is an organic result of standing in the Light; of living in love as a beloved child; of "being into" our God-bearing identity. We need the being of surrender, not the doing of sacrifice.

Prayer:

God of Light and Life,

of Death and Rebirth,

*Grant us the courage this season to live into
our identity as your beloved children;*

to step away from our incessant busyness.

May we know more of what it is to stand in the Light;

to be known and loved;

to exist apart from the darkness.

*Grant us rest and rejuvenation as we seek
surrender and not more unnecessary sacrificing.*

Amen.

Ross Tarpley
MDiv 2020

SATURDAY, MARCH 25

HEBREWS 10:4-10

God does not delight in sin offerings, but in doing his will. Our text reminds us that Christ came to do the will of God. He took on a human body and through moral obedience he did the will of God. Have you asked yourself what the will of God for your life is? What are you doing that will delight God? If you have not been thinking about this, then this is the time and season for you to diligently seek his face, allowing the spirit of God to guide you to do his will.

For Christ, being obedient meant willingly giving up his life once for all. We, too, have a choice to make. How are you doing the will of God? Christ did not come into the world to be a good man. He came to be a great high priest, and a body was prepared for him that by offering it, he might put sinful men forever in a perfect relationship to God. How are you preparing yourself for him this season?

The law was like a shadow with no substance of itself. It could not do the work which God intended in the perfecting of his people. What is that shadow you are still chasing? What is it that you are still holding onto to make you right with God? What can make you perfect other than the precious blood of Jesus? We can only subject our body in obedience to God. Sacrifice without a willing and obedient heart is a waste of time. 1 Samuel 15:22 says, "To obey is better than sacrifice." God requires loving faithfulness not sacrifice. The self-offering of Christ constitutes both a freely giving, loving offering of himself in obedience and devotion and a fulfillment of all to which the sacrificial system required in all details.

We can now rejoice that we have a righteous standing before God because there is no more offering for sin and no more remembrance of sin because Christ has offered himself once for all.

During this Lenten season, we are called to prepare ourselves through self-examination, prayer, and repentance in preparation to celebrate Easter. God expects our total submission and obedience. This means living our lives to please God in all things. Some people are ready to please God only when the price is affordable or cheap.

Prayer:

Father help me to present my body as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto you, which is your reasonable service. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 26

PSALM 23:4

My normal emotional rhythm is contentment, stress, contentment. In more difficult seasons of life, it is relative calm, distress, relative calm. Last year was one of those seasons when a bit of anxiety floated up and down on my emotional grid at times just above or just below the surface.

When my stress intensifies, my go to scriptures are often psalms of trust.* Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust. Verse 4 portrays a moment of potential distress, sitting between relative calm (vv. 1-3) and relative calm (vv. 5-6). Because the Psalms are “The Prayer Book of the Church,” these very words have been read for centuries amidst moments of grief and all kinds of trouble. I joined that company again this year, walking with the psalmist (David) through valleys deep and dark (even the shadow of death). And God spoke consistently an alternative reality into my soul through these words: “I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

One of my Lenten exercises this year is to recall my emotional rhythm across the months past. I have several reasons to do this, but mainly one. My wife Sara was still fighting breast cancer at this time last year, and she was deep into the journey – facing more brutal chemo and serious burning during radiation. We knew we were walking through a dark valley, and were aware of an imminent death shadow. I cannot say that we were without fear. But we knew with a deep knowing that we were not alone. And the calm was interrupted only for a few infrequent moments by any significant feelings of distress.

I do not long for the inevitable coming season of distress, but a Lenten prayer is that I may more calmly walk alongside others who this year will face one.

*(My most reliable arsenal of trust psalms includes Pss. 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, and 131).

MONDAY, MARCH 27

PSALM 146

Put Not Your Hope

*“Put not your hope in princes,
in a son of man who cannot provide salvation...
Blessed is one whose trust is in the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the YHWH his God.”*

As I was scanning through radio stations looking for music to drive through, the lyrics of a song caught my attention. The music itself was uplifting, like what one might find on a radio station devoted to worship music, but the lyrics made it clear that I wasn't listening to K-LOVE. The chorus was a series of “what if” questions ending on a ringing “What if everyone saved themselves?” The song, which I was never able to identify, puzzled me. A problem that one can solve themselves isn't a true problem; it may be an obstacle or difficulty, but it isn't a real problem if the ability to overcome it lies within us.

The Bible teaches us about such a problem, one that faces not only individuals but humanity in general. We've forsaken our role as image-bearers and emissaries of God and turned our attention to lower things. The results of this misplaced adoration are easy to see in our world: envy, hatred, sadness, violence, and every natural consequence of sin. Humanity has gotten itself into a situation that it cannot get itself out of. This is why the Psalmist exhorts his readers to “put not [their] hope in princes, in sons of man who cannot provide salvation.” The difficult, threatening things of this world cannot be overcome by humans alone, because humans caused the problems in the first place. A problem that one can solve themselves isn't a true problem, and humanity has true problems.

Of course, ultimately “a son of man” came who could provide salvation. This is the Gospel, the Good News, of Christ: humanity couldn't save itself from the problems it created, so God Himself took on flesh to set things right. The ultimate victory against the evil humanity brought on itself has already been won. Put not your trust in a son of man who cannot provide salvation; blessed is the one who puts his faith in the only Son of Man who can.

