

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH UCC
ST JOSEPH**

PRESENTS

“WORDS OF FAITH”

**A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
FOR 2023**

WRITTEN BY MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION

February 22, 2023 - "Ash Wednesday"

Psalm 51:1-17

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten Season by reminding us of one of the most fundamental truths of existence - all things die. We cannot escape our mortality, no matter how much we pretend or ignore it, death is part of life. This has always been part of my vocation as a pastor to be exposed to this reality - in every community I have served, death has been part of our worshiping experience. And yet, the passing of my father last year has taken this exposure to a whole new meaning. Death's sting, as it were, feels ever more painful.

Yet Lent is about embracing the truth - the truth of our creation and redemption. All things die, yes, but, because of Jesus, all things may now truly live. In Christ, God enters the realm of death itself - to give us hope for a new creation. In Jesus, the most tragic and painful experience of humankind has been brought to the throne of grace. Death is not the final word for us anymore.

Thus, Ash Wednesday is a release, an act of surrender. We stare our mortality in the face to remind ourselves of the beautiful gift life is meant to be. It is sacred - precious. And even in its fragility, there is the grace of God waiting to make all things new. From the ashes we are born, and from the ashes we will rise anew in God's future. Ash Wednesday prepares us for the journey of Lent, the journey of following after Christ on his road to the Cross, by embracing death - not as an act of futility, but as a song of hope. Death may reign for a day, but we are people of resurrection. The love of God is eternal; Easter is forever.

The only way we can truly embrace this gift, however, is confession. Today's psalm shows us how to speak truthfully about our condition. It does not ignore our sin or our sorrows - it casts everything that we are before God. This is what Ash Wednesday is about; this is what Lent leads us toward - confession of our utter dependence on the grace of God. We confess so as to be assured by the hope of God's final word in Christ: death is real, yes, but so is God's everlasting love and life in Christ.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

February 23, 2023

Jonah 3:1-10

As a history and literature undergrad, medical school was quite a change for me. Gone were the disciplines of research, analysis, and interpretation. I entered the world of rote memorization. At the time my school had adopted an integrated model of teaching the science basics that underpin medical practice. During each six-week session we would simultaneously study biochemistry, anatomy, physiology, microbiology and more. At the end of each session would come a lengthy test encompassing all of the material that had been presented. Applying my liberal arts training I faithfully read the relevant chapters in the assigned textbooks, looked over lecture notes . . . and failed to pass the first exam. I clearly heard a voice telling me to repent of my foolish ways . . . the voice of the dean who I assured that I had learned my lesson. Henceforth I dedicated myself to memorizing every word of every lecture starting with the break between lectures, then the evening at home with all that days' lectures, the weekend with five days' worth, culminating with a session ending weekend with all six weeks of minutia, memorizing right up to the moment of walking into the examination.

I freely confess that the impetus for this remarkable transformation of my study habits was not love of learning. Rather the more primitive visceral fear of failure. Like the people and rulers of Nineveh (and Tina Turner), love had little to do with it. Except perhaps the "love" of self-preservation. Fire and brimstone preaching has long ago fallen out of fashion in Christian churches. But death (and taxes!) are still just as inevitable as they were in Jonah's day. The Jesus presented in our gospels does not shy away from delivering warnings to his listeners:

Watch out for the doomsday deceivers. (Luke 21:8)

But be on your guard. (Luke 21:34)

Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. (Luke 12:15)

I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave. (John 8:34)

The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. (Matthew 6:19)

Had my dean offered me kind words recognizing my many fine qualities, I would likely have found myself on a very different path in life. The warning did not replace my love of learning, patient care, or medicine, but it was a very necessary tool to get my mind in the right place for the task set before me. I'm not sure what God's warning is for me this Lent but my eyes and ears are open and my heart is ready to receive it. I only hope that my will to respond to the warning is as vigorous and whole hearted as was the will of the people of Nineveh.

Dennis Thompson

February 24, 2023

Jonah 4:1-11

Lent is a time for renewing our relationship with God. It is a time for repenting for our sins through fasting, putting on ashes, and engaging in acts of charity. Importantly, Lent is a time for talking and listening to our Lord.

The Book of Jonah is such a story. It is a tale about the power of prayer and repentance. It is told through the eyes of Jonah, one of the most unusual messengers ever chosen by God. Jonah is a prophet in direct communication with God. A prophet who is disobedient. A prophet who is angry with God. A prophet who is selfish. A prophet who is not afraid to express his displeasure with God.

Why of all the people in the world did God choose Jonah as His messenger? Is God calling me? How can I discern God's message to me? Were there times that I rejected God's message?

*Dear Lord,
Grant me the grace
to see you in the darkness,
to hear you in the silence,
and to fulfill your plan for me.
Now and forever,
Amen.*

Don Popielarz

February 25, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-12

The churches of my childhood did not observe Lent, but I remember classmates talking about what they were giving up for Lent. For the sake of this writing, I wish I had asked “Why?” Thinking back, I interpreted the practice to be much like a New Year’s Resolution. In Isaiah 58, we learn that it is much more than a resolution. Just as we prepare for big events in our lives, Lent is a time to make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is a time of repentance and a regretful acknowledgment of our sin.

Isaiah 58:1-12 is one of many passages in the Bible about fasting and repentance. So, what is fasting, and why is it important? Many traditions believe that the only acceptable form of fasting is an abstention, to varying degrees, of food and drink as practiced by Jesus, Daniel, and others in the Bible. Some believe giving up something important to you is an acceptable “fast.” I believe God is more concerned with why we fast rather than how we do so. To God, the condition of the heart is what is important.

As an instrument of God, Isaiah is loudly chastising the Israelites for their shallow worship consisting of perfunctory fasting and self-centered prayers. They went through the ritual then returned to their sinful lives. God points out their, and (by extension) our sin: a lack of sincere worship, quarreling, strife and lack of love and compassion for others.

