



THE HOPE OF THE CROSS

2020 Lenten Devotional

University Lutheran Chapel | Ann Arbor, MI



**" In me there is darkness,
But with You there is light;
I am lonely, but You do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with You there is help;
I am restless, but with You there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with You there is patience;
I do not understand Your ways,
But You know the way for me."**

~Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*May you experience the light, help, peace, patience, and hope of Christ,
day by day, this Lenten season.*

Cover Photo:

Water cistern in Meersburg Castle, Southern Germany. The cistern receives rain water through the spout at Jesus' feet. During festivals, the cistern is said to have been filled with wine—Jesus is the Living Water who has shed His blood for our salvation. Photo by Norma Polk



Genesis 18:26-33

February 26, 2020

Ash Wednesday

Just One | Pastor Gabe Kasper

Dust you are and to dust you will return. These words are sobering. And yet, inescapably true. They set the tone for the entire season of Lent: a season when we stare into the stark reality of death, a season when we recognize our human frailty, and a season when we come clean about the reality of our sin. All of this may seem a bit morose, and perhaps it is, but the heaviness of this season isn't about darkness for darkness' sake. It's about understanding the weight of the darkness in our world and inside each of us in order to point us to the incredible grace poured out for us on the cross.

In Genesis 18, Abraham asks if God will save the city of Sodom from His judgement against sin for the sake of a righteous few. In that question, Abraham is asking, Is my moral record the only record I have to go on? Or is it possible that someone else's record can cover over mine? Is righteousness transferrable? Can the righteousness of the few save the many? Abraham boldly continues, *"May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?"* He answered, *"For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."*

And so, Abraham discovers this amazing theological principle. That yes, the righteousness of the few can, in fact, save the many. Ultimately, how many righteous does it take to save the many? As it turns out...just One. On the cross, Jesus is the righteous One giving His life for the sake of the many. For your sake. St. Peter puts it like this, *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit"* (1 Peter 3:18). May that be our focus this Lenten season and always.

Reflection:

How will you live that out this Lenten season?



1 Kings 10:1-8

February 27, 2020

The Skeptical Queen | Justin Beemer

Put yourself in the shoes of the Queen of Sheba for a moment. A rumor reaches you that the king of a country elsewhere in the world has been blessed so greatly by his God that his wisdom surpasses all who have ever lived. You'd probably be skeptical, right? It's quite a claim to call someone the wisest man to ever live. You'd probably want to go meet this king and see for yourself if this rumor is true.

That's exactly what the queen does, and she is amazed at Solomon's splendor. She even praises God in the next verse, saying, *"Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel!"* It's easy to understand her initial skepticism, isn't it? All the time we read the Scriptures and hear of the incredible works of the Lord. Sometimes it's easy to doubt; maybe it's all too good to be true. After all, we weren't there to see it for ourselves.

Jesus' own followers struggled with this. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he saw for himself. For followers of Christ, doubting is a natural struggle of faith. But, even in the face of these doubts, the Bible gives us a blessing and a promise from Jesus. In John 20:29, He says blessed are those who have faith without seeing. And in Matthew 28:20, He promises to always be with us. In the midst of your struggles and doubts, put your trust in these words from our Savior.

Reflection:

How do you turn to God in the face of struggles or doubts?



Luke 23:32-43

February 28, 2020

Pain With A Purpose | Shannon Riley

In the first century A.D., the Roman Empire was a factory of death. By the time of Jesus, it had mastered the art of crucifixion, which was reserved for the worst of society because it was the most disgraceful way to die. Before the transgressor was nailed to the wood, he was stripped and beaten. Then a sign was placed above him, stating his name and his sins for all to see.

We might not experience the pain of physical crucifixion, but we all experience spiritual pain. The devil knows all our sins. Every day he tortures us with the guilt of our sinful nature. He tells us lies to spiritually nail us to our cross all the while holding the sign over our heads so that all can see. As sinful humans, the only thing we deserve is death. Despite all our sinful blemishes, we can look to Jesus. Jesus allows bad things to happen to us, not because He loves us any less, but because through difficulty the Lord makes Himself known to us. At our most vulnerable, God rescues us.

When we become spiritually weak, that is when God renews our strength. During Biblical times, crucifixion nails were believed to be healing charms, even though they did not have any magical healing powers. Instead, we can think of our sins and struggles as spiritual nails: the anger we allow to fester, the guilt we carry of past sins, the frustration we encounter about our current economic situation, or the sadness we feel from the loss of a loved one. Despite any earthly obstacle we may face, God wants the best for His creation. Just like Jesus saved the repentant robber on the cross, He also saves us. God will never stop loving us, and we can rest assured that we too will be with Him in paradise. Through the law of God, we are shown our sins, but through the love of God we are shown our Savior.

Reflection:

On this sin-filled earth, where have you seen God at work?



Paul's Advice for Christian Growth | Thad Polk

Paul only got to spend three weeks with his new converts in Thessalonica before being forced to leave (Acts 17). The new believers were left on their own in an extremely anti-Christian environment without anyone to lead them. Paul was naturally very concerned and was ecstatic when he heard that their faith was firm (see 1 Thessalonians 3 for Paul gushing!). Paul, therefore, wrote them to express his joy and encourage them. That letter ends with today's verses, in which he offers advice to help them grow.

First, he offers three DO's for Christian growth: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Does that mean we should always put on a happy face and never feel sad? That seems unlikely since Jesus himself was often sad (e.g., Jesus prayed "with loud cries and tears" before heading to the cross). Presumably the advice is to see adversity as an opportunity for growth. As James put it, *"Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (James 1:2-3).

Paul also offers three DON'Ts for Christian growth: don't quench the Spirit, don't despise prophecies, and don't commit evil acts. In other words, don't ignore the Holy Spirit. As Oswald Chambers put it, "If you are not sensitive enough to detect His [the Spirit's] voice, you will quench it, and your spiritual life will be impaired." In my own life, I've found that if I disobey the Spirit's voice, then it becomes harder to hear Him the next time. Conversely, if I obey His voice, even in little things, then my spiritual hearing gets more sensitive, and I can better hear Him in the future.

Ultimately, we can't grow ourselves; the Holy Spirit has to do that. But Paul's advice can help us get out of His way!

Reflection

What trials are you going through that God could use to grow your faith? What can you do to get out of the Holy Spirit's way and let Him work in your life?



Matthew 28:16-20

March 1, 2020
First Sunday in Lent

The Rest of the Story | Mark Liston

We all remember the Great Commission: *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* But we really don't remember, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story."

The women went to the tomb. When they arrived, an angel told them that He had risen and that they should go to Galilee. Then, Jesus appeared and they clasped His feet and worshipped Him. He told them to do as the angel said: tell the disciples to meet Him in Galilee. Imagine what the women shouted to the disciples. The tomb! The angel! How Jesus appeared to them! How they clasped His feet! The women knew that He was alive!

Here's the rest of the story. His guys. His team. All eleven had seen his miracles for years. They saw Him raise people from the dead. They knew that He was God. Yet, in verse 17, *"They saw Him and worshipped Him, but some doubted."* Duh! Were they idiots? Didn't they listen to anything the Christ had told them? Didn't they remember the transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus? Didn't they remember the voice coming out of Heaven saying, *"This is my beloved Son?"* Why did they doubt?

Reflection:

The rest of the story is about us. Why do we doubt? Why don't we remember that God loves us? He forgives us. He sent his Son to die for us. Why don't we spend every waking hour talking to Him and asking Him for His guidance? For His help? For what He wants for us, rather than what we want for ourselves?



Psalms 32:1-5

March 2, 2020

From Weighted Down to Total Freedom | Danielle Behnke

Lent truly is an amazing season of the church year. It's actually my favorite one, which people are always surprised by. I usually hear responses like, "But it's so depressing" or "Lent? Really? Why not some time happy like Christmas or Easter?" Don't get me wrong, those are great seasons, but I find Lent to be even greater. As a season of repentance, Lent encourages introspection. We examine our lives to determine where we are falling short and then repent and ask for forgiveness. This is not an easy thing to do.