TUESDAY, MARCH 28

COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

Praying...On Purpose

Do you pray on purpose? How intentional and specific are you in your supplications, requests, and petitions to God? Are your prayers self-centered or other-centered? Beyond the obvious pillars of prayer from praise and thanksgiving to requests of forgiveness and personal provision, how focused are your prayers for others? These, among an array of other questions, can often times rattle the posture of any Believer seeking to develop an effective prayer life. Much like the ringing of the alarm in the wee hours of morning, such self-reflective questions can either place you on edge as you look forward to the end of a day that is just beginning or it could signify the dawning of new and fresh possibilities that only requires you to make the first step. The truth is, all of us are standing on the shoulders of someone who stood in the gap for us through prayer and intercession. For some of us, despite the sporadic 'life quakes' that we have endured or escaped, our current existence is the result of purposeful and targeted prayers that were made on our behalf by someone who wanted more for our lives.

Such is the case in Colossians 1:9-12. Paul, along with Timothy, writes passionately to the church at Colossae, expressing through the form of prayer their desire to develop and expand in their faith and life beyond what has already been deposited in them through other well intentioned teachers and servants of the faith. The who, what, and why of their petitions were clear and concise. They prayed on purpose.

The English Standard Version reads, "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light."

In these four verses we find a passionate and personal plea to be selfless in our prayer walk. We are invited to never stop praying for others (the who, verse 9a). We are encouraged to pray for the spiritual vitality and strength to journey through a life filled with many mysteries (the what, verses 9b, 11, and 12). Then, we find the intention of our intercession in verse 10, that those we call partners in the faith would be productive, living a life that is fitting and pleasing to our God. This is a charge for each of us to become so full with the advancement of others that we soon find a change within ourselves. That is praying...on purpose.

Application:

Over the next month, select five different individuals to pray for each week. Write them down, spend time pray for specific needs, and then write a card to each person stating what God has shared with you concerning what you prayed about and encourage them in their faith journey.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29

MATTHEW 9:27-34

I used to think life would be “easier” once I completed a major paper or test. “God, I can’t wait for this semester to be over!” Often, I spent more time worrying than I did preparing for the approaching assignment. We often feel the present is the most “challenging” and “stressful” situation we have ever faced, until the next challenge presents itself before us. Even today, I struggle to enjoy the present because I’m too busy worrying. Life is hard. However, how often do we miss out on the present by worrying about the future? What would it look like to involve Jesus in our daily living? What would it look like to live in the present?

When the two blind men approach Jesus, they cry out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” Interestingly, they never request to be healed of their blindness. I often wonder what it was like for them to hear Jesus’ voice for the first time. Jesus asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” What a powerful question. Do we believe Jesus is able to do a good work in our lives? Learning to see is not easy, and it is a lifelong journey with Jesus Christ. The blind men responded in faith in the presence of the Messiah. We, too, are called to respond in faith.

Reflection:

What is troubling you today? What could happen if we choose to live in the present? What could happen if we believe that Jesus is able to guide and help us? Certainly, we would begin to approach life differently, but we would also begin to be changed by our faith. Sadly, this doesn’t mean that our problems would disappear, but we are promised a “new perspective” in our relationship with Christ. Today, will you have faith like the two blind men? Will you trust Jesus with this day? If Jesus is able to give sight to two blind men, then imagine what he can do in your life!

THURSDAY, MARCH 30

REVELATION 10:1-11

A Unique Call

The call to Christian ministry is a call to proclaim the Gospel of God in various forms. It could be in preaching, music, or pastoral care. In Rev. 10, John speaks about a specific call, the prophetic call to proclaim the word. While we cannot dismiss the reality of individual, powerful voices today that have dominated the Christian landscape, John reminds Christian ministers not only about their prophetic calling and its renewal and reaffirmation, but also the source of the prophetic calling and its message.

In the text, John's prophetic calling is reflected in three sequences. First, in verses 1-4, John introduces the vision of his prophetic calling. The vision in Chapter 10 is a response to the question in Rev. 5:2, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" The answer to this question is implicitly, God. The "Mighty Angel" of God comes to John on earth with the scroll open and John's responsibility is to proclaim what is in the scroll. Second, verses 5-7 speak about the sovereignty of God in both the given proclamation and context of the message of the prophetic call that is in the scroll. John does not see the message in the scroll as belonging to him but from God. The message in the scroll is specific and urgent – God's judgment under hope has arrived. Third, in verses 8-11, the scroll is finally passed on to John. He is to take responsibility for the message of the scroll. He is to proclaim the message to and against the nations in judgment under hope.

The questions that come home to Christian ministers reading Rev. 10 today in the midst of the many powerful voices influencing the Christian church are: Who does the prophetic call to ministry belong? What should be the content of the prophetic message?

What has become so noticeable in prophetic calling today is the political and cultural processes embedded in Christian prophetic calling. Kingdom work has become the symbolism of the prophetic call. Moreover, a politically-cultural influenced Christian minister's voice has replaced the voice of God. Many Christian ministers today are influenced by these individual's voices rather than the prophetic voice John experienced. Therefore, the prophetic message of the cross, the resurrection, atonement, new birth, the church, or judgment, which John explicitly speaks about in urgency, have all evaporated into the mission of the church through social action. Many are called through good works.

At the heart of John's contention is that the calling of a Christian minister's calling belongs to God. It starts and ends in God. Within this prophetic calling is the message that brings the nations into judgment under hope. That is, Christian ministers' calling and proclamation presides in the sovereignty of God and God's absolute sovereignty should be uppermost in the Christian ministers' call and proclamation. John calls the Christian minister to live and proclaim a life of repentance and judgment to the nations that have rejected God.