In research for this devotion, I found the following lines in the “Prayer of Confession” from the Book of Common Prayer. It is a humbling prayer, and the words are so fitting for this time of seeking God: *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

In addition to meditating on today’s scripture, let’s contemplate our own mission as Christians and disciples of Jesus Christ: to discover God, equip one another for life, and reach inward and outward to serve. How do we get there? (Hint: 6 practices). However, we decide to seek God, I think we can agree that God desires for us to “fast” from the world; to disassociate ourselves from other things to focus on Him and seek Him in humility with prayers of repentance.

Stories about fasting: Daniel 9, Esther 4, Jonah 3;

Social justice: Matthew 25:33-40, Parable of sheep and goats

Ruthann Miller-Sipe

February 26, 2023 - "First Sunday of Lent"

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The Season of Lent is drawn from Jesus' time spent in the wilderness, enduring temptation and trial before beginning his ministry. Forty days mirroring Israel's forty years in the wilderness - Jesus embodies humanity's wandering spirit. This text from Genesis reveals our original wandering: the choice to follow God or our own wills.

Whether this is about a literal piece of fruit or the temptation of obeying God or "being gods," the story reveals the same: Sin leads us to the wilderness. The wild places of the human heart, the wasteland of our rebellion, can seem like a desperate end with no hope. Yet the tale in Genesis ends with *grace*, not with condemnation. Humanity may be exiled from the Garden, but God goes *with* those first humans.

In the same way, God goes with humanity in Israel on the journey out of Egypt to the land of Promise and in Jesus in the desert of testing. Wilderness is not void of grace; it is *full* of grace, because God dwells there, too. Lent reminds us that our discipleship is a journey from the temptation of the self, the rebellion of our hearts, to the promise of God's love, the hope for new creation and redemption.

In Jesus, the choice of the Garden takes place once more, but this time, Jesus chooses rightly - Jesus follows God's way and thus we are granted release from exile. Because Jesus is faithful, we can be faithful. As we walk this Lenten road to Promise, remember that God dwells in wilderness with us and provides grace even in the desert.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

February 27, 2023

Psalm 32

This psalm is about forgiveness, but it is not just about forgiveness. For David, forgiveness is one step along a path that starts with sin and ends with happiness. He's right. All forgiveness starts with sin—with failure. We humans are ambitious creatures and we hate to fail, even though it's inevitable that we do so. We try to be good people and not sin, but we all fail. We're imperfect beings and we hate that about ourselves. A lot of our sins rise, not from a desire to sin, but from a desire to cover up our sins. We fail in our attempts to be good, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small ones. We steal, we hurt other people, we cheat.

Even if we can avoid big sins, we still commit small ones. We forget to return a loan, we shove back at the guy who pushed past us, we run the red light because we think no one will see. And then we're embarrassed because we wish we hadn't done that. We wish we'd paid our friends back, but to pay them back late is to admit that we goofed up, so we pretend we forgot we owe them money. We say we didn't mean to shove the guy in the hall, but we know that, in the heat of the moment, we did. We say we didn't see the red light. We lie. We're trying to save face, to pretend to ourselves and others that we're better people than we are, but it only makes us feel worse. By trying to look like better people, we make ourselves worse.

David knows this. When he kept silent—when he tried to ignore and hide his sins—his body wasted away. He groaned all day long. He was tormented by what he had done. It's only when he goes to God and confesses his sin that he feels better. It's when his sin is acknowledged that he can be forgiven, both by God and by himself. And he's not just forgiven, he is joyful. He is surrounded with glad cries of deliverance. He is protected from the sins he has committed in the past and the sins he will commit in the future. And he is overcome with joy at understanding the extent of that protection.

That is what God wants from us—understanding. And David celebrates that in this psalm. God created us, not to be animals who need to be controlled to live up to their full potential, but to be intelligent beings who understand difficult concepts like sin, forgiveness and joy. God knows that we learn by doing, so we need to sin in order to understand forgiveness and get closer to him. And when we get closer to God, we get closer to joy.

Kristen Robinson

February 28, 2023

Genesis 3:1-16

This passage always knocks me out!

Human nature, baby, on full display. Nothing in here that I do not identify with. Pretty hard not to take all of this personally. Let's just take the naked part. This is a dialogue for the ages (I guess it has lasted for ages!).

“When they heard the sound of God strolling in the garden in the evening breeze (Just picture THAT), the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from God.

God called to the Man: “Where are you?”

He said, “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid.”

God said, “Who told you that you were naked?”

Oh man, there are so many laughs in that passage. Like all humor it is funny because it is recognizable, I've been there, done that. And like all humor, because it is the truth. I like the silliness of the idea of hiding from God in the first place. But I admit to doing it. Not behind the garden foliage. Instead I hide behind my good deeds. Behind my accomplishments. Behind my personal assessment that there are worse people than me. (If pushed I would have to rank my goodness in the top quartile of the eight billion people on the planet, even though I really only know .0000012% of them—I did the math).

Then there is my low level of badness: I don't lie very often, I am seldom mean to my wife, I don't remember the last time I kicked the dog . . . the list goes on. Then Jesus asks me: “Who told you that you were naked?” “Who told you that you are bad?” “Who told you that you are not lovely?” “Who told you that your differentness is not a good thing?” “Who told you that God does not cherish you the way you are?”

Impossible for God to love us the way He/She made us?

Consider our love of the babies we make. They do no good deeds. They make stinky messes. They lose their tempers. They seldom put others first. But we love them, in all their naked glory, just the way they are. Do we really think that we are more capable of love than God is?

Easter. The promise of God's always abiding love. Always. Not just when we are good. Not just when we are wearing Armani. Always.

Dennis Thompson

March 1, 2023

Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28

In the above passage, God's servant, Moses, is commanded by God to come up to Mt. Sinai. There God comes before Moses and tells him God is a God of mercy and grace, patient, loving, and forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin. God does not ignore sin, however, and will hold those who do so accountable. Moses begs forgiveness for his people and himself. Eventually a covenant is reached between God and Moses and God's people. Moses then receives the Ten Commandments.