We hate to see our faults displayed before us and to see how far we are from following God's will completely. It's condemning and wears us down. For just as David wrote, *"For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer,"* so we feel that weight of sin and our imperfection upon us. However, that's not the end of the story. In our imperfection and guilt, Christ came so that we could be forgiven, completely absolved and washed clean. This weight that we feel during Lent, as we reflect on everything that we've done wrong, is completely lifted as we remember the true gift of grace and confess our sins to a God who is so loving and merciful that we don't have to pay the price because His Son did it for us.

That is why Lent is such a great season: through our introspection and realization of just how far we are from holiness on our own, we can more fully appreciate the joy and total freedom that comes from the gift of the forgiveness of our sins.

Reflection:

How can you embrace Lent more fully this year?



James 3:2-18

March 3, 2020

Come On Down | James Piazza

"Our tongues are a small part of our body, but make great boasts" and can corrupt the whole course of a life (v.5 amp).

The Price is Right, a long-running TV game show offers the opportunity for audience contestants to win many wonderful prizes after hearing an invitation to "Come On Down" from Bob Barker, the show host.

After competing against other contestants, one winner is afforded the opportunity to use their voice and tongue to select **Door One**, **Door Two**, or **Door Three**, to win a spectacular or maybe not-so-spectacular prize, based on the door selected.

We earthly beings are blessed with a similar opportunity to use our voices and tongues to hopefully win a spectacular prize. However, we can only choose between **Door One** or **Door Two**.

Door One: Our Own Strength

This door provides a selection of discord, which cannot produce righteousness. It also provides self-ambition, bitter envy, disorder, and every evil practice, all provided by the devil and our flesh. These selections are earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil.

Door Two: Humble Faith

The wisdom that comes from Heaven is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit. Impartiality and sincerity are behind Door Two, along with a life of deeds done in humility.

Reflection:

Brothers and sisters, which door will you select today?



Genesis 3:1-7

March 4, 2020

He Said, She Said | Julie Piazza

So he said, she said...it wasn't really my fault was it? We have become quite good at navigating sin in our world. It started with this betrayal and temptation invitation "to eat of the forbidden fruit." It seems remarkable to me that this decision had the impact to change the course of human history and is at the root of our "blame and shame" society.

It's seemingly easier to blame someone else when something goes "wrong." However, when we try to hide from those situations, God knows, and so do we. We become "naked and ashamed" rather than "wiser and more knowledgeable." And we often bear unnecessary burdens from these feeble attempts to hide. A fig leaf is not going to cover much!

We have the opportunity through repentance to rid ourselves of our blame and shame behaviors. We can both receive and share God's precious gift of forgiveness. The first step is owning our sin and acknowledging our role in it. We can choose how to behave when we face temptations. By releasing control to God, as well as by admitting our participation in the choices we have made, we step forward in faith.

Reflection:

In this season of Lent, reflection, and repentance, may God help us realize how our decisions and behaviors can impact others. An unwise decision can start a downward spiral of sin. Let us reflect on how our decisions and behaviors can encourage others and keep us on the path God intended.



Mark 12:41-44

March 5, 2020

Worshipping Christ with our Money | Todd Baker

I know it isn't Christmas season, but every time that I consider generosity I think about the character of George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life*. He was constantly giving up the desires of his heart for others. One powerful example in the film takes place at the beginning of the Great Depression. George and his new wife, Mary, are on their way to leave for their honeymoon when there is a bank run on the savings and loan that George manages. Without a second thought, George and Mary give up all of their wedding gift money to their patrons who are in desperate need of money to live on. George was not rich in terms of money at all. This wasn't some small gift that wouldn't put a dent in his finances. This was a big gift.

Thankfully our salvation is not dependent on the size of our gift—in real terms or in terms of a percentage of our net worth. Isn't it comforting to know that we do not need to purchase redemption from our sins? Christ has done that on the cross for us. Instead, we may use our wealth as a means to worship and praise Him. If we're going to praise God with our money then why not give until it hurts? If Christ died on the cross for me, then surely I can give my money to Him instead of buying the biggest house or the latest gadgets.

Reflection:

In response to His gifts to you, how can you worship Christ this Lent?



2 Kings 6:8-17

March 6, 2020

The Truth of the Battle | Will Cannon

What we see determines our ability to understand reality.

In this passage, the King of Israel has his sight set on the obstacles set against him, namely the King of Syria and his armies that had successfully surrounded him. Elisha recognizes this and calls the King's attention to the deeper reality—that they are all surrounded by the Lord's army, ready to fight on their behalf. In a profound development, Elisha prays that the Syrian army be struck blind, and they are—rendering them ineffective in battle and allowing Elisha to lead the King and his army to Samaria.

We all need our vision to be set on the deeper, spiritual realities around us. It is easy to get distracted by what is immediately surrounding us and forget the battle we are in and the victory already won for us. That we are not *“fighting against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”* (Ephesians 6:12) and that the Lord has already overcome all that is in the world (John 16:33).

There are two traps for us to avoid: 1) not seeing the danger we are in, and 2) not claiming the victory already won for us. You are in a spiritual battle—recognize it like the King sees the Syrian army surrounding him. Do not lose heart though. Raise your eyes to the cross: see the army of Heaven surrounding you and the victory already won for you in Christ (Psalms 121)!

Reflection:

Where do you see the spiritual battle in your life? How do you set your sights only on the danger you are in? Pray through Psalm 121; ask the Lord to raise your eyes to Him and give you spiritual vision of His grace working in the very situations you are confronted with.



Genesis 4:1-8

March 7, 2020

Cain and Abel | Cecilia Hiros

Being a student can be very difficult at times. When you have spent 40+ hours on a project just to receive a C-, while a classmate spent only 10 hours and received an A+. Or in my case, I spend hours perfecting a difficult solo piece and a younger student comes in and has already performed that piece dozens of times. Or even in the workforce, you have been working hard to get that promotion, but the new hire is promoted instead of you. All of these events can spark jealousy and resentment. That is the story of Cain and Abel.

Cain and Abel were to bring sacrifices to God. Clearly, Cain did not bring a pleasing sacrifice and Abel did. God says to Cain, *"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it"* (Genesis 4:7). Although God is providing Cain with a second chance to respond with humility and faith rather than with manipulation and pride, he chooses to ignore God. Instead, he allows his bitter resentment to control him, and consequently murders his brother, Abel.

This resentment is a common theme in everyone's life. We have all at one point or another been jealous of our neighbor and maybe even blamed God for our downfall. We forget that we are to follow God's will and not expect Him to follow ours. God tells us to put aside our resentment, for it can lead to greater sin. We are asked to put aside our jealousy and be happy for our neighbors.

And because Jesus sacrificed His blood for us, we are given the ultimate second chance.

Reflection:

When have you been given a second chance? How did you use it?



Daniel 3:20-29

March 8, 2020

Second Sunday in Lent

God Is Still Emmanuel | Vanessa Lane

The account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego always sounds larger than life, bordering on heroic and unattainable to the average disciple of God. Upon closer reading, however, there are many relatable aspects present in Daniel 3:20-29. We see three men, faithful believers in our God, caught up in an intense conflict with their king. Their king wants to kill them for their belief in God, which feels unjust to us as 21st century Americans, and the means of death by fire is simply inhumane. Although the degree of their persecution might not be something we experience in southeastern Michigan, we don't have to look far to see injustice, corruption, and suffering on a smaller scale right in our own neighborhoods.

I read this passage and felt confused about its placement in the lectionary. Why would this reading be selected for the Second Sunday in Lent? The answer can be found in this follow-up question: Where was God when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in the fire? He was with them. The message of Lent, yes, is that of penitence, self-reflection, and looking toward the cross, but it's not an abandonment of Christmas. The hope of Jesus is that He is Emmanuel: God with us. This is the Christian's hope for our daily walk with God. He is present in our suffering, in the midst of tumultuous political times, in our mourning, and even in the wearisome minutiae of our daily lives.

Reflection:

In what ways have you seen God's presence in your suffering? What promises does He make even when you don't feel His presence?



Colossians 2:6-12

March 9, 2020

Are You Free...and From What? | Larry Frank

So, there was this church plant east of Ephesus and a report that they might have been “taken captive in trance-like visions with rigorous rules and thought, describing a fuller type of spiritual experience.”