FRIDAY, MARCH 31

REVELATION 11:15-19

The Lenten season ushers us towards Easter, as does Revelation 11:15-19. We receive here a pronouncement of the coming of God's Kingdom. It is worth our time to notice the signs in verse 19 that accompany this inauguration. The Temple is opened and the Ark, the very presence of God and the reminder of all he promises, is made accessible. Then follows the trembling of creation. There is lightning and thunder, earthquake and hailstorm.

I observe these signs and I am taken to the Crucifixion scene in Matthew's Gospel. Upon Christ's death the Temple is torn open, the place of God's presence and promise is opened to the world. Then follows the trembling of creation. The earth shook and rocks were split.

Nor should it escape us that, like the elders of Revelation, Matthew's Centurion responds in worship: "Truly this was the Son of God."

Revelation and Easter go hand in hand. Both call us to tremble and worship the coming of God's kingdom. We are reminded here that the Christ who lived and the Christ who died, the Christ who loved and Christ who redeemed, is the Christ who rose and comes again.

Revelation proclaims the victory of Easter. The Kingdom has come, Christ returns, let us worship the King.

Prayer:

Lord,

Your Kingdom has come and therefore we worship

We confess our aptness to hope in earthly kingdoms and powers

We trust that our victory is in your resurrection and return

Your presence is loosed into all of creation and so we celebrate

We confess that our busyness often neglects your presence

We trust that in every space and in every season you are near

Your Kingdom is one of reconciliation and so we offer praise

We confess that the hurt of the World is our own

We trust that salvation is in the acts of Easter

God we worship you and rest in your presence

Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 1

LUKE 24:44-53

Something to Write Home About

Dear Family,

I am sure by now you have heard about the death of Jesus. I know you must be scared and nervous. Please do not be! You see, I finally understand. I have been following this man for around three years, and I have seen him do amazing, unexplainable things. I was unsure when he set his face to Jerusalem this wise man was signing his own death warrant. It was only after his return to us that my mind was opened. This man is the savior we have been waiting for. The one I have grown up hearing about. He is the Savior discussed in the Law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the Psalms. He has suffered for us, died for us, and been resurrected for us. He has brought forgiveness and repentance to ALL nations. It is not just about Jerusalem or us Jews anymore. I am to be a witness – we are to be a witness. You are included in that!

We are currently waiting for what God has promised to us. Jesus told us we would be clothed with power from on high. Loved ones, I so wish you could have seen our last moments with Jesus. He blessed us and then ascended into heaven. It was the most beautiful moment I have ever experienced. Picture a gorgeous sunrise or sunset then amplify it. Surely, this is the Son of God! We are currently back in Jerusalem. We are living with joy and worshiping God constantly. I treasure this time with the other disciples, and yet, I know we have more to do. I yearn for the deliverance of God's power. Staying is difficult when I want to go and tell. Yet, I know there is a time for everything. God is preparing us for our future ministry. To go before we are fully equipped would be to go against the will of God. As Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion, not my will but the Father's be done. So, I will stay, and I will praise God while I wait. Grace and peace be to all of you!

With a joyful heart,

Thomas

Lucy Jordan
Mdiv 2018

SUNDAY, APRIL 2

EZEKIEL 37: 1-14

These dry bones...

These dry bones in the valley seem safe, buried down below the cries of pain where no sounds of grief, or visions of unsightly things can be reached.

These dry bones in the valley lay still, piles of decaying potential buried beneath what is real and numb to what they are meant to feel.

These dry bones in the valley sink low, drifting deeper into hiding, complacently subsiding, not daring to look up for fear of being known and exposed.

These dry bones in the valley creak and crack, as the weight of darkness beats them back down into bending and pretending to be what they are not.

These dry bones in the valley grow stiff, the marrow atrophied from lack of moving toward anything worthy, they remain rigidly opposed to mercy.

These dry bones in the valley fall blind, focused on perfunctory pursuits and lies that paralyze holy vision and block the truth from our eyes.

These brittle bones wither with each passing moment into dusty shells of decay. How can they live when the light of life seems so far away?

But then, out of the dust the prophet cries out, God's word on his lips, "Listen up you dry bones and be changed from within."

RISE UP.

O prophet cry out and open the graves where these dry bones lay, remove the sin penning them in and show them the one true hope of the Way.

O God breath your life into each petrified place and cause flesh to come upon deadened space, so that we might know the path of grace.

O Spirit come from the four winds with joy, and fill these dry places with the refreshing noise of praise lifted high in hearts coming alive.

RISE UP.

continued on next page...

Awake my soul and bring these dry bones to life, heal the disease of comfort and pride that poisons my purpose and weakens my sight.

Dust off the dirt of my selfish ambition. Let compassion fill these veins of wicked volition with kindness, patience, and peace on a mission.

Shake these bones out of their sleep, awaken me to the plan of the King and help me to see what this valley of bones was created to be.

RISE UP.

Every curve and line created for your glory, to inhale, exhale, praise to the Almighty. So yes, come alive and tell the world its salvation story.

Break what does not resemble you, and reshape me into something new that looks like Jesus Christ, the only sacrifice that will suffice.

With each breath he puts in me I begin to find, this life I have was never mine, but a miraculous, beautiful expression of Christ filled love divine.

RISE UP.

I was made to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly, to carry the broken, give the blind sight, and to share the hope of the resurrected Christ.

These dry bones once dead now live, God spoke and so it is, let every word from these lips bring glory to your utmost worthiness.

O master creator, up from the grave you came to save, resurrect, renew, and redeem, to speak these dry bones to life again and again.