As we move into the New Testament and we understand the nature of the God who loves his people despite their transgressions, we are reminded of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." This is the gift of grace granted to those who believe. As Christian believers we are Christ's disciples and as such are charged with faithfully following his example. How best then to do so? "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35) A much loved and familiar church song reminds one of our discipleship:

"They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love"
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yeah they'll know we are Christians by our love
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Donna Dumke

March 2, 2023

Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is titled “A song of ascent,” which is exactly how the scripture begins: “I lift up my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.”

What is it we need help with? Maybe it is how we can remember the passion, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The passion He has for us, His death so brutal and how lovely His resurrection. The phrase “watches over” is mentioned four times, how reassuring is that? He will not let me fall; He neither slumbers nor sleeps - His watchful eye is constantly watching over.

The Lord is your shade and keeps you from harm, meaning protects one against oppression, which could also mean from the devil. It is stated over and over again He watches day and night. When I read this scripture, I feel very blessed to have Jesus watching over me at all times, but I must be worthy of this privilege by being a disciple. Discipleship is modeling and teaching Christians the precepts of the Bible, mainly prayer, doctrine, Christian living and worship. It is the Holy Spirit that brings people into an intimate relationship with God.

You must know it will cost you everything; learn to say no to temptation; you have to follow Him through trials, suffering, loneliness, humiliation. Discipleship means count the cost, give up everything, follow Him.

Being a Christian is a matter of choice, being a disciple is a commitment. I know I am a Christian but I’m not so sure that I am a devoted disciple all of the time.

Joyce Vance

March 3, 2023

Romans 3:21-31

Like mis-singing the lyrics
to our favorite song
Is it possible that we've
interpreted Paul's words wrong
And that faith without deeds
is just a clamoring gong

Did our early Church fathers
refuse to be the bearer
Of the one chosen to
point out Paul's early error
Thereby exposing themselves
to Paul's holy terror

True faith in God
is the important first step
But for our salvation
we must also accept
God's Kingdom is at hand and
Jesus' teaching that we repent

Is it mere folly for
another view to exclude
An error in judgement for
the Letter of James to preclude
Did not our Lord Jesus
gift us the Beatitudes

How will we be judged
after our earthly sojourn
What good is it if a person has faith
but for their sins does not atone
You see a person is justified by what
he does and not by faith alone

Don Popielarz

March 4, 2023

Luke 7:1-10

The story of the centurion's faith is a familiar one. Knowing of Jesus' ministry in the area, the centurion sends some Jewish leaders to ask for Jesus' help to heal his valued servant. The centurion's confidence that Jesus acts on the authority of God and that his word alone will restore his servant's health is so great that even Jesus is amazed. But is Jesus amazed not only by the faith of the centurion, but also by the man who professes that faith? This recognition of Jesus' authority comes not from one of Jesus' followers, but from a centurion, a Roman military official and a symbol of occupying power. He is an outsider, the "other". How can this man model what unshakeable faith looks like?

William F. Buckley, Jr. a devout Roman Catholic, in his eulogy of his friend and fellow journalist, Richard Clurman, said, "It occurs to me that all my life I have unconsciously been on the lookout for the perfect Christian, and when I found him, he turned out to be a non-observant Jew." Like Jesus' amazement at the centurion, those who can deepen and enrich our faith may also surprise us.

And what do we make of the centurion's sense of his unworthiness? Despite the high regard with which the Jewish elders hold him, does his outsider status make him feel unworthy to approach Jesus directly? Like the centurion, do we struggle with our relationship with Jesus because we believe we are unworthy? Or conversely do we judge others based on our concept of acceptable worthiness? Does this self-imposed judgment of both ourselves and others cause us to miss out on an intimate relationship with Jesus as well as the rich, new perspective others might bring to our personal faith?

This judgment of worthiness and unworthiness is a human construct. The good news is that in God's eyes we all are worthy – not for our beliefs or our achievements - but for simply being beloved children of God. Whose faith will inspire us and draw us closer to God – someone young, someone old, someone of a different political persuasion, someone of a different faith? In this time of Lenten heart-searching, may we be watchful as God reveals himself in unexpected places and unexpected people. Prepare to be amazed!

Beth Kenagy

March 5, 2023 - "2nd Sunday of Lent"

John 3:1-17

John 3 contains one of the most oft-quoted lines of Scripture throughout time and place. Yet as powerful as verse 16 is, it's only *part* of the narrative's appeal. This passage features a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a leader within the Pharisee camp. There are many themes in this brief encounter, and if you follow closely, you may feel a little sorry for Nicodemus, who is not a "bad guy," but an earnest disciple coming to Jesus for answers.

Yet Jesus, in typical fashion, presents few answers and more questions. Nicodemus is left in the dark and Jesus quickly moves on in his journey. This story, found only in John's Gospel, is a conversation in the dark, literally. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night - whether out of fear or because we hold our most important conversations with those we hold dear in the waning hours of the day. He wants to know how one can be "born again?"

Jesus talks of the Spirit, and then speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up, like Moses and the serpent in the wilderness. If you know your Scripture (which Nicodemus did), then you'll recall that Jesus is referencing Numbers 21:1-9, when in the midst of a rebellion, Moses held up a bronze serpent to heal the people from a disease born of their own broken choices.

If the Son of Man must be "lifted up," like the bronze serpent, then he is certainly a source of restoration and not condemnation. Indeed, that's where John leads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:16-17).

However, Jesus as a source of redemption is found out of the chaos of our own brokenness. The Bronze Serpent was only needed because Israel rebelled in the wilderness. Likewise, we can only grasp this redemption through the Spirit's power in making us new. Lent is a wilderness journey, a time of being "born again," through the Spirit's illumination of Jesus' life in our own. Don't get stuck in the dark trying to get answers out of Jesus, when our call to discipleship really is about following that line of sight away from condemnation to the redemption of God's Son.

It is certainly not easy, but it's the most beautiful mystery we'll ever be part of.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

March 6, 2023

Hebrews 3:1-6

I have always been struck by how much of the division among ordinary Christians centers around everything except Jesus. My fundamentalist/evangelical forebears (and some current relatives) subscribe to a rather literal approach to the Bible. From this foundation springs a legalistic brand of Christianity.