In this text, Paul asks what experiences does the believer (that’s you and me) share with others—and with Christ (v. 9)? This might include questions like: What are the roots of your faith? Is it just living by rules? How are you strengthened in your faith? In your thoughtful responses, do you overflow with thankfulness?

So, what does living in Christ (v. 6) involve? In Paul’s description in Colossians 1:10-12, there is an answer: Joyfully giving thanks and recognizing thankfulness in our own prayers! See that word—recognizing—that’s one stop on the ticket to freedom. You can also encourage other people that way!

You know there are “additions” to your faith! You experience encouragement from others, or even as a by-product of your own gift of encouragement to others! What experiences do you share with Christ (v. 9-13)? Think of the implications—changes—you have seen in your life! Recognize you are free in Christ!

Look at Colossians 3:12-14—it empowers us to be free in our submission to Christ!

We are not in a trance, we are in the fullness of Christ, and He has given us the victory over the human-control idea impressed upon the people in the text.

We are set free by His Grace.

Reflection:

Thank you, Jesus, for the Gospel that reports these corrections in our life for us. May we open that door, step through it, and proclaim, as Paul did, our freedom in Christ.



Matthew 20:1-16

March 10, 2020

Unreasonable Generosity | Amy Robson

In God's kingdom, things are often turned on their head. Repeatedly, we see that *"the first will be last and the last will be first."* This principle is illustrated dramatically in Matt. 20:1-16: The workers who work in the vineyard for one hour receive the same wage as the workers sent out in the early morning. While I've often viewed this passage from the perspective of the worker, it is the Owner's graciousness and generosity that capture my attention this Lent.

Unlike most bosses, the Owner leaves the vineyard in search of employees. In fact, He goes out five times to find workers. And those he hires apparently don't have any qualifications, other than their obvious availability. While he mildly rebukes the latecomers for being idle, he hires them, too. In this passage, he never mentions a need for workers for the vineyard's sake; he seems to hire them for *their* sakes.

Not only is the Owner surprisingly gracious, He is also "unreasonably" generous. It does seem unjust that the person who worked for one hour gets paid the same as the person who worked all day. Yet, the vineyard Owner is right when he says, "I am not being unfair to you, friend...Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Why do the workers protest this generosity? They get paid what they are promised; however, they feel entitled to more. What others get somehow takes away from what they have. While their pay hasn't changed, their perspective has: They were content with their lot until they saw what someone else received.

Reflection:

In this passage, the vineyard Owner, or God, initiates a relationship with the "workers" and graciously pays them all a day's wage. As a result, those who worked longer are indignant—entitlement and comparison seem to be the enemies of gratitude and joy. This Lent, let's focus on the Father who sent His Son as the payment for all of our sins—for those who are in the church and for those outside, for those who seem deserving and for those who don't. Let us be like Him, gracious and generous to a fault.



2 Corinthians 9:8-15

March 11, 2020

Encouraging Word | Ruth Bengé

I read *The 5 Love Languages* by Gary Chapman years ago and determined my dominant love language to be "Acts of Service." This means I show others care and love by doing, helping, supporting, collaborating and organizing whatever "thing(s)" needs to be done. On the other hand, the most foreign love language for me to express is "Words of Affirmation." God has been laying this heavy on my heart lately, especially in my professional life.

In the education world, "strategic feedback" is considered to be best practice. An intentional and mindful teacher makes sure to give students feedback which is timely, specific, and connected to learning targets being taught, but also this feedback should be honest and genuine. The heart of this Christian educator is being convicted of withholding loving words of encouragement as He places them in my mind. It's always been easy for me to express loving feedback to children, but adults...well, that can be just straight up weird and awkward for me.

In the Lenten reading for today, Paul reminds us that "*you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion*" (vs. 11). This includes being generous with heartfelt words to those around me, trusting God's blessings will flow in the weirdness. Instead of just thinking in my head, "Wow, now that's passion, extra effort, excellence, honest vulnerability, or loving leadership in action," I am practicing the pause and reflecting that God might be urging me to transform those thoughts into words of loving encouragement and affirmation. After all, God's very essence is generosity, freely giving His Son Jesus to die for all people. We can live in joy, not fear, remembering we are made rich in every way.

Reflection:

Consider how you can give generously by investing your words to bless others and to further His Kingdom.



Matthew 16:1-4

March 12, 2020

The Demand for a Sign | Michelle Armbruster

In Matthew 15, Jesus:

Addressed the issue of what makes a person unclean (his answer offended the Pharisees)

Healed the Canaanite woman (though he was sent to the Jews)

Healed and fed the 4,000 (with seven baskets of leftovers).

But that, apparently, was not enough for the Pharisees and Sadducees who came together and showed their hatred in their attempt to trip up Jesus by asking Him to provide a sign.

Jesus' response was to redirect them to Jonah's story. He patiently asked them to review what they already knew. I wonder how many more signs it would have taken before they would have believed that He was the Messiah. Was the ultimate sign of Jesus' death and resurrection even sufficient?

"The Lord's point is obvious. Those who love their sin will never embrace the truth no matter how many miracles they see—even if someone were to rise from the dead! The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus explains well that *'If they will not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rises from the dead'* (Luke 16:31). If they were not convicted of their sin and their need for a Savior from the Law of Moses and the preaching of the prophets in the Old Testament, then they would not be willing to listen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ whose resurrection from the dead is the pinnacle of God's redemptive work. As always, those who refuse to acknowledge that they are sinners will never see their need for the Savior" (Stanly Community Church, Pr. Rick Clayton).

Reflection:

How many signs of God's love and provision do we require before we are convinced of His sovereignty? When something happens that is unexpected, do we question His plan for our lives? How do we respond when something happens that we have been told is coming? Are we ready for it? How do we receive it?



The Vanity of Toil | Matthew Osbourne

For human beings, eternity is difficult to imagine. Sometimes we find ourselves dwelling on the disheartening thought of wasted time and purposeless achievements. That ongoing turmoil inside of our minds asks us, "What is the point of this?" Typically, we choose one of two routes—one that seeks wealth, popularity, and unlimited amounts of stuff, or the one that fuels the flame inside the soul, a path that accumulates knowledge, wisdom, and happiness.

In Ecclesiastes 2, the speaker says he hates his own life because what he is reaching towards has nothing to offer in return. Verse 18 reads, *"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me."* In today's society, this sentence is all too realistic—as everywhere we turn, we see a bright ad for the newest gadget or a huge job opening that offers an insane amount of money.

You can't fault someone for gaining a reward for hard work, yet how much of that reward is involved with eternity? Eternity has much more to offer. Eternity turns everything we thought we knew into something we could not even begin to imagine. Instead of living each day collecting stuff, live each day preparing yourself for your final home. Jesus never intended for us to drive up to Him sporting a brand-new Subaru Forester (there's no parking for those up there). He simply wants your heart. And there's no better way to live this life than to spend each day sharing that same love.

He doesn't want us to seek fulfillment in what we own; He wants us to find peace in what He has given us from the very beginning: a serene contentment that flows from His eternal love.

Reflection:

Where do you see yourself toiling over things that won't be with you in eternity? Instead of concerning yourself with these things, what might you be doing with this time/energy? What can we do to balance our lives between finding success in this world and focusing on what's most important to Jesus?



Jonah 4:1-11

March 14, 2020

Endless Mercy | Charissa Hasper

I can say with confidence that following God is hard. I'm sure you all can, too. Often, my walk with God feels less like one of "walking with Him" and more like one in which "God is dragging me along trying to get me to follow His lead."

Jonah is a prime example of this, and these verses always make me laugh. He is over-dramatic in his stubbornness, as we all can be sometimes: he is so angry about God's mercy towards Nineveh that he wants to die, and then he is so upset about losing his plant that he wants to die again.

But Jonah's actions do point out how stubborn and proud we can be. In our sin, we get so prideful that we think we can follow ourselves instead of following God. We think we know who deserves God's grace and forgiveness, and we try to play judge.

