

Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”

The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”

Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.

Week 3

Monday, March 30

Read: Psalm 130

Reflection:

I consider this to be perhaps one of the most powerful portions of the entire Bible:

“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered” (v.3-4)

There’s so much unknowing in this season; plenty of fear and frustration. Not only in the midst of COVID-19, but *all* of life – premature deaths, broken relationships, war, slavery, hate speech – so many things that we can’t answer for or explain. Yet, in the face of indescribable tragedy or pain stands the God who *forgives*. There is a God who refuses to allow the injustices of time to simply be forgotten. There is a God who sees the suffering of the universe and has chosen to meet it in God’s own person.

This God calls out to us in our anxiety and chaos – this God holds us while we weep and wonder. This God created the world and refused to see it perish in rebellion. This is the God in whom our hope is found, and in whom our souls may wait.

Prayer: *Forgiving One, there’s much in my head and heart these days I can’t put words to. Yet with the Psalmist, I wait for You – out the depths, we cry out for Your redeeming Presence. Amen.*

Tuesday, March 31

Read: Psalm 131

Reflection:

I know it is spring (or supposed to be) but reading this psalm makes me think of Christmas. Not the snow or decorations – but the actual *story*. When Mary is told she is to bear the Messiah of God in her womb, she responds not with fear or doubt but *willingness*: “Here am I – let it be with me according to Your word” (Luke 1:38).

These words share in the humble spirit of Mary, opening ourselves to the God of Possibility. *Who knows what the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe is capable of?* Sometimes we try and categorize away God’s power and presence in our lives to the degree where *we* are in control until God becomes just another “tool” in our box of positivity.

Yet if we follow the example not only of Mary, but of Jesus himself then we will recognize just how *out* of “control” we are. Our eyes are not “raised too high;” we can look around us and see this creating and redeeming God in our midst, always up to something extraordinary through our (truthfully) quite ordinary existence.

Prayer: *It’s easy to make ourselves into the Masters of our fate, especially when we’re meeting God at eye-level. If we can take a “step down,” perhaps we’ll discover afresh a whole new world of love and possibility in You, O LORD. Amen.*

Wednesday, April 1

Read: Psalm 132

Reflection:

It’s strange to think of God having a “place” – when we so emphasize God’s Spirit “inhabiting” us, we tend to de-emphasize location. In this moment with social distancing, there’s comfort in that – God can dwell with us wherever we are! Yet the psalmist’s insistence on God’s relationship to the Temple should not be overlooked.

The Temple was a visible symbol of God’s relationship with the people. Even though God’s promises were not always visible, the Temple reminded them that God had given this tribe of nomads a home, a king, and a purpose.

Living next to the church building reminds me that God has given *us* a “home” in God’s own heart. Even as the building sits empty during social distance, the bricks and mortar act as a symbol of *our* call – a reminder of our discipleship. Just like the Temple, you may take the building away, but God’s promises will stand firmer than any cornerstone.

Prayer: *Rise up, O LORD, and go to Your place in every person’s heart, to keep us grounded in Your love. Amen.*

Thursday, April 2

Read: Psalm 133

Reflection:

Finally! A text about *beards*. You know I've been waiting all Lent for this one! The "beard of Aaron" aside, what is most meaningful in this text to me is its very first words: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

Israel would sing this song as they ascended the hills to Jerusalem – recognizing their shared identity as God's people across tribe, class and story. When God's people come *together*, it is cause for rejoicing – for God did not save any one person alone; God saved a *people*. God did not just create persons; God created a *community*.

As much as we long for our "togetherness" in this season, may we not lose sight of our connection. May we not forget the "ties that bind" – those promises of God uniting us across time and space in the power of the Holy Spirit. We may be distanced today, but tomorrow may come a day when we can gather together once again. Just think how beautiful and wonderful that day shall be!

Prayer: *LORD, though we are often so easily divided, may we relish this longing for unity, so that when the opportunity comes, we do not miss celebrating for the gift community is. Amen.*

Friday, April 3

Read: Psalm 134

Reflection:

We don't often think about praising God at nightfall, beyond those "bedtime" prayers, perhaps. When we come to the end of the day, we're exhausted, hungry, ready to do anything else than "pray" – or at least that's often my excuse!

Yet this psalm shows us the reverse rhythm to the Hebrew day: night "begins" the cycle. In Genesis 1:5 we read: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." For Jews, Sabbath is always sundown *to* sundown.

It's an interesting way to view God's activity in our lives. Just because our "day" has ended, doesn't mean God's work is done; nor, perhaps, our discipleship. Darkness is no barrier to God's light – the evening has just as much opportunities for faith, hope and love as the daytime. Perhaps Lent is the "night" of the Christian year to remind us that God calls us to relationship beyond the 9-5 existence, and wants us from sundown *to* sundown.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, O God, for whether it is night or day, You are at work. Help us to be so faithful. Amen.*

Saturday, April 4

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

Sunday, April 5 – Palm Sunday

Join us for “virtual worship” through the livestream at 10:30 AM:

<https://boxcast.tv/view/sunday-worship-576144> or www.facebook.com/FCCStJoseph/

You can also view service videos past and present on our website:

www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/

Whether you “join in” this virtual worship or not, use this day for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. Since it is Palm Sunday and the entrance into Holy Week, consider using the below format as a guided meditation to enhance your worship experience.

Call to Worship

Leader: Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!

All: Hosanna in the highest! Praise the LORD!

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-17; Matthew 21:1-11

Reflection

- How does the writer of Matthew connect Zechariah’s vision to Jesus?
- What about this episode of Jesus seems “triumphant?” What victory has Jesus accomplished?
- What does it mean that in the span of one week, people go from celebrating Jesus, to calling for his crucifixion?

Lord’s Prayer (*or free prayer if you choose*)

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.