“The Bible is God’s word. Therefore, every word is true. Therefore, listen to this verse that proves . . . that gays are living in sin . . . that current geopolitical events put us all in the end times . . . that women should not be leaders in our churches . . . that instruments should not accompany music in church . . . that the earth is roughly 6000 years old . . . etc.” None of these church controversies springs from the actions or the words of Jesus. They do have roots in specific Bible verses.

I taught an adult Bible study from the book “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth” by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. The pearl for me stems from the same conviction that “The Bible is God’s word” and is therefore true and can be trusted. But rather than taking this to mean that every word, every story, every sentence is true on its own, Fee and Stuart hold that because the Bible is God’s word from beginning to end it has to *make sense from beginning to end*. Christianity is frequently ridiculed for believing in a harsh, bloodthirsty God in the Old Testament and a soft, warm, loving God in the New Testament. And some Christians deserve this criticism. Fee and Stuart maintain that followers of Jesus must understand ALL of the Bible in a way that is consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus. We are followers of Jesus, not Moses or Paul or Isaiah or John.

Depending upon the version, there are about 750,000 words in the bible. The four gospels account for roughly 55,000 of them, 7.3%. To keep myself focused on Jesus (rather than say the prescribed punishment for a death from goring by a vicious bull, Exodus 21:28) I try to spend at least as much time in the story of Jesus as I do in Paul’s letters or the prophets or any of the rest of the scriptures. This helps Jesus become the lens through which I understand everything else. Apparently, I am not the first Christian to discover this practice as many liturgical churches have a tradition of always having three scripture readings during services: The first is from the Old Testament, the second is from one of the New Testament letters, and the third is from one of the four Gospels.

In the twelfth chapter of Hebrews the author approaches the conclusion with this advice: “Keep your eyes on Jesus . . .”

Dennis Thompson

March 7, 2023

Isaiah 65:17-25

Years ago, one of my friends and his wife named their son Isaiah. I asked him why they chose this name. At the time, I had not read much of Isaiah, but I knew that my friend was headed toward the priesthood up until he met his wife.

His answer to my question went something like this: the Prophet Isaiah wrote a lot about the coming of the Messiah and our eternal salvation through Jesus' life on earth. To me, he said, it is one of the most important books in the Bible.

So, I read Isaiah, and I found much comfort and inspiration in his words. Not the least of which is Isaiah 6:8 (NIV), "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I Send me!'"

Isaiah 65:17-25 is one of the most hopeful, comforting, inspirational passages one can read. When you read these words, you will find many reasons to be glad and rejoice! The Prophet Isaiah makes a strong case for faith in God, whatever you conceive Him to be, for He "...will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."

Keep reading beloved friends!

Kathryn (Zerler) Anderson

March 8, 2023

John 7:53-8:11

The above scripture tells the story of the woman accused of adultery, the sin of which is punishable by stoning. She is brought before Jesus by the Pharisees who hope to trick Him into rendering judgement against her (notable is the fact that the man involved is not with her). Jesus draws in the sand and says: "Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). One by one the accusers disappear and Jesus tells the woman that since none remain to condemn her neither will He. He tells her to go and sin no more.

The lesson here is forgiveness. Jesus alone has the moral authority to condemn the woman as he is without sin, but instead He extends grace, mercy, and forgiveness. However, seeing sin in another while having sin in our own lives is a sin of which we are all guilty. Matthew 7:5 warns against such hypocrisy: "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." We are not meant to throw stones. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:17) We were created for a life of justice. 2 Corinthians 5:18: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer which instructs us to seek forgiveness for our own sins and also to forgive those who sin against us. Romans 8:1 "...there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Sin separates us from God. There is salvation for those who believe. "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Dear Lord, I draw near to you. I'm kneeling at the cross, Aware of my need for forgiveness. You took the sin of the world upon yourself. Now I lay my life open before you. Thank you that as I confess my sins, I am set free. I will live forever in Your grace. I'm ready to run the race with your promises set before me. Lord of all, you are my Saviour and you lead me into eternity. Now I can rest in your hope and salvation. Thank you that you cover me with your mercy. I will remain in you, always. Amen. (prayer by Julie Palmer)

Donna Dumke

March 9, 2023

Colossians 1:15-23

While Jesus is the basis of Christianity—he literally puts the Christ in Christianity—his position is also confusing. How can he be eternal, like God, but also God’s son? In my class on western civilization, I lecture every year on a man named Arius, a leader of the early church who was exiled because he believed that God was older than Jesus—a position that makes logical sense, but goes against Christianity’s concentration on the Trinity. In my history class, I concentrate on the social and political effects of Arius’s insistence on God’s supremacy. The mainstream church’s insistence on the Trinity marked the beginning of a trend of exclusivity in the early church, as they move to exclude thinkers like Arius who went against the views of the mainstream church. This happened at the time when Christianity was transforming from a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire to one that was first legal, and then mandatory, in the Empire. Once there were advantages to being a Christian, the church felt the need to define their beliefs more stringently.

To me, that defies the theological message of this passage. I can see the logic of both Arius’s position—if Christ is “the firstborn of all creation”, he must not have been there until God created the heavens and the earth—and mainstream Christianity’s insistence on the Trinity as coequal and coeternal. However, this passage does not focus on that. This passage does not exclude anyone, but includes everyone. “All the fullness of God” dwells in him—is pleased to dwell in him—and God makes peace with all things in heaven and earth through Christ. Concentrating on the details of Christ’s birth distracts from the inclusive theology of this passage. Christ is what brings us together, and Christianity is for “every creature under heaven.” This passage celebrates Christ as equal with God, and the means by which God understands humanity and the rest of creation. One of the things I believe about Christianity is that it as an attempt for mutual understanding—for humans to understand God and for God to understand humans—and Christ is the bridge by which we may come to a fuller understanding of each other.