But God is the only one who can judge. And thank goodness He is, because we all deserve eternal punishment for our sins. If we were to judge ourselves like Jonah judged the Ninevites, we would all be condemned for what we've done. But God is not only just; He is merciful. And He loves us. Instead of condemning us, God saved us by sending Christ to pay the price for our sins. And God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ is for everyone.

When we think about it like that, why would we be upset if God gives grace to those around us as well as to ourselves? Because of His amazing gift of grace to us, we should strive to follow Him in all we do and show His grace to those around us. Today, I encourage you to thank God for his endless mercy and patience as we walk with Him.

Reflection:

Think of some ways in which you've seen God's grace in your life lately. How can you show God's grace to those around you in the next week?



Matthew 11:28-30

March 15, 2020
Third Sunday in Lent

Yoked with Christ | Will Cannon

It is strange that Jesus tells us to “*take [his] yoke*” upon ourselves to find rest for our souls. We tend to think that freedom and rest comes from the removal of burdens in our lives. In regards to the spiritual life, this is not so.

True freedom and rest come from taking up the right burden or yoke. Humans labor and strive for what they desire—acclaim, power, wealth, experiences—but whatever is not from the Lord Himself will destroy us. Jesus in this passage is calling His disciples to pick up their cross and follow Him, to labor alongside and learn from Him on their way toward the Kingdom.

Younger beasts of burden are always yoked to older ones in order to focus their strength and zeal toward the right end. We are meant to be yoked to the Lord through the cross, to bear the load alongside Him, in order to find rest and peace for our souls. Otherwise, we will overwork ourselves striving for that which will not satisfy on our own. Only Jesus, the one who is “*gentle and lowly in heart*,” fully God and fully man, who understands the burden of the cross more than we do, is a fitting companion to be yoked to.

Freedom is not the removal of a yoke or burden but being yoked with the source of life Himself, the only one whose “*yoke is easy and burden is light*.”

Reflection:

What are the things you labor and strive for in your life? (e.g. your family, academics, career, relationships) How is Christ yoked to you in your labor for these things? Invite Christ to tighten the bonds of the yoke that fasten you to Him.



Ephesians 4:30-5:2

March 16, 2020

Be kind. Be kind. Be kind. | Rachel Thoms

Sound familiar?

When the 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* hit theaters, Mister Rogers' life lessons of empathy, kindness, and caring for your neighbor percolated their way into the media, classrooms, and conversations around the world. His three keys to a successful life were to, "Be kind. Be kind. Be kind."

We love Mister Rogers because he personified respect and encouragement. He reminded everyone, every day, that they are worthy of love. Sound familiar? We don't have to watch reruns of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or go to the movie theater to hear messages of how to treat our neighbor. We can just open our Bibles. (Which, by the way, is such a gift!)

Jesus didn't just demonstrate kindness: He *is* kindness. Jesus touched the untouchable, spent time with the rejected, and showed compassion to the suffering. To do this, to be kind, we need to do away with a few things. Ephesians chapter four ends with Paul sharing six areas for us as Christians to avoid: bitterness (jealousy, dissatisfaction), wrath (rage), anger (persistent anger), clamor (uproar, quarreling), slander (speaking false evils about others), and malice (evil intent).

May conversations of love and kindness permeate our homes, classrooms, and workplaces. Let's not just leave it at that: let's demonstrate kindness, walk in love, and lead lives imitating God (Ephesians 5:1). With tender hearts (compassion, sympathy) and forgiveness, let's remind everyone, every day, that they are loved and forgiven children of God.

Reflection:

Be kind. Be kind. Be kind. What is a way you can demonstrate kindness today?



Judges 16:23-31

March 17, 2020

Partners in Restoration | Kristin Rathje

From the start, God signals that Samson is set apart. An angel appears to his mother to announce his arrival and to provide specific instructions: Samson is not to eat or drink anything unclean or—weirdly—cut his hair. He is to be set apart because *“he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines”* (Judges 13:5).

His life is directed by God to fulfill this purpose. Although his parents are upset when he marries a Philistine woman, that union, is *“from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines.”* Through that relationship, Samson begins to despise the Philistines and uses his God-given strength to wreak havoc on them—burning up their grain, killing a thousand of them with the jawbone of a donkey, and leading the Israelites against them.

In retaliation, the Philistines use Samson’s relationship with Delilah to reveal the secret to his strength. They shave his head, bind him in shackles, blind him, and imprison him.

From that place of desperation, Samson cries out to God, *“O Sovereign Lord, remember me!”* And God, who had planned from before Samson was born to use him to begin the deliverance of Israel, renews Samson’s strength in time for him to bring the whole temple down upon himself, killing *“many more when he died than when he lived.”*

And isn’t that how God works? He plans in advance for how He is going to save us. He heralds his plan with angels; He uses unassuming women to be His vessels; and He brings His plan to completion. Could He do all this without human involvement? Indeed, He could, but He chooses over and over again to connect Himself with His people—to partner with us in restoration.

Reflection:

How is He inviting you right now to be involved in His restoration?



The Grace to Turn | John Rathje

There I was, 16 and a new driver, just out of work for the night, tired and going home, when the blinding lights and siren jolted me, and I pulled over! As the police officer started walking toward my car, I regained my breath and prayed for help! As we talked, he pointed out that I hadn't turned on my lights and hadn't used my blinker to make the last turn. I admitted I wasn't paying attention and truly not considering the consequences. I was just doing my thing and listening to the radio (loudly). He had many options for what to do with me: issue a ticket, tow my car, take me in, etc., all of which would have set me up to feel the full wrath of the power of my parents! Whatever he did would have been known throughout my family for many years to come—legendary (and not in a good way). But he didn't. He gave me a warning, and I turned off my radio and turned on my lights. (I still check to be sure my lights are on when I drive at night!)

YHWH (The True God) could have cut off His created people (Egyptians) from the earth, but to show His power and be known everywhere, He warns them about the hail and even gives a full day to allow them time to save themselves and their animals! That is God's character. That is why He sent His only Son, Jesus, to save us all on the cross as the ultimate expression of His loving power. Lent is a time to listen to our loving God and turn to Him. We can turn away from sin (doing our own thing) because YHWH, who could cut us off, invites us to trust Him and turn to Him. He wants everyone to know and trust His loving power.

Reflection:

What is God saying to you about your life and doing your thing? What power is He wanting to show you, wanting to work in your life? Will you listen to His voice and turn from your ways to Him, today, right now?



Exodus 14:13-31

March 19, 2020

Fear Not...Be Silent | Deaconess Norma Polk

The Egyptians pursued the Israelites after they left Egypt. Imagine the chaos and the Israelites' fear. They implored Moses, *"Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians for it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness!"* They didn't want to leave the homes they grew up in, the land they cultivated, the food they grew, or the markets they knew so well. It was terrifying to leave all that and start a journey into the unknown!!

Now, imagine their fear when they saw the Egyptian army pursuing them, including six hundred chariots!! And, in addition to being pursued from behind, they were trapped by the Red Sea ahead! What to do?! The Israelites began wishing they had never left! Moses assured the people not to fear, but to trust in the Lord, *"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."* Moses told the Israelites to stop grumbling, arguing, and pleading, and to instead be silent and trust God...completely. We know how the story goes—God rescued them by parting the Red Sea and destroying their enemies so that they could continue their journey to the Promised Land. Seeing His great power, the Israelites finally feared and believed in the Lord. But the story doesn't end there. The struggle to completely trust God continued, and it also continues for us.

Reflection:

The Israelites didn't want to leave Egypt, the place they knew all their lives. Being slaves was more comfortable for them than leaving to go to an unknown place! Leaving a familiar situation can be difficult for us, too, even if we know that the situation we are in is not healthy, or even sinful. We know that God wants us to leave these situations, but how? Where can we go?

Is there a sin or a relationship in your life that is enslaving you? If so, what steps can you take to move toward freedom from fear and to start trusting God to lead you to the life He has planned for you? Remember what Paul said to the Galatians, *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."*



Matthew 13:45-46

March 20, 2020

A Priceless Gift | Corissa Mattson

What would you do for a Klondike bar? It might be a tempting offer (at least for those who aren't lactose intolerant), but it's likely that you wouldn't do anything too crazy. Now imagine that this Klondike bar is the last one in existence and you haven't eaten in five days. Now what would you do? Probably a whole lot more, right?