RISE UP. RISE UP.

Amen and amen.

MONDAY, APRIL 3

PSALM 143

Fear gripped me. Terrified, I clung to the frayed rope swing as it catapulted me down the leaf-strewn hill.

“Let go!” my dad yelled as he jogged behind me. I knew that I should, I wanted to, but I did not trust that I would be safe in the fall from the run-away rope swing.

Despite my best efforts to hang on, my fingers loosened their grip and I began to fall. Yet, rather than slamming into the ground like I expected to, I felt myself being caught up in my dad’s arms.

As I have grown older, my moments of fear no longer involve my grandma’s rope swing, but there have been many times the same fear has made me want to clutch tightly to what was familiar rather than letting go and trusting my heavenly Father. Little by little, I have had to learn that when “my spirit grows faint within me” or “my heart is dismayed,” I can choose to remember the works God’s hands have done and then “spread out my hands” to Him in trust and surrender instead of focusing on my own fears or failures. I remember and I pray “Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.”

Though you may not know where the path leads, you can trust in God. Though you may not want to release your grasp on what is familiar and lift up your desires to the Lord, you can trust that He will always catch you when you fall. He is the perfect Father, calling out to you, “Let go! Trust me. No matter what you have done or what your enemies may say, I’ve got you.” So when the voices in your head drag you down, when you feel dismayed or your spirit feels oppressed or crushed within you, lean on God, cry out to Him. It may seem like you are just wildly swinging to your doom, but God has bigger and better things in mind for you and will be there to catch you as soon as you are willing to just. let. go.

Prayer:

God, when I despair, when I think you are not there or that I’ve fallen too far for You to reach me, may I put my trust in You. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, fill me with the kind of expectant hope that the psalmist has at the end of the 143rd Psalm. Remind me of all of the good things You have already done in this world and in my life. Help me to meditate on them rather than on lies of the enemy that my sins are too great for You to conquer. Yours is the victory achieved on the cross. Thank You that it is big enough to silence every fear and triumph over any mistake. In Jesus’ name and power I pray these things, Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 4

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

This text should be familiar to those who have been following Jesus for a time. Verses 8 and 9 are a hallmark of evangelical witness, a beautiful reminder that it is not our own effort that saves us, but rather the grace of our Father.

Today, however, may you focus on the verses that surround that iconic text. If you would, please allow your heart and mind to zero in on a few verses in particular that should inform how you view God, His grace, and yourself: verses 4-5, and verse 10.

“Dead through our trespasses...” (v. 4-5)

There are many times in our lives when it becomes easy to spot God’s grace at work. When we are able to faithfully serve others, flee from sin, and find joy in our days, God’s grace seems so very near. Yet oftentimes adversity makes it difficult to remember God’s supreme saving grace. The times when I find it most difficult to believe in God’s grace are when I’m chest-deep in sin.

Surely you, too, have experienced this. Struggling with your own selfishness, fighting a losing battle against a sin that seems to have a hold on your heart. It’s hard in these moments to believe that God is still gracious, still by our side, and still at work in our sanctification. But take heart, friends: the Creator is still “rich in mercy” and has a “great love” for you, even while you feel “dead through your trespasses” or stuck in your sinfulness. Yes, even in the midst of our darkest sin, God’s grace still covers you. His love still embraces you. You are still every bit His child. Revel and find freedom in this!

“God prepared beforehand...” (v. 10)

In the midst of your sin, your failure, and your doubt, remember also that God has prepared your path to righteousness already. Do not fear! Your sin does not surprise Him. Your failures do not alter His plan. Take heart, dear child of the King. Your “way of life” is not the sin in which you’re currently drowning. There is a better, more beautiful way that’s already been given to you in God’s all-encompassing grace. Choose the path He’s already laid out, and you will find your way.

His grace frees you from sin. It’s still ever present in the midst of sin. Take hold of it today!

Prayer:

In light of this understanding, pray this over your life today:

Creator God, thank you that it is not my own works which save me.

Thank you for giving your free gift of grace to me, and for adopting me as Your child.

When I find freedom from sin, remind me that it is because You have led me.

And when I fall into sin, remind me that You still love me. Forgive me.

And help me find freedom from the sin which entices me.

Remind me, Lord, that I don’t need to try harder or do better,

I simply need to choose the beautiful path which You’ve laid out for my life.

I choose today to embrace Your love and live in freedom.

It’s in the name of Jesus that I proclaim and ask these things.

Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5

MATTHEW 22:23-33

My time in seminary has taught me quite a bit. I've learned how to properly exegete scripture and how to preach a powerful sermon. I've learned how to read the confusing works of ancient theologians and how to explain them to a congregation. I've learned about pastoral care, leadership, and the role of a minister. I've learned how to write reading responses in 20 minutes flat and how to discuss an assigned text like I've actually read it. The lessons taught throughout these halls are innumerable.

One of the most distinct lessons I've learned, though, is that a seminary education is something of a paradox – the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. One day (hopefully) I'll walk across the graduation stage with a head full of knowledge extracted from countless hours of reading, writing, and fighting the urge to fall asleep in class. I will know more about theology, scripture, Greek, Hebrew, and the church than I ever knew was possible. And on that day, through the joy and the relief and the excitement, I will be keenly aware that my education in the matters of the divine is still closer to its beginning than its end.