Perhaps the early church was right to punish Arius. He refused to compromise on his insistence on God’s supremacy, even in the face of many other Biblical passages that emphasize the coequal nature of the Trinity. Perhaps not—Jesus’s birth does pose an interesting logical puzzle for the church. But I feel like the overall message of passages like this one, that emphasizes the supremacy of Christ as the way that humanity is saved, is sometimes lost in the details of that argument.

Kristen Robinson

March 10, 2023

Psalm 95

A Villanelle to Worship and Obey

These are a people who go astray.
Quick to make a noise so joyful.
But, they do not regard my way.

Songs of praise they sing and play.
Their hearts are hard, for their sins no sorrow.
These are a people who go astray.

I call on them to honor, worship and obey.
They sing joyfully and seem so thankful.
But, they do not regard my way.

See with new eyes the miracles of today.
I make the mountains rise and the rivers flow.
These are a people who go astray.

From my teachings, do not stray.
So that your inner grace shall grow.
But, they do not regard my way.

On bended knee, adore me and pray.
Then upon you, gifts I shall bestow.
But, these are a people who go astray.
They do not regard my way.

Don Popielarz

March 11, 2023

Exodus 16:27-35

What souvenirs do you collect as a remembrance of a favorite trip or vacation - a T-shirt, a Christmas ornament, a mug, a key chain, a seashell? A friend of mine beautifully displays small vials of sand from all of the beaches she has visited. Just the sight of these little mementos can stir memories of lovely places and adventures.

God understood that power of an image, a symbol, when he commanded Moses to fill a jar with an omer (two quarts) of manna and place it in the Ark of the Covenant. After escaping from Egypt, God's daily gift of manna in the morning and quail in the evening sustained the Israelites for forty years as they wandered in the desert – the ultimate road trip. The jar of manna served as a visible and holy reminder of God's provision and grace so that even after reaching Canaan, the Promised Land, the Israelites and generations after them might remember God's care for his people.

Lent, too, is a journey and an opportunity to look back on our own wilderness days – days when illness, broken relationships, financial challenges, or a loved one's death upended our lives. The manna jar in our memory bank helps us remember how God sustained us and carried us through. Like Moses' jar of manna, memories of our manna moments can comfort us and assure us of God's continuing presence, protection and provision in our lives despite the challenges we may face.

God's command that the jar be kept for future generations so they might know of their ancestors' delivery is still relevant and important. We all have "a cloud of witnesses" whose lives continue to inspire and guide us. The stories of courage and faith of grandparents or great-grandparents, whom we may never have met, continue to resonate in our lives. Likewise, sharing our personal stories of God's goodness and grace with the children in our lives may also serve as our legacy of faith for them. And what is our response to God's unconditional love for us? Our gratitude for the manna of God's provision compels us to extend that same care to others. Through our Soup Kitchen and Bear Pack ministries we are literally providing daily bread for those in need. Figuratively we can fill the manna jars of others with a note, a meal, a visit. Just our presence can comfort and assure others that God continues to be intimately involved in our daily lives.

We may not have an actual manna jar before us as a holy souvenir of our life's journey, but we can pause to reflect on God's provision and care and in response gratefully serve with kindness and compassion. His grace and goodness are indeed fresh each day and they strengthen us for the road ahead.

Beth Kenagy

March 12, 2023 - "3rd Sunday of Lent"

John 4

Once again, John's Gospel is the only place where we have this episode of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. There's much to behold within this narrative, and I encourage you to dwell upon the richness of the text. For the sake of our Lenten journey, here's where we might focus in together:

"But he had to go through Samaria" (v. 4).

No, Jesus did not. There were multiple routes Jesus could have undergone to get to where he wanted to go - but he chose the undesired path. Jesus "had to go through" territory that was not "kosher" to Jews (Samaritans and Jews were bitter opponents, not only ethnically, but religiously). And yet, this is where Jesus chooses to walk because for Jesus, *no one* could be off-limits, or beyond grace, or mortal enemies. God's Kingdom reaches all in Christ.

Yet as we see in this conversation, to encounter this Christ, to experience the grace he has to offer, it may take us to some uncomfortable places - like a Samaritan and a Jew meeting at a well. Encounter with the Christ-mystery may stretch us and push us towards transformation where we can no longer live as before.

It's a reminder that the Lenten journey is not an "option" for discipleship. This is not a season we can skip over as a community of faith. Like Jesus, we "have to go through" this Lenten wilderness, this desert of transformation and testing, because it's the only way we'll truly encounter and embrace the Christ-mystery. Only by such an honest unveiling of our truest selves in Christ will we be able to go forth as God calls us, "in spirit and in truth" (v. 23-34).

Whatever your Samaria, know you're on the right path, and believe you're not walking it alone.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

March 13, 2023

Psalm 81

Psalm 81 was written by Asaph, who was a Levite appointed by King David to lead musical worship in the tabernacle. Like David, he was a skilled singer and poet. It is believed that Asaph wrote this psalm for one of the three annual feasts, or “holy convocations,” that the Lord commanded the Israelites to attend in Jerusalem.

Our psalm begins with a call to worship: “Sing for joy..., shout aloud... strike the timbrel (tambourine); blow the trumpet!” What a joyous beginning, but it soon becomes apparent that God is not pleased with many of his people, who have forgotten his faithfulness and disobeyed his commands. They are piously going through the motions, but their hearts are not filled with righteousness. In keeping with this season of meditating on our relationship with God, we see that God longs to be the center of his people’s lives, and the God, who has rescued his people, wants them to love him. Hear me, my people—I have rescued you, not some other god. It was me. Don’t worship anyone (or anything!) but me. As you read the psalm, set aside any distractions. See God’s anguish in the rejection of his people. For us, it is a time to remember that he gave his only begotten son for us, his often disobedient, rebellious children.

God allows the Israelites to follow their stubborn hearts. God, their loving father, cared so much for his wayward children that his next words are filled with sadness: “If only my people would listen... [and] follow my ways, I would protect them from their enemies, and I would take care of them.” I used to shake my head at how the Israelites kept doing the same rebellious things over and over again. Why wouldn’t they obey God? I was so humbled the day I realized I was metaphorically one of them.