Now re-answer the same question, but instead of ice cream I want you to imagine the object in question is the Kingdom of Heaven. For the merchant and his pearl the answer was simple—sell all you have because the pearl is worth so much more. It's the ultimate Klondike bar. Yet how many times have you found yourself thinking, "Alright God, do with my life as you wish...as long as I don't have to give up this hobby." Or maybe, "I'll go wherever you need me... as long as it's not Ohio. Or Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri...you know, now that I'm really thinking about this, I'd rather stay here." We want the Kingdom of Heaven, but we don't want to pay full price. Instead we try and settle for a "budget brand" Christianity.

But the thing is we're not the ones paying—Jesus is, and He paid the full price on the cross. If someone gives you your dream car (which you could never afford) and told you it was completely paid off, would you continue to drive your old clunker that only starts half the time? No! You would recognize the value of the gift and treat it with respect. That's what Jesus has given to us—the Kingdom of Heaven, something we could never afford—as a gift. All we have to do is accept it.

Reflection:

Do I treat Jesus's gift as the most valuable thing in my life?



Genesis 21:1-8

March 21, 2020

Promises Fulfilled | Elisabeth Komurka

Just a couple chapters earlier, the angel of the Lord visits Abraham and Sarah—and gives them astounding news: despite incredible old age, Abraham and Sarah will have a child born of Sarah. At this news, they laugh—most likely a laugh of incredulity. After all, it's not usual for a woman of ninety years to give birth to a child. And I would wager they are not the only ones laughing in disbelief or shame—I'm sure there were a few mocking comments made in the background about the fact that Abraham and Sarah did not already have a child of their own.

Now, fast forward several years and, despite their disbelief, God's promise is fulfilled: Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah. In this moment, we find more laughter: physical laughter, this time most likely due to joy rather than doubt, and even Isaac's name, which means "He laughs." Sarah even comments that they will not be the only ones laughing happily. It's a beautiful moment when everyone is invited to share in the happiness of God's promise fulfilled.

Isaac is not the only child of God to be proclaimed and met with shock, only to later be received with joy after the fulfillment of a promise. When Jesus was heralded as the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised Only-Begotten Son of God, people did more than laugh—they mocked, jailed, tortured, crucified and ultimately killed Him. And in this moment of absolute rejection, Jesus took the punishment for our sins, descended into Hell, conquered death, and returned three days later to fulfill the promise of salvation for all people—not just the Israelites.

Reflection:

Have you ever doubted one of God's promises? Have you ever found yourself laughing with joy at a promise fulfilled?



1 John 3:1-3

*March 22, 2020
Fourth Sunday in Lent*

We are God's Favorite | Mary Kay Liston

There is nothing like a father's love. To know there was someone helping me make good choices in life and desiring nothing but the best for me was so important growing up. My dad was career Navy, and he would be away for six months to a year at a time. It didn't matter that we didn't see him regularly. He always found a way to let us know he was there and watching over us. I have five siblings and we all KNOW that we are the favorite! We lost our dad last August, and the loss is palpable.

But the need for a father's love and guidance never goes away, no matter how old we get. How wonderful to know our heavenly Father will never leave our side, and His love is so much more than our earthly fathers' love.

Jesus' followers probably shocked those who worshiped other gods when they claimed that they were the true children of God. They KNEW they were God's favorite! Saying others do not know God would not have been popular, but the disciples truly experienced God's love and could share it with others they met because they walked with Jesus. They lived the love Jesus taught them, and they sought to convert others through that love.

Reflection:

How exciting for them to share that when Jesus returns—His true believers will become just like Him—pure in God's love.



Matthew 14:22-33

March 23, 2020

Trust Jesus and Get Out of the Boat | Larry Frank

"If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat"

The above title of a book by author, Pastor John Ortberg asks, "In your life, have you ever been that daring, and with a purpose?" Jesus' purpose in walking out on the water to the boat was surely a test for Peter! First, calming the fear of all in the rocking boat, Jesus says, *"Take courage! It is I."*

Peter boldly asks, *"Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water."* Strange question isn't it? Surely, he had to know it was Jesus! They shared a trust!

Jesus says simply, with purpose, *"Come."*

Peter, in faith, accepts Jesus' call, steps out of the boat, walks a little way on the water, then when his human nature takes over and wind pushes waves against him, loses sight of Jesus' purpose in that call. He now knows he does not measure up to Jesus' call to him, and sinking, he cries out, *"Lord, save me!"*

Reflection:

What in your own life parallels Peter's attempt to walk on water?

After all, he did get out of the boat! Ortberg writes, "Peter alone knew what it was to attempt to do what he was not capable of doing on his own, (and) he felt the euphoria of being empowered by God to actually do it...(also) Peter knew the glory of being lifted up by Jesus in a moment of desperate need."

Is Jesus' call on your own life not without a purpose? Jesus knew Peter's faith; He knows yours. The "quiet failure" is not getting out of the boat, because Jesus with His right hand, will reach out, and catch you when you "see the wind."

Jesus says, to you, in your own boat in rough weather, *"...fear does not have the power to destroy you. Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid."* And then, you can respond: *"Truly you are the Son of God."*



Psalms 4:1-8

March 24, 2020

A Heavenly Peace | Eddie Godbold

There are some things in this world I wish I could control but, alas, I cannot. I find this to be one of the most frustrating and challenging parts of life on this side of Heaven. Consider, for example, the everyday fact that others say and think things about us—things over which we have no control. Ironically, the same things we wish we could keep others from thinking about us, are many times what we find ourselves saying and thinking about others! Something isn't right about this picture. But what to do?

In this psalm, King David seems to complain that, among other things, men have been speaking ill of him in an attempt to tarnish his name. David rebukes his enemies and reminds them that God sets apart the godly from those who behave this way. He encourages them to not let anger turn into sin. These are good reminders for us.

David's posture throughout this psalm is also important: He humbly presents his request to God, and he puts his trust in the Lord.

As we prepare ourselves for Holy Week, we remember our Savior who was betrayed, slandered, and ultimately delivered up to die for wrongs He did not commit. Jesus faced a life of shame and suffering instead of the glory He deserved. What was His response? He dutifully entrusted himself to the Father and His gracious will.

When you and I do likewise, we can assuredly *"lie down and sleep (in peace),"* regardless of all the things we cannot control in this life. For in the Lord, we will always dwell in safety (v. 8).

Reflection:

Do I speak ill of persons in authority? ...my colleagues? ...my neighbors? And when I face things out of my control, do I find my peace in the Lord?



Wisdom Personified | Vanessa Lane

In a college theology class, Marcus and I had the opportunity to learn from a professor who studied the Dead Sea Scrolls during his doctoral work at Harvard. This professor had a profound impact on the way both of us read God's Word. For example, in studying Proverbs, our professor invited us to consider reading it from the perspective of Jesus as "Wisdom Personified." So, using this method, Jesus equals wisdom. If we do that in today's reading, the imagery becomes uncannily very quickly. Right away, we have Jesus preparing a feast and setting a table with wine. He welcomes the simple, not the prestigious or higher-ups of society. Wisdom Personified, Jesus, invites us to eat His bread and drink His wine, and then immediately says, "Come, follow Me."

In Jesus' day, Jewish people knew that the Messiah would be a bread maker and a winemaker. This is a profound cultural marker that we can't overlook. Truly as Wisdom Personified, Jesus makes quite a statement during the Last Supper with his disciples. *"This bread is My body; this cup is My blood."* Each time we come to the table, we receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, but also the forgiveness of sins. When we eat at Jesus' banqueting table, we interact with Wisdom Personified, and God is at work in us. During this Lenten season, when schedules are crazy, and we feel beaten down and weary, let us remember that Wisdom Personified, Jesus Christ, invites us to His table. At Jesus' table, there are always enough seats, and the sustenance is abundant.

Reflection:

How does Jesus, being Wisdom Personified, resonate with you this Lent?