The Sadducees in this passage knew the words of the law. They could recite the scriptures forwards and backwards. They approached Jesus not because they were seeking clarification, but because they wanted to entrap the Wise Teacher in a net of contradictions. What Jesus told them would have been shocking: "You don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God." How could these learned men not know the scriptures? How could they be ignorant of the God to whom they were so devoted? Their heads were full of knowledge. They could argue the letter of the law, but they didn't know the nature of the Judge.

Perhaps we're more like the Sadducees than we care to admit. Are we so enraptured in our pursuit of knowledge, of understanding, of clarity that we can't see the beauty in the great mystery of the divine? Is our obsession with answers causing us to look past the power of God?

We are not slaves to the law, but rather servants of the living God. Our hope is not in stale words and empty promises, but in the reality of the vacant tomb.

Prayer:

Oh God,

In our uncertainty may we seek you.

In our confusion may we trust you.

In our frustration may we lean on you.

In your resurrection we find hope.

In your revelation we find security.

We praise the Living King,

The hope of our salvation.

Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 6

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

The only requirement in the Garden of Eden was to not eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The penalty for disobeying the restriction was inescapable death. Adam and Eve act against God's will, climb the tree, and eat.

God finds them hiding, experiencing nakedness and discomfort, and expels them from the garden.

The weight of their defiant act is found in pain, suffering, hunger, and death. The cost of the defiant act is a broken relationship with God.

Adam and Eve have eaten, but find themselves empty. We, like Adam and Eve, are defiant toward God's will.

We climb the tree. We pluck the forbidden fruit. We all take a bite.

We also find pain, suffering, hunger, and death. The cost of our sin is a broken relationship with God. We are not allowed into the garden.

Next week is Holy Week. Jesus will be ripped from the Garden of Gethsemane and handed over for crucifixion. Jesus will be forced to climb a tree, and he will die upon it.

The cross becomes the Tree of Life. By accepting the call of the cross, humanity finds the way to eat the fruit of righteousness. Humanity finds a way to regain relationship with God.

Which tree will you climb? You can pursue your will and eat the forbidden fruit that leads you away from God. Or. You can surrender your will, and follow the God who was nailed to the tree on Calvary that leads to restoration.

One tree brings emptiness.

The cross brings fullness.

Hear again the prayer of Paul:

"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in wisdom and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 7

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30

Maurice Clarett was the starting tailback for Ohio State's 2002 National Championship team. He entered the fall as a freshman looking to prove his worth to Head Coach Jim Tressel and the rest of Buckeye nation. He finished the season with 1,237 rushing yards and 18 touchdowns as Ohio State finished the season undefeated after beating the University of Miami in the Bowl Championship Series National Championship.

Despite his prolific play on the field, Clarett wanted more. He began to battle issues of depression and alcoholism, as well as find himself in several misconduct cases during his academic career. Clarett seemed destined to leave Ohio State and begin an NFL career, so much so that he challenged the league's early entry eligibility rules. Instead of staying in school, finishing his education, and making the most of his time as a Buckeye through teamwork and leadership to younger players, Clarett imprisoned himself in a reality of poor decisions brought on by his selfish ambition.

In Philippians, the Apostle Paul is also in prison. His conditions are poor and yet he feels the call to write and encourage the Philippians. Verses 23 and 24 say that he is pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

In this time of persecution, Paul is standing firm on who he is, a man fully rooted in the saving power of Jesus Christ, whose life is to share the truth of who Christ is with all he encounters. As easily as his flesh wanted to give out, he did not give up. As wholeheartedly as he desired to be with Christ face to face, he knew that he was needed more where he was.

Paul chose the way of suffering because it brought life to those who would hear the message of Christ when he preached. Christ did not suffer on the cross in vain, he suffered so that we can have life and have it abundantly. Paul held strong when it was easy to quit and give up. Paul remained in prison against his deepest desires because his work on earth was not done. Clarett did just the opposite. He gave up, and walked out on his team, on his university and on himself. He gave in to the desires of his flesh and sinful nature because it was easier for him. Ultimately, he was never able to find himself on the football field again.

It is possible for us to follow Paul's example. It won't be easy, nothing worth doing comes easily but it can be done. Just as Paul's message through suffering and persecution is an encouragement, your message should be an encouragement as well. Paul writes to only conduct yourselves worthy of the gospel of Christ. Encourage others as they struggle and as you struggle. Conduct your life as if to mirror Christ and allow Paul's example to serve as the encouragement you need to make it through the day.

Prayer:

Gracious and caring Father,

Just as you protected your servant Paul during his time of imprisonment, protect me from the prisons of my thoughts and my life. Allow me to see the goodness in your plan and the error in my own. Align my will to yours, and allow me to stand strong in life's trials. Help me to stand with my brother and sister during their darkness and hold my hand as I hold theirs. Allow me to conduct myself in a manner that is pleasing to your eye and faithful in your sight.

Father, love me like only you can and let me share this love with everyone through all circumstances.

Amen.

Nathan Keil
MDiv 2018

SATURDAY, APRIL 8

MARK 10:32-34

When I read this passage in the Gospel of Mark, I imagine Jesus walking with his followers down the road toward Jerusalem. They have been walking for quite a while and their feet are starting to blister from sandals that don't fit just right. While they walk, they process what Jesus just taught them about the first being last and the last being first. What did He mean?

The disciples, while astonished by Jesus, are having some trouble figuring out what just to make of Him. He says he is going to die. This man they have been following, listening to, and learning from says he is going to die at the hands of those who hate him. The disciples don't know quite what to make of it. Suddenly, Jesus stops and turns toward them. He begins to speak about the Son of Man dying at the hands of those in power and the Gentiles. He begins to speak of his own death.