In the past I loved the Ash Wednesday service, sat in reverence for a time on Good Friday and celebrated Easter morning, but never gave much thought to the season of Lent. This year is different. I don’t remember the details—only that after something we studied in Women’s Bible Study, I was convicted about my pick and choose, lukewarm obedience. While studying scriptures on obedience, I read Matthew 26:39: “[Jesus] fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’”

I visualized the story and saw Jesus praying in agony, sweating drops of blood, but acquiescing to God’s will for my sake. Psalm 81 reminds us to remember and meditate on our history with God: to remember all he has done for us and that he loved us so much he gave his son to suffer and die to save us from our sins.

Ruthann Miller-Sipe

March 14, 2023

Genesis 29:1-14

The verses just prior to Genesis 29:1-14 tell us that God spoke to Jacob in a vivid dream telling him that he would prosper with land and descendants. Jacob was filled with awe, as he continued his journey to Haran. There, Jacob encountered shepherds near a well with their flocks.

Jacob asked if they knew his uncle, Laban. At the same time, Rachel, Laban's daughter and Jacob's cousin, walked to the well with her flock. Jacob wept with joy at meeting his cousin! Rachel took Jacob to her father's home; Laban was also joyful upon meeting his sister's son! Jacob stayed with the family, as was God's plan. Just as God planned, Jacob was blessed with land and children.

When I was younger and in parochial school with daily worship, Sunday school and church, surrounded by a neighborhood full of my classmates, I struggled with what God's plan was for me. I couldn't figure it out. Years later, decades really, it finally dawned on me that I only needed to pray, to be silent enough to hear God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit whispering to me. And to notice the miracles all around me all the time.

God's plan for us is often not a lightning strike of immediate awakening; more often, His plan is a journey full of all that life has in store for us. All we really need to do is trust in God's wisdom.

“For I know the plan I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

God's plan for Jacob took more than 14 years; his journey included more than a few shocking surprises! In the end, Jacob was blessed beyond measure. And you will be, too!

Kathryn (Zerler) Anderson

March 15, 2023

John 7:14-31, 37-39

This is the heading that The Message version of the Bible gives to this passage: Could it be the Messiah? Anyone who has lived more than a few decades has faced this question, probably more than once. Is this the new CEO that will solve all the problems facing our business? Is this the physician who will finally figure out what is wrong and make me feel better? Is this the presidential candidate who will set our nation on the right course? Is this the pastor who will fill the pews to overflowing? Could this be our Messiah?

The passage reveals some stumbling blocks for the people of Jerusalem who are considering the possibility that Jesus could be the Messiah. First, he had no formal education. He had no credentials. Where is his official diploma, his PhD in messianic studies? Or at least a Messiah's learners permit in his wallet. Then there was the rule breaking. Was not this the character who had flaunted our most sacred law about keeping the Sabbath holy. Those found guilty deserve the death penalty! (Exodus 31:15) This behavior appears to be the opposite of what one would expect from the Messiah. And then there is his origin story. We know the town he comes from. A carpenter's son from a hick town? This is the Messiah for all of us urbane sophisticated big city Jerusalem folks? Not likely.

“‘Rabbit’s clever,’ said Pooh thoughtfully. ‘Yes,’ said Piglet, ‘Rabbit’s clever.’ ‘And he has Brain.’ ‘Yes,’ said Piglet, ‘Rabbit has Brain.’ There was a long silence. ‘I suppose,’ said Pooh, ‘that that’s why he never understands anything.’” (Winnie the Pooh, A. A. Milne)

Then Jesus stops arguing and offers an invitation: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me in this way. . .” In this way. In contrast to the way the citizens of Jerusalem are weighing the question, “Could It Be the Messiah?” And if “this way” is not by rational consideration of all the scriptures, facts, history, traditions and application of learning and wisdom, then what is “this way?” “One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: ‘Let the children alone, don’t prevent them from coming to me. God’s kingdom is made up of people like these.’” (Matthew 19:14)

People like these. Not educated. Not wise. Not clever. But deeply trusting. And open to all possibilities. “But it isn’t easy,” said Pooh. “Because Poetry and Hums aren’t things which you get, they’re things which get you. And all you can do is to go where they can find you.” Could this be the Messiah? Are we trying to find the Messiah? This Easter let’s try going where the Messiah can find us. Amen.

Dennis Thompson

March 16, 2023

Psalm 23

Is there any wonder that out of 150 psalms this is the one that so many gravitate to as life on earth ends? It seems that I have known this psalm my entire life. It has been a part of memorial services for family and friends. I have heard it spoken from the pulpit by pastors and others. I have read it over and over when I am trying to accept the end of a life that I don't want to end quite yet.

I listen to the words as they are sung. This is a psalm of hope. It is one of trust. It starts us out in a good place. It takes us through the times we struggle with. It gives us the faithfulness of God as He continues to give us more than we ask for. It reassures us that life on earth is never over because He is there as move us to our heavenly home. His right hand stretched out!

David knew God as the Shepherd to guide him. David wasn't perfect by any means, but that made no difference to God. Christ took on the role of our Good Shepherd as He continued His Father's work on earth. Now we are called to be disciples and reach out to others so that they can benefit in eternal life.

Is this an early meditation? Could we take this with us to any place where we want to find comfort and need His peace? Lent is a journey. We can deprive ourselves of "something" or we can reach out of our comfort zone and do for others. Our choice....no matter how our days start or end. He is with us always and forever. Our 2023 Lenten journey continues.

Patty Nordberg

March 17, 2023

Ephesians 5:1-9

Believed to be written by Paul
while in a Roman prison.
Or possibly dictated by the Apostle
during the last days of his mission.
Paul sounds like a dying
man facing certain death.
Slowly voicing his words
while exhaling his last breath.

Like an elderly father conveying
to his children his final instruction.
Speaking the truth with clarity
and compelling conviction.
Imprisoned without writing tools
relying on what Jesus taught.
Dependent on friends and acolytes
Paul dictates his final thoughts.