Luke 7:36–50

March 26, 2020

Free-Flowing Forgiveness and Gratitude | Lisa Wiesenberger

Overcome by the presence of Jesus Christ, the sinful woman in today's passage finds herself at the feet of Jesus, weeping. Her reverence leads her to wash the Lord's feet, anoint them with oil, and dry them with her hair. The woman knows that her sins are plentiful and recognizes the mercy that Jesus shows her. The gratitude that she feels for this, as well as her devotion to Jesus, pours out of her as she kneels at His feet, thankful to be there.

As Simon observes the sinful woman touching the Lord, Jesus teaches him a lesson: when two people in debt are forgiven, the one who has more debt cancelled often feels more grateful. This woman receives great deliverance from her sin—perhaps more sin than what others had committed. Through her great deliverance, we see God's love and character on display. The forgiveness and mercy that she received during her encounter with Jesus transformed her from the inside out.

Regardless of our sin, we too can fall at the feet of Jesus and know that He will forgive us and show us mercy. Let us pour out our love and devotion to Him in celebration of these gifts.

Reflection:

Brothers and sisters, when we recognize the mercy and forgiveness that Jesus Christ gives us, are our hearts transformed the way that this woman's heart was? When we repent of our sin, are we filled with such gratitude for the deliverance from our sin that we fall to our knees in worship?



Genesis 3:8-15

March 27, 2020

Naked | Melissa Kasper

Have you ever felt naked? Exposed? Your shortcomings on display for all to see?

I recently had a rough day caring for my three young kids. My husband was working late, and I was trying to clean up dinner while also trying to meet the demands of a clingy toddler and whiny older children. After repeating myself for what seemed like the millionth time, I finally lost it and my anger was unleashed in harsh words towards my son. The second the words left my mouth, I saw his hurt and pained expression as he fought back tears and ran to his room.

In that moment, I felt awful. Completely ashamed of my actions. Naked.

Adam and Eve had a similar experience. Before the fall, God walked and talked with Adam and Eve. Once they bit that fruit, they were naked before God. They were naked and they knew it. Their faults and shortcomings instantly on display.

And how did they react? They hid. Shame filled them, so they hid from God. Then they blamed. They blamed each other and finally the serpent.

And how did God respond? He didn't respond in anger towards them. He didn't call out their lies and false accusations. He cursed the serpent. And promised that one day his head would be crushed....

Reflection:

Jesus' resurrection brings that day. When God sends His own Son to bear the punishment and blame for all of our sins and shortcomings on the cross, and then breathes life into His body again on Easter Sunday, He is crushing Satan's head once and for all. Let us remember that this Easter season. Instead of condemnation and death, Jesus brings forgiveness and life.



John 13:1-10

March 28, 2020

A Lesson in Humility | Deaconess Norma Polk

Easter is my favorite holiday, but I also cherish the time leading up to Easter: Lent and Holy Week. I love nothing more than observing Seder with my family and friends at home on Maundy Thursday, including washing each other's feet. In Jesus' time, foot washing was a common practice because people walked around on muddy or dusty ground in sandals. Usually a servant would wash the guests' feet. In our reading today, Jesus became a servant to all of his disciples by washing their feet.

At first, Peter refused to have Jesus wash his feet. Jesus, being a great teacher, used this opportunity to explain two important truths. First, Jesus said, *"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."* If Jesus does not cleanse us, we have no part in Him—we can't have a relationship with Him! Peter then asked Jesus to wash his hands and his head also! In response, Jesus shared a second important truth, *"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet."* When we have been washed by the blood of Jesus we are clean, but we still need Him to work in our lives on a daily basis.

As Jesus demonstrated, it takes humility to love and serve others. Paul in Philippians explained, *"Do nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."*

Reflection:

Has pride prevented you from serving anyone recently? If so, try reflecting on Jesus' example.



Proverbs 16:18-20

March 29, 2020
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Humbly Living for Christ | Charissa Hasper

I'm willing to bet most of us have heard these verses before, and sometimes, this message can get old. Yes, pride comes before a fall, we get it. But the truth is that pride permeates our society and is something we all struggle with. Everything seems like a race to the top, whether it's getting ahead at your job or in school, being popular, or having the most money. I've even seen people compete to be the "most loving."

Pride and following God often directly oppose each other. It's easy to become self-righteous in our faith or try to gain recognition for being Christ-like. While we should strive to be those things, acting selfishly like that is exactly how *not* to follow God. It's hard to do this with a truly humble heart.

What a relief, then, that we have an example we can turn to: the life of Christ.

Jesus continually showed us how to live a life worthy of great heavenly rewards. He spent time with sinners and tax collectors, not looking for personal gain. He washed His disciples' feet and helped the sick. He even allowed Himself to be condemned to die for our sins. He became nothing for us; by doing so, He was glorified above all others. He said, *"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant... The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20: 26b-28).

If we want to be great, we must become the least. Let's look to the Word for guidance, focus on Christ's example, and serve those around us while keeping our eyes on our heavenly prize.

Christ paid the ultimate sacrifice for us. Instead of choosing pride, let's live for Him. And what is a more perfect example of living for Christ than serving others?

Reflection:

Which of Christ's acts of humility touch you the most?



Hebrews 4:12-16

March 30, 2020

Tempted As We Are | Elisabeth Komurka

We want to be known, intimately, deeply—to know that we are not alone. But we all carry scars and shameful stories or moments, and being known gives someone the power to condemn us. And that makes letting someone in tricky. Who wants to be hurt, right? But when we look to God and to Jesus, we don't have to worry about that.

God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to Earth—to take on human flesh and walk with mankind. Jesus intentionally sought out the broken and the sick. He befriended lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners of all kinds. And, He continues to seek us out, exactly as we are, and He loves us as we are.

Furthermore, Jesus Himself is both God and man, and while He is without sin, He has known temptation. He understands what we wrestle with, day in and day out. Whatever the detail—supplanting God with a false idol, shirking responsibility, lying to avoid punishment, embellishing to improve an image, betraying a friend—the list literally goes on, He intimately understands what we are wrestling with.

And He meets us there and offers us, sinful as we are, salvation—freely. Jesus does not condemn us through judgment—He instead offers us mercy and salvation. When we want to be known but fear rejection or misunderstanding, we can always look to Jesus Christ—and boldly approach our God who fundamentally understands what it means to be human.

Reflection:

How does knowing that God accepts you fully and without judgment impact your other relationships?



Happy Endings | Dan Dolsen

I'm going to share something with you that I would appreciate you not telling others because it would truly damage my manly reputation. Here it is...I really enjoy watching Hallmark movies! I'm not sure what it is about Hallmark movies, but I love them! It could be the sappy storylines, barely above-average acting, or the predictable plots. I think the main thing is that they all have a happy ending. The boy gets the girl, the town is saved, and everyone is smiling at the end. I think if the truth be told, we all love stories that end well.

In Psalm 30, King David is pleading with God for his story to end well. David is facing foes who want to kill him. He is crying out to be delivered from death. He understands that if God is hidden from him, that he will have no hope of being saved. He even reminds God that if he were to die, that it would bring little profit or value to God. David is pleading with God to see things from his point of view and for God to write a David-story with a happy ending!

Psalm 30 and David's pleadings reflect our own story as we encounter the harsh realities of life. We face trials, failures, and disappointments. Some of us, like David, may even be facing the imminent prospect of death. But our story is part of a much larger story: a story with an ending that is beyond anything Hallmark can conjure up. Our story is the story of the cross and an empty tomb. The Easter Story answers David's pleadings, and it can answer our pleadings as well.

Reflection:

What are you pleading with God for, and how is He answering your pleas?



John 16:32-33

April 1, 2020

So Many Words | Ryan Peterson

At this point in Lent—and especially if you have been reading these ULC Lenten devotions consistently—you have read a lot of words. Each day, you have read hundreds of words that now cumulatively equate to thousands of words. Outside of these devotions, you have probably heard and spoken even more words daily.

These words we hear from Jesus in our assigned reading are not only significant, but they are life-changing and perspective-altering. Hours before His own death, Jesus said to His disciples, *“I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

When you finish this brief devotion, what troubles will still be staring you in the face? What challenges will be overwhelming your mind? What thoughts will be weighing heavy on your heart?