Something that stands out to me in the Gospel of Mark is that the disciples continue to misunderstand Jesus throughout the story. They struggle to understand that he is God and what it means to trust in him. They misunderstand him when he predicts his death. And here, when Jesus speaks of himself in the third person as the "Son of Man," I'm sure they misunderstand as well.

As a reader, I know that he is speaking of himself which leads me to wonder why I am always surprised when Jesus predicts his death. I've read the story over and over and know it is going to happen, but I'm always surprised. Jesus knew the time and the day. I realize this and I wonder what it was like for Jesus to know how he was going to die. I wonder how he felt.

One thing does remain certain though. While the disciples struggle to understand who Jesus is, doubt him as he predicts his death, and betray him right before he is arrested, Jesus remains steadfast. Jesus who knows who he is and whose he is. He lives out his purpose to the very end, even when that means being betrayed and crucified.

I learn a lot from Jesus' faithfulness in this story. I reflect on how often I am like the disciples. I struggle to understand and trust in God completely. God proves to me over and over again that I can trust him. Jesus loves his disciples even though they misunderstand him. That gives me hope for me, too.

Prayer:

God, we ask for faith like Jesus. Faith that allows us to know that even in the darkest days that await us, that you will never leave us. Help us to trust in you even when we don't want to and don't understand what you are doing. Thank you for sending yourself to us through Jesus Christ. May we learn to live more like him each day. Amen.

SUNDAY, APRIL 9

MATTHEW 21:1-9

Palm Sunday is Anticipation Day! The story of Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem brings this out in the strongest way possible. It gives us a dramatic visual of the direct connection that exists between hope (and strong anticipation) and joy. The sense we get from the narration of this event is comparable to the sense we get from small children the day before Christmas. It was with this kind of eager anticipation the Jewish people had looked forward to a time when God would set them free from the Roman bondage. And now, they were convinced that time had come. Jesus from Nazareth would become their political savior and fulfill their political dreams and visions. He fit the bill! He fed the hungry, healed the sick, confronted the powerful, cast out evil powers, and spoke words of reconciliation. What more could they want? Surely he would live up to their expectations!

However, in their eagerness they had come to confuse a God-focused anticipation with their own personal expectation. Rather than anticipating God revealing his presence in their midst, they were now expecting God to fulfill their personal vision of his presence.

Palm Sunday, with its the story of the Triumphal Entry, has something very important to teach us about the focus of our hope and the nature of our anticipation. What we learn, even on the surface of this text, is that our expectations to Jesus are far too narrow and small. It reveals that the joy that follows anticipation disappears when expectation is allowed to replace anticipation.

They wanted Jesus to be a regular king. A regular king has a regular kingdom which is defined by borders – and the king only rules those living inside these borders. Those outside have other kings or presidents. But Jesus had no desire only to be king for those inside Israel – he would be king for all people regardless of location. A regular king only has power in a certain area. But Jesus, as the Son of God, has power in all the earth – indeed on both heaven and earth. A regular king only has power in relation to external situations. Jesus' power reaches through the externals to our inner being – indeed, rather than merely changing a few externals for people, he wants to change life within people.

Palm Sunday reminds us to not limit Jesus' kingship to our own little "Jerusalem." He came to be the King of all and of everything within us – without borders and without limits. Even history is in his control. Notice, even in this context, the presence of the donkey in vv. 2-3 and the fulfilled prophecy of Zechariah given 1000s of years earlier! This week that we call Holy (that is, God's) functions as a reminder of the contrast between the anticipation of God's great vision and our small expectations. It's a reminder to not let the disappointment from our small expectations rob us of the joy that flows from the anticipation that Jesus will reveal his true kingship.

Who is the strongest – the soldier who captured Jesus in the garden or Jesus who says, take me and let the others go? Who is the strongest – Pilate who against his conscience gives in to the pressure of the Jewish leadership or Jesus who stands before him and says, I have the power to give my life and to take it back? Who is the strongest – the Sanhedrin who sits comfortably in Jerusalem planning the next point on the agenda or Jesus who hangs on the cross fighting to destroy the powers of darkness and enable your salvation?

What would confusing anticipation and expectation look like in your life? Who is your King?

Dr. Preben Vang
Professor of Christian Scriptures and Director, Doctor of Ministry Program

MONDAY, APRIL 10

PSALM 36

It was the summer of 1996, and I was walking into what would be the most exciting experience of my four-year-old life: Safety Town. Safety Town was the week-long day camp sponsored by my hometown which featured a half acre model of our town complete with roads, traffic lights, and big wheel tricycles for us to explore it. It also featured a daily visit from the police and fire departments to teach us how to be safe, responsible little citizens. For a four-year-old obsessed with police cars and fire trucks, it was heaven.

As my mom finished the registration forms, I proudly affixed my honorary police badge and began this rite of passage. I joined my group and waited for the camp to begin. Shortly after, in walked a uniformed police officer followed by the, then popular, McGruff the crime dog, and the room erupted with excitement. As the officer began to speak, his message quickly became evident. The world was a dangerous place for people like us, but there were those who were there to watch over us.

Psalms 36 teaches much the same lesson that Safety Town instilled in me as a child. It opens with a frank discussion of the pervasiveness of the evil in the world. The psalmist portrays “the wicked” as the embodiment of evil; as those who are so wicked that they are unaware of their own wickedness. In the mind of Psalmist, it is because of the wicked that Safety Town must exist. While Psalm 36 acknowledges that evil is pervasive, it also argues that there is one who stands over and against this evil, one who we can call in times of trouble.