How refreshing. How simple.
So direct. So passionate.
Paul teaches the words of
our Dear Lord Incarnate.
Immorality, impurity, greed
are not proper for living saints.
Obscene, vulgar, silly talk
is likewise out of place.

The laws of God our Father
do not disobey
or the wrath of our Lord
will rain upon you today.
As his beloved children
imitate God and trust.
Walk in love with Christ
as Christ loves us.

Don Popielarz

March 18, 2023

John 1:1-9

Today's abridged introduction to John focuses on Jesus as Word, life, and light—appropriate Lenten themes while pondering finite being, mortality, and our age's darkness. The cosmic scope of the opening to John's gospel contrasts starkly with most of the account. While John waxes eloquent on the preexistence of Jesus, getting lost in something-about-life-and-light is a common occurrence. Considering what follows—for instance John 4 and 7 – the prologue reveals itself as a masterfully crafted primer that queues the reader's questions and introduces themes the author will address by layering narratives to form a composite profile of Jesus.

Interestingly, Jesus is only identified by name once in the prologue (v.17). In today's text (vv.1-9), we're left wondering, "Who is this Word, this light in whom was life?" Famously, John presents seven titles for and seven "I am" statements from Jesus. John 4:16 doubles down on Jesus as incarnation of the Father's Word. Not only the "who" of the Word but also the "why" is addressed. As we're told, John the Baptist's role was to witness to Jesus, "so that all might believe." While succinct, the reader doesn't get the firmest sense of what "all" might be believing.

John the Baptist's purpose is bookended by John the author's in the twentieth chapter. "...so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Both John's "whys" inform us about that of the Word. Only life that recognizes Jesus, "The true light that gives light to everyone", is true life (v.4). How is "the life [that] was the light of all mankind" different? Consider John 4:14 and 7:37-39.

Read with John 1, these episodes give narrative meaning to the claim that Jesus is true life. John 4, through the living water theme, contrasts striving for waning life with eternal life from Jesus. John 7 makes the connection to the Spirit, itself imaged by light (e.g., our altar candles). John 1 indicates the Word "enlightens every person" so that, through the Spirit, we have true and unending life in Jesus. In these 40 days of self-denial, John 1:1-9 tells us that the Word who is with God and who is God is the true source of life and light to all mankind so that not by our own expiring life is darkness overcome but by Jesus's eternal life. May our life be Jesus's alone, not our present life that is but dust.

O Word who was in the beginning with God, in you alone is life and light. The darkness has not overcome you. Grace us with your light, so we may have true life and bear witness so all might believe. Let your life and light in us overcome the darkness of present age and mortality as we long for you to return with the fullness of your kingdom. Amen.

Will Muller

March 19, 2023 - "4th Sunday of Lent"

John 9

Sight is an important theme in the Gospel of John. Throughout, the writer talks of light and dark, of truth and being able to understand properly. Those who wish to follow Jesus need to be able to "see" him in the right lens, otherwise they'll fail to truly grasp the fullness of his message and mission. Today's text is all about Jesus and faithful sight.

Perhaps you've guessed it, but the issue in the story is not really the man who is born blind; it's everyone else in the text who's struggling. Jesus heals the blind man, but everyone else, the religious community especially, remains blind to what's really going on. Everyone's so concerned about sin and about who's in the wrong, that they're missing the opportunity to actually follow the Messiah in their midst!

Before we judge too quickly, we might want to take a step back and see the ways this story reflects our own experiences. Haven't we ever been so caught up in correctness, in labels, in our own sense of victory or accomplishment, that we've missed the bigger picture? Where have we in our faith journey focused so intently on minor details or side projects that we've fallen short of the heart of discipleship: relationship with God and each other?

The good news, however, is that none of us need to remain blind. Jesus has the power to heal our blindness - whether it's physical or spiritual. Instead of becoming so caught up in the details or various pieces of our faith journey, maybe we can allow the Lenten season to provide us the clarity of the man whose sight Jesus restores:

"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v. 25).

Perhaps that's all the sight we really need - to be able to see Who it is that redeems us, and to Whom we owe the gift of our very lives.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

March 20, 2023

Acts 9:1-20

Saul has been persecuting Christians (followers of The Way) and is traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to seek out Christians and return them to Jerusalem for punishment. Saul is zealous in his chosen task and cannot be persuaded by anyone to change.

Then, what happens? A bright light, the appearance of the resurrected Christ, and Saul asking, “Who are you Lord?” The reply is right to the point, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Then Jesus tells Saul to get up, go into the city, and Saul will be told what to do. To make his point, Jesus blinds Saul so he is dependent upon his companions to lead him to Damascus.

Have you ever had an experience where you knew you were right in your actions only to be told, in no uncertain terms, that you are absolutely wrong? Have you made plans only to change them at the last minute, because a voice in your head told you to do something different? This is what Saul experienced.

In 1984, I had my own road to Damascus experience. I was living in St. Joseph and had made plans to go out with friends for pizza. While I was getting ready, I heard this voice tell me, “Go Home.” I ignored it at first because I had plans for a fun weekend and driving 4 hours to Ohio to visit my parents wasn’t on my agenda. Then the voice spoke to me much louder, “GO HOME!!” Well, that got my attention. I cancelled my plans, quickly packed a bag, and began driving home at 5:30 PM.

Has this ever happened to you? Maybe it wasn’t a voice, or a bright light, but a nudge or feeling that you needed to do something differently. My parents were surprised that I had come home for the weekend, as I hadn’t called to tell them. We had a nice evening and the next day, lunch on the patio, enjoying the summer weather. Two hours later while shopping at the mall, my mom almost fell over and said we needed to go home! When we got home, our neighbor told us to go to the hospital as my dad had had a heart attack. My dad had literally dropped dead from a massive heart attack.

The rest of the weekend was crazy but I’m so glad I listened to that “voice” in my head. The part of this scripture that is meaningful to me is when Jesus spoke to Saul and Saul followed His instructions. Once Saul regained his sight, he was baptized and began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God. This scripture shows me that God will reveal himself to whomever God chooses and when God chooses, not just to Christians. This experience deepened my faith and helped me to live my life being more aware of Christ’s presence in my everyday life.