Jesus knows our human condition. He knows what is weighing or pulling us down. He is realistic, *“In the world you will have tribulation.”* He doesn't ignore it, minimize, or turn the other way. He doesn't say, *“Go figure it out.”* He doesn't sugarcoat the severity of your situation. Rather, He offers Himself as the solution. We can take heart, for Jesus has overcome the world. He declares victory for you because of His victory on the cross and through the empty tomb.

Maybe life has been too hard for you to be hopeful.

Hold on. God is present and real. Jesus invites you to hold tightly to the peace He gives you because of His victory.

Reflection:

What is staring you in the face? What promises do you need to hear today that will re-center you in the hope of Jesus?



Psalms 137:1-9

April 2, 2020

Trusting God to Do What He Promises | Michelle Armbruster

Many psalms have been made into beautiful songs used to help us focus on God during times of worship. You probably have some psalms memorized because we sing these songs at ULC:

How Great is Our God (Psalms 93 and 104)

King of My Heart (Psalms 100 and 136)

Come Thou Fount (Psalms 139 and 63)

There are other types of psalms that don't lend themselves to contemporary Christian choruses for obvious reasons.

Steven J. Cole explains, "Psalm 137 is one of these. It is called an imprecatory psalm. In these psalms, the author (usually David, although not in Psalm 137) invokes God to bring down judgment or punishment on his enemies. Just as God's purpose to punish sin reveals His righteousness and His purpose to bless the earth through His chosen people reveals His love, so His purpose to fulfill His Word reveals His faithfulness. You can trust God to do what He promises. What had God promised concerning Babylon? He promised to fully repay Babylon and to level its walls" (Jeremiah 51:56, 58).

Reflection:

The writer of Psalm 137 was focused on trusting what God promised. We can find encouragement in God's promises as well. Deuteronomy 8, "*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.*"



Psalms 23

April 3, 2020

The Lord is My Shepherd | Marilyn Rothberg

When I read Psalm 23, my mind paints a picture. I see the shepherd, sheep, green grass, and calm waters. All this adds up to a place of resting. The shepherd guides his sheep and they follow him. Our Shepherd, Jesus, is all-knowing and wants the best for us. He is our provider, taking care of all of our needs.

I am blessed and have plenty. As David goes on, more of God's blessings are on the way. Verse 6 says: *"Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* Some versions use the word "pursue" instead of follow. God's love is pursuing David for the rest of his life. We can have that assurance also. These are encouraging words for those who love the Lord: God is right behind us, and He will be there even when we are alone. In times of suffering, He tells me I do not have to be afraid.

Reflection:

Reading God's word is a comfort and calms me down. The Bible is the true word of God, I have the confidence to say I will live in God's house forever.



Matthew 4:1-11

April 4, 2020

An Unrelenting Resolve | Eddie Godbold

Purposefully intertwined with the temptation of Jesus in the New Testament is the story of the Israelites from the Old Testament. Just as God once led His people into the desert, so His Spirit now leads Jesus into the wilderness.

Satan first hopes that Jesus will succumb to hunger just as the Israelites had done when they lashed out in anger against God. Instead, Jesus demonstrates trust in His Father by quoting the very words Moses wrote to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8:3. Next, Satan wants Jesus to put God's might to the test. The Israelites had faced similar temptation themselves, and had responded by demanding a miracle from God (Exodus 17:2). Jesus, on the other hand, responds by quoting Moses' cautionary words for the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:16. Finally, in response to the final test, Jesus sends Satan away by quoting Moses' words in Deuteronomy 6:13.

Though Satan's tactics may have worked against Israel, a nation of imperfect sinners, they don't work against Jesus. For, while Israel had responded to temptation by removing their eyes from God's promises, Jesus responds by fixing his eyes on the Cross. Even while wandering through the empty wilderness, Jesus lives every moment of his life intentionally in step with the plans God had laid out for Him.

He does this because Israel had failed their test. And He does it because He knows we would later fail ours, too. He does it out of God's unrelenting love for you and me.

Reflection:

We, like Israel, struggle when our faith is tested. Though God blesses us with strength and protection in the face of temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13, Ephesians 6:11), we often take our eyes off of these promises in favor of personal comfort and glory. Lord, help us set our eyes on You today.



2 Corinthians 5:14-21

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Who Is This? | Dan Dolsen

Today is Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry of Jesus into the great city of Jerusalem. It also marks the start of the most important week on the Christian calendar, Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the people welcome Him with shouts of, *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"* But as He enters the city, the crowd raises a question that will be front and center the remainder of the week: *"Who is this?"* (Matthew 21:10)?

That question, *"Who is this?"* is boldly answered on Easter morning with Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And it is through this life-changing answer that we, too, are confronted with a more personal and penetrating question, *"Who are you?"* Who are you because of Jesus' death and resurrection?

The answer is found in today's Scripture passage when it states, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). It goes on to say that, *"We are ambassadors for Christ, God makes his appeal through us"* (2 Corinthians 5:20a).

Reflection:

As you enter Holy Week, take time to consider...

- Who are you because of Jesus' death and resurrection?
- How does being a new creation in Christ impact your day-to-day life?
What does it mean for your relationships? Your work?
Your view of your value to the world and to God?
- What "appeal" is God making through you?
- Who or what controls your life? (Check out 2 Corinthians 5:14 for a clue.)

How do these answers impact your relationships with other people?

Here's to a whole new you this Holy Week!



Hebrews 11:8-10

April 6, 2020

Monday of Holy Week

The Faithful Follower | Lauren Drinane

Throughout your life, you will go through many transitions and changes, whether it is high school to college, single to a relationship, or married to having kids. However, we, as modern-day people, dread change. With each new change in our lives comes the uncertainty, the unknown, and the uncontrollable. We don't like not being in control.

In Hebrews 11:8-10, we are reminded of someone who went through a major life change with very little information. God called Abraham to move to a new place without giving him any information about the new place he was going to. Because Abraham faithfully followed God's plan, he was rewarded by becoming the Father of All Nations.

In order to receive the reward of God's everlasting grace, love, and eternal life with Him, we must put our full faith in Him and His plan rather than in our own agendas. God is God, and we are not. As Harry Grimes said at the 2019 LCMS National Youth Gathering, "I don't always need to understand God in order to trust Him. Cling to His promises." God is loving and caring. His intent is NEVER to lead us into a place that would harm us. As you step out into the next transition in your life, step out in faith, knowing that God has everything already figured out. He has a plan of hope and abundance for all who follow Him.

Reflection:

What is one area of your life that you can completely surrender to God and become a faithful follower of Him and His plan for your life?



Romans 8:28-39

April 7, 2020
Tuesday of Holy Week

Nothing Can Separate | Paxton Green

Have you ever wanted to simply snap your fingers and make everything in your life fall into place? I certainly have felt like that. However, the pieces we desperately want to fall into place are a sliver of the bigger picture: God's plan. In the midst of our worldly tribulations, we can lose sight of the beautiful tapestry God is weaving together. Paul understood this frustration well. Many forces were working against Paul, but God was on Paul's side. Little did Paul know his letters would not only impact the churches at the time, but they would impact the Christians for thousands of years. You never know what God has planned for you.

In Romans 8:28-39, Paul writes to a church in Rome. This letter recognizes that struggles like *"tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword"* are real evils that can knock us down and distract us from God's goodness. However, Paul's passage also provides reassurance that God is with us and for us. The trials we face now cannot overshadow us because Jesus has overcome the world.

Like Paul, God has a grand purpose for us, too. God is using our current situation to do His work. It is not our picture to make perfect. God is already putting the pieces where they go. It can be frustrating not getting our way in an instant; however, our way isn't always the best way (no matter how much we don't like to admit it). God sees what we can't. Trust that God's way is always the best way. Don't let your situation blind you from how God continues to move in your life. God is with you and for you and nothing can be against you. Nothing can separate you from His love.

Reflection:

In the midst of difficulty, how can you remind yourself that God is in control?