The second stanza of Psalm 36 speaks to the Lord’s faithfulness in the face of the pervasive evil. Just as the officer taught us that we could always call 911 in times of trouble, so Psalm 36 speaks to the nearness of God’s in our troubles.

As we continue through this season of Lent let us lean into the the promise of Psalm 36 that God’s steadfast love continues to those who know him.

Reflection:

- 1. Think about a time in your life where the wickedness of world around you was undeniable. How did that make you feel? Did it cause you to draw closer to God or to push him away?*
- 2. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase God’s steadfast love?*

TUESDAY, APRIL 11

JOHN 12:20-36

Last summer, I attended a women's conference with my mom at my childhood church, and Beth Moore was one of the keynote speakers. She said something that has stuck with me these many months, which immediately came to mind as I was reflecting over these passages – “gospel math is one of multiplication.”

Through Abraham, God made a great nation, and through his offspring, all nations are blessed (Genesis 12:2; Genesis 22:18). Through Elisha, the widow's jar of oil became sufficient to save her sons from slavery (2 Kings 4:1-7). Through Jesus, five loaves and two fish fed 5,000 men with food to spare. (Matthew 14:22-31). Throughout Scripture, we see God take a little and make it more than enough.

But, here's the thing, sometimes God's addition actually feels like subtraction. In John 12:23 (NRSV), Jesus tells those with him that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” To multiply, that one seed must first get to the ripening stage, and then it withers and dies. (Thank you Google!)

Jesus is using the seed to illustrate that spiritual multiplication requires sacrifice. We must give something up to gain something greater. In this case our very lives, according to John 12:24, “those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (NRSV).

Through the death of one Man, as many as believe are reconciled to God and gain eternal life. But Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection isn't just about Him losing his life, it's about us losing ours too.

Sometimes the losing can be painful, even to the point of feeling like death. It has been known to take friendships, careers, relationships, habits, prized possessions, security, health, and the list goes on.

Jesus was crucified, he was tortured, and endured a brief separation from His Father. These things were painful and we shouldn't try to minimize or pretend otherwise. Jesus' humanity is revealed in his pain. He can identify with our present groans and sufferings, but He also knows what feels like excruciating deprivation is producing a far greater glory that outweighs them all (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

“Whenever God means to use a man for big things, he breaks him into little pieces first.”
-C.H. Spurgeon

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12

HEBREWS 12:1-3

"Oh, that must be an old one. I bet that was a Baptist church once. Did you know that one third of Baptists in Kentucky in the 1800s became Campbellite?"

"Jon! Jon! Eyes on the road!" Kendall yelled. Oh, she was right. My bad.

My girlfriend, Kendall, grew up Pentecostal. I grew up Baptist. Speaking about the histories of the people who were the "cloud of witnesses" was a way we grew to understand one another's faith. The cloud of witnesses which surrounded, went before us, and encouraged us to look toward Christ, were different but had some parallels.

Most Baptists are familiar with Lottie Moon, who gave her life serving Missions in China – preferring to live among the people rather than separate and comfortable apart from them. Lottie Moon serves as an example of people exiled, set apart, or (for a time) forgotten who have since inspired many to look toward the pioneer of our faith: Jesus.

So Kendall had a similar figure in her faith tradition. For a long time, few Pentecostals looked toward William Seymour as an important figure in their churches. But nearly every black and white Pentecostal denomination, from Assemblies of God, to the Church of God in Christ, can point to Seymour's Azusa street revival as its origin.

Because Seymour was not officially part of any denomination, he was often forgotten in denominational histories despite his influence on so many. And because he was African-American, his ministry, which was racially integrated, which has women prophesying and praying over men, proved a scandal during his time. Before the revival, which would influence missionaries and an entire movement of Christianity, he sat in a Texas Bible college hallway listening to lecture. Jim Crow prevented him from attending classes in with white students.

Yet this man was used by God. When asked about his movement, one may expect Seymour would say something about signs and wonders. Those in his day certainly thought that was "the point" of Seymour's ministry. Seymour did not see it that way. He said, "when you sum it all up, [it] is just more of God's love. If it does not bring more love, it is simply a counterfeit."

When I learned of Seymour, it helped me understand Kendall's faith tradition more. It broke through a divide of practice and even of vocabulary to point us more to Christ. I like to think she felt the same when I told her of Lottie Moon.

Recognizing the many different pastors, Sunday school teachers, missionaries, which surround us can be more than a road distraction. It recognizes God's gift to us in the people around us, the cloud of witnesses, and serves as a wonderful reminder to persevere in the race before us and look to Jesus.

THURSDAY, APRIL 13

JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

It must be difficult to justify allowing Jesus to rinse the dirt from your feet. Jesus, miracle worker, teacher, healer, soon to be savior of the world bends down to wipe the dirt from your feet.

It does not make sense, Jesus is too important, too divine, too God to wash the feet of man. It is easy to identify with Peter, hesitant, even resistant, to Jesus serving him in this way.

Can you see it?

The unworthy servants are reclining while the master bends over with a basin and a jug, insisting that they allow their feet to be washed.

Peter's response, "Not just my feet, but wash me all over" is also identifiable. If you are rinsing feet, clean me all over!

During the Lenten season, I sometimes feel like this. I want Jesus to clean me all over because in my reflection on the sacrifice made at the cross I realize how often I squander, misuse, and abuse the gift of salvation.

I don't live righteous enough. I don't pray enough. I don't give of myself enough. I don't care deep enough.

I fall short and, at times, turn back from living a life pleasing to God. I want to be cleansed thoroughly, just as Peter asked.

But Jesus' response speaks more to who He is than how I am flawed. Jesus tells Peter that those bathed don't need a bath, they simply need their feet washed.

So simple.

When we give our lives to Christ, accepted him as our savior, and embrace a salvation that is only accessible through him, we become clean. Washed so thoroughly that when the inevitable dirt of the world settles on our souls, Jesus requires us to submit ourselves humbly to him so he can rinse the dirt off once more.

Our God bends down with a basin and jug and rinses us over and over again.

FRIDAY, APRIL 14

JOHN 18:1-19:42

Peter gives me hope.

The rock upon which the church will be built.

The first to jump out of the boat.

The man who recognized Christ as Messiah.

The same man who misreads the situation in the garden and goes on to deny Jesus three times.

Peter gives me hope.

It can be so easy to shake my head at Peter's impulsiveness, to judge him for his lack of courage, and to question his motives.

Until I look in the mirror.

Looking deeply, I see the same impatience, the same rush to action, and the same fears in my own life. I see the times where I have missed the bigger story of what Jesus is up to. I see the times where I have rushed to do what I think is best, rather than waiting for Jesus to act. I also see the times where I have denied Jesus by my words or actions out of convenience.

And even though Peter is flawed, misses the point from time to time, or turns his back on Jesus, Christ is willingly mocked, beaten, and nailed to a cross... for Peter.

For me. For you. For us.

Peter gives me hope because I am Peter. I am a flawed follower of the Messiah. I know who he is, yet I can be timid. I am quick to act, but can also miss the point. And yet, just as Jesus was patient with Peter, restoring him to do great work, Jesus does the same with me. Through his suffering, through his crucifixion, and through his resurrection, Jesus continues to work in me and call me to greater things.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for your willingness to continue your work in me when I forget who I am, who you are, or what you are up to.

Thank you, Father, for loving me in spite of my shortcomings, lack of faith, and timidity.

Thank you, Father, for your sacrifice, suffering, and for healing me through your stripes.

Thank you, Father, for entrusting me with the work of bringing your Kingdom to earth.

Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 15

MATTHEW 28:1-10

Through the Eyes of Mary Magdalen
Grief empties my heart,
Trudging along to tend the tomb of our teacher,
To dress flesh in decay.
He who has suffered,
He who has died,
He who has been buried,
Along with hope.
Hope to which I cling,
Or let death crush me crippled.
Woe! If death is but a gaping mouth
Swallowing men.
Woe! If the earth does not shake for God
Who set the foundations.
Woe! If God is not faithful
To raise the fallen.
God has opened the grave,
Death's appetite satisfied.
The earth trembles under God's heavy grace,
Creation submits as the Son submitted.
Jesus has kept his promise,
his cloths alone stripped on the floor.
We run in anticipation,
Tears falling,
Thighs burning,
Hearts aching.
When our Lord stands before us.
Nothing can hold back my tears
For he has exhumed my hope,
Raised it with him,
Returning it with his presence,
and promise,
and commission.
He is not buried,
He does not lie in a tomb,
He need not sleep like the dead,
For he stands with the living.
This is our Lord,
Son of God,
Who lives!

EASTER - APRIL 16

John 20:1-18

'Woman, Why Are You Crying?'



“Christ is risen!” a leader proclaims; “He is risen indeed!” the people exclaim.
Happy Easter, sisters and brothers!

continued on next page...

The text before us this Easter morning is John 20:1-18. It unfurls in two roughly equal parts. Verses 1-10 focus upon the empty tomb, and verses 11-18 report an appearance of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene. Whereas in the Synoptic Gospels Mary Magdalene, “from whom seven demons had come out” (Luke 8:3; cf. Mark 16:9), is among certain other women who travel to Jesus’ tomb and there learn that their Lord is alive (cf. Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1, 10), in the Fourth Gospel Mary takes center stage.

It was she alone who on “the first day of the week” went to the tomb in the black of night to discover that the stone had been rolled away (John 20:1). It was she alone who hightailed it to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple to declare that their Lord was no longer where he had been laid and that his whereabouts were unknown (John 20:2). And it was she alone who stood outside Jesus’ tomb crying after Peter and the other disciple had taken leave (John 20:3-11).

As the solitary Mary is weeping, she bends and peers into the tomb. In so doing, she sees two angels seated where Jesus’ body had been placed. The angels ask of her this question: “Woman, why are you crying?” She answers because her Lord has been taken from his tomb and that she had not the foggiest notion where he now was (John 20:11-13).

Mary could hardly turn around before she was being asked yet again – this time by one she mistook to be a gardener – “Woman, why are you crying?” This would-be garden-keeper also asked Mary, “Who are you seeking?” As she begins to engage the stranger regarding her Lord’s location, she discovers by his very mention of her name that the gardener is her Teacher (John 20:14-16).

Her Rabboni instructs her not to cling to him but to tell his “brothers” that he is ascending to his and their Father and God (John 20:17). Mary not only hears the voice of her Shepherd-King, she heeds it (John 20:18; cf. John 10:27). In so doing, she becomes an “apostle to the apostles” (apostolorum apostola).

Prayer:

Risen, Reigning Lord, the day will come when you will wipe every tear from the eyes of your resurrected people (so Revelation 21:4). Until that time, you weep with us (John 11:35) and speak to us by name (John 10:14). Thank you for laying down your life and taking it up again (John 10:17). Thank you for the promise of abundant and eternal life in you (John 10:10; John 3:16). Amen.



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