Luke 18:35-43

April 8, 2020

Wednesday of Holy Week

God of Mercy | Margaret Baker

Don't you love how Scripture reinforces Scripture? Sometimes one word in a passage triggers a connection to another, or even several others, enlivening our understanding. This is the case with this blind beggar story. Certainly, one lesson here is that while the disciples, most privy to His teaching, could not always "see" the truth about the Savior, this blind, societal outcast recognized Him not just as "Jesus of Nazareth," that celebrated speaker around whom many were congregating, but as "Son of David," the long-awaited Messiah! And this prescient man had gleaned enough to know that the proper call of the human heart towards Him is for mercy. His story, in fact, recalls that of the paralytic brought to Jesus through the roof by friends. Those visitors were surprised that Jesus' first response was not to physically heal, but to extend mercy, to forgive his sins. Only here, the blind beggar knows that his primary need is for mercy from the only One who can authoritatively bestow it.

As I spent more time with this passage, I noticed another detail. Those who led the way, Jesus' advance team, as it were, "rebuked" this persistent man. And this was the word that unlocked another connection. Just a few verses back, Luke had offered the narrative of the little children brought to Jesus by others for His blessing. There, again, the inner circle "rebuked" those pesky seekers. "Don't bother the busy man," they seem to be saying. "We'll handle his appointments." They had a different agenda for this sought-out prophet. Book signings! Talk show appearances! Perks for the faithful! Jesus was unmoved. He always has time for those who seek Him with true humility and sight.

Reflection:

Let us not be mere followers, drawn to a gifted teacher engaging our minds but not our hearts. Instead, let us be like the blind beggar, calling out to Jesus for the mercy we need and He alone can give. May his prayer be our daily meditation: "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.*"



Matthew 26:26-28

April 9, 2020
Maundy Thursday

The Cup, Bread, and Deliverance | Marv Fox

The Last Supper is the most historical meal ever documented. The leading man, the supporting cast, the tale of friendship and betrayal, and all the events leading up to Jesus' final meal in the book of Matthew provide a captivating narrative of suspense, adventure, and drama. The Lord's Supper and the events leading to it are all so interesting that some of the symbolism of Jesus's final meal gets overlooked.

If you have ever had communion, you have heard the pastor or the person serving the Lord's Supper say, *"Take and eat the body of Christ"* and *"Take and drink the blood of Christ."* Many of us recognize the bread as the body (Matthew 26:26) and the cup which contains the wine or juice (Matt. 26:28) as the blood of Jesus.

While we recognize Jesus' very body and blood present in the Lord's Supper, He also calls us to remember. To remember that His body and blood in the bread and wine remind us of Jesus' crucifixion 2000 years ago. We see this in the way that just as the bread is broken, Jesus' body was broken on the cross. Just as the wine is poured out, Jesus' blood was poured out after being pierced by a Roman soldier. This points us to the reality that the Lord's Supper is a meal of deliverance. Just like in the passover when the Israelites were rescued by the blood of a lamb, so too we are rescued by the blood of the Lamb. The presence of Christ's body and blood with the bread and wine invite us to remember Jesus' death for us.

The wafer and wine or juice we consume during Communion are powerful symbols of a deeply nuanced ritual. The Lord's Supper reminds us of Jesus dying for our sins, God's promise to his people, and the joy we should feel knowing we can experience deliverance every time we consume the Lord's Supper. Amen.

Reflection:

Let us not take the Lord's Supper for granted. How can we be more expectant as we commune this Lenten season?



Isaiah 53

April 10, 2020
Good Friday

Good Friday | Margaret Baker

What a remarkable piece of prophecy is this blessed chapter of the Old Testament, written centuries before the atonement. How beautifully and intimately does Isaiah describe our Lord, Jesus, with phrases that resonate deeply with Christians. *"He grew up like a tender shoot,"* with *"no beauty or majesty to attract us to him."* He was *"despised and rejected,"* a *"man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering."* And then, how poignantly does Isaiah explain that despite our utter disdain for Him, He not only bore our sins and healed our wounds but has become our intercessor.

Isaiah's writing is all the more arresting as he alternates between expressions of our rejection of Jesus with triumphant declarations of His salvation. We *"hid our faces"* from Him, yet *"he took up our pain and bore our suffering."* We considered Him punished by God, yet *"He was pierced for our transgressions."* We turned to our own—not His—way, but *"the LORD laid on Him the iniquity of us all."*

Here was the greatest injustice the world has ever known, the execution of the only one who had done no violence and was without deceit, who was *"led like a lamb to the slaughter,"* but offered no protest or self-justification.

And most mysterious of all, Isaiah reminds us, *"It was the LORD's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer."* God allowed it! For only through Jesus, our perfect sin offering, can we be restored in relationship to the Father who loves us. The crucifixion happened in all its horror, yet God saw that it was good. There was evening, and on the third day—oh, that third day—there would be Sunday morning. What a GOOD Friday, indeed!

Reflection:

What do you see when you look to Christ on the cross?



John 19:38-42

April 11, 2020

Holy Saturday

Cling to His Cross; Anticipate His Resurrection | Angela Post

A few years ago, I read an article from *Christianity Today* about Holy Saturday. In this article, the author remarks that Holy Saturday is the day that “Jesus, and all understanding, lay dead.” On Holy Saturday, the world, as the early Christians knew it, stood still. Imagine the panic, the fear, the doubt. Will He rise?

People often say that time seems to slow down when you’re waiting. You start to notice things differently when you’re waiting. The anticipation can fill a person with so many emotions all at once, and of course, it asks more questions than it answers. While we do not have a Biblical account of what Holy Saturday was like, Scripture gives us countless examples of what it means to wait to see the Lord once more.

As we anticipate seeing Christ face-to-face, we inherently have these same feelings: fear, panic, doubt. Will He come back? Though we do not know when our Lord will reveal himself to us, we have faith that He will. We know that the Savior who has proven Himself over and over will not let us down.

We cling to His cross and anticipate His resurrection.

Because we know He will come back.

Reflection:

What do you cling to when the waiting tempts you to doubt?



Mark 16:1-8

*April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday*

Surprised by Our Redemption | Pastor Marcus Lane

I have to confess: I hate surprises. It doesn't matter the occasion, Christmas, my birthday, not knowing the end of a movie, I hate surprises plain and simple. I like to understand what is going on around me and to know what to expect in any given situation. Admittedly, this likely comes from a place of cynicism. Surprises come with the possibility of being let down or disappointed. If I always know what to expect, at least I don't have to deal with the disappointment of something not living up to my expectations.

Maybe you don't have such a strong distaste for surprises, but I'm certain you've experienced that pain of disappointment. Maybe the excitement of a new relationship gave way to the hurt of its unexpected ending. A new job promised new opportunities and possibilities for your life but resulted in the disappointing reality of conflict, mistrust, or a toxic work environment. Leaders promises of a better future inevitably give way to the painful disappointment of unkept promises.

But, as three women, filled with the pain of death and disappointment over their loss, walked to the tomb that Easter morning, they were met with a different kind of surprise, *"Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him"* (Mark 16:7). The resurrection of Jesus is God's entering in and disrupting a world of disappointment and pain. The surprise of the resurrection promises that the end of our story will not be filled with disappointment, pain, and sadness. Instead, our story is one of redemption, hope, and joy. NT Wright wrote: *"With Easter, God's new creation is launched upon a surprised world, pointing ahead to the renewal, the redemption, the rebirth of the entire creation."* In Easter, God has made us the surprising promise that sin and death have been undone. He has redeemed all things, and He is making everything new.

Reflection:

How can you take part in the surprising reality of what God is doing and will do for His creation?



Thank you to the many writers who contributed their wisdom and insights to the ULC Lenten Devotional!

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Editors,
~Kristin Rahtje and Amy Robson

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**" In me there is darkness,
But with You there is light;
I am lonely, but You do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with You there is help;
I am restless, but with You there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with You there is patience;
I do not understand Your ways,
But You know the way for me."**

~Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*May you experience the light, help, peace, patience, and hope of Christ,
day by day, this Lenten season.*

Cover Photo:

Water cistern in Meersburg Castle, Southern Germany. The cistern receives rain water through the spout at Jesus' feet. During festivals, the cistern is said to have been filled with wine—Jesus is the Living Water who has shed His blood for our salvation. Photo by Norma Polk