Diana Seaman

March 21, 2023

Psalm 146

NO, NO, NO! Am I to put my trust in national leaders who took 15 votes to elect a Speaker of the House while swearing, punching and showing no signs of cooperation or collaboration? That's certainly not my inclination. NO, NO, NO! Am I to put my trust in my loving parents? Not likely, since they are deceased. NO, NO, NO! Am I to put my trust in a best friend who moved away? I wish I could, but distance has become an issue.

NO, NO, NO! Am I to put my trust in my youthful, healthy body? Ha! I looked in the mirror this morning and moaned as I got out of bed in discomfort. Not realistic. NO, NO, NO! Am I to put my trust in how much I can buy for \$1.00 today and assume it will be the same next year? Not according to the economists.

I'd like to say I can put my trust in my relationship with my husband of 50 years, but I am a realist. Sad to say, I know one of us will die first. There goes that trust! I do take comfort in Scripture like Psalm 145, because I have an unexplainable trust in scripture and God. I know I can't trust anyone or anything else! Read with me some of the promises made in this Psalm.

YES, YES, YES! "The Lord is gracious and compassionate." I certainly feel loved only because of His grace, that is unearned. This grace gives me a confidence in myself and helps me to love others. YES, YES, YES! "The Lord is slow to anger and rich in love." I remember my Irish Dad, who before he was baptized, was not slow to anger. To have a loving, heavenly Father who is slow to anger, is such a freeing, gentle way to live.

YES, YES, YES! "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." Using the idea of being grateful and counting our blessings reminds us how good God is. Will you pause a moment and count 10 blessings with me? You don't have to stop at 10! YES, YES, YES! "His kingdom endures through all generations." What a comforting concept that my children and their children have the same constant promises from God that I have.

Cliff hanger: I'll let you finish the Psalm yourself and find the other promises that He makes. Don't trust me, but trust God's promises. They are all wonderful and comforting and everlasting. When finished reading Psalm 146, why not take a moment to praise God in whatever way suits you? There's a YouTube song of 146. It has a catchy phrase or two that might be a praise method for you? Or maybe sing the Doxology? Try praising God like no one is watching! It's fun!

Paula Thompson

March 22, 2023

Matthew 9:27-34

The restoration of sight to the blind men and voice to the demon-possessed mute are just two in a long series of miracles in Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry. These miracle healings occur after Jesus shares his life-changing Sermon on the Mount teachings. Through them, Jesus' message of compassion and unconditional love for all is made real.

Jesus' miracles are meaningful not only because they reveal his holy power, but also because of the individuals Jesus chooses to heal with that power. In the culture of Jesus' time, physical disability was often blamed on sin or a moral failing. Those who suffered from blindness, leprosy, and paralysis were considered cursed and were relegated to the margins of the community – religiously isolated and socially invisible. Because they were considered unclean, even touching these sufferers was considered defiling.

But these are the very people, the outcasts, the “others”, who Jesus embraces – literally. And ironically, blind men are the first to recognize Jesus as “Son of David” as they approach him requesting his mercy. Their intuitive sense of Jesus' caring heart and life-giving power reveals that, although blind, their spiritual sight is 20/20. When Jesus restores their physical sight, the men are also restored to community with others. They are transformed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In contrast, the Pharisees condemn Jesus' outreach, labeling it as the work of demons. So who is it that actually suffers from blindness – the blind men who saw Jesus' authority even before their sight was restored or the religious elite whose fear blinds them to Jesus' purpose and power?

So, what is the relevance of Jesus' miracle healings in our lives today? In her book, *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans shares that miracles are instructions, challenges that show us what to do and how to hope. She says, “Perhaps a better question than “Do I believe in miracles is “Am I acting like I do?” Am I including the people who are typically excluded? Am I feeding the hungry and caring for the sick? Am I holding the hands of the homeless and offering help to addicts? Am I working to break down religious and political barriers that marginalize ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities?”

In this season of Lent, may our sight be so clear that we are not blind to the opportunities to extend God's compassion and healing touch of acceptance to others – all others - blind men and Pharisees alike. God calls us to live fearlessly as if the world we wish to see is here right now – on earth as it is in heaven. What a great privilege we have to make his kingdom visible in small ways to others and perhaps in the process to “catch a glimpse of the miraculous” (Evans).

Beth Kenagy

March 23, 2023

Psalm 130

Out of our depths we cried, our church needs a new pastor. We anxiously waited for just the right fit. We put our hope in God to find the right person for us. We waited faithfully as we knew that just the right person would be found for us. While waiting, preparations were made for his/her coming – questionnaires were completed to describe who we were, the parsonage was made ready, a new directory was prepared and many other things. The Pastoral Search Committee kept us informed of what was happening, but it seemed to be taking a long time.

And after about eighteen months, our faith was redeemed with the calling of Pastor Jeffrey and his wife Carly to lead us at First Congregational Church. God is indeed all knowing. He made all things ready for Pastor Jeffrey to come to us. And we are blessed to have him in our midst and part of our church family. Now after much waiting and anticipation, Rhys joins Pastor Jeffrey & Carly and this church family.

Know that it is by God's grace and his gift of Jesus that we are forgiven. Answers to prayers do come, but in God's time as we wait more fervently than night watchmen wait for the morning. We put our hope in God in all things.

Dear LORD,

Thank you, God for your gift of Jesus who died for our sins so that we are forgiven. During this season of Lent, we await the coming celebration of his resurrection.

AMEN

Jean Bloomquist

March 24, 2023

Ezekiel 33:10-16

Hope for the hopeless.
The sick need a physician.
God's Love. Your Repentance.
Can cure your affliction.

*No matter how far wrong
you've gone,
You can always turn around. **

Faith for the faithless.
The burdens of our transgressions.
Turn away from your sins.
Conquer your addictions.

*No matter how far wrong
you've gone,
You can always turn around.*

Love for the loveless.
Turn from your wickedness.
Atone for your past.
Seek God's forgiveness.

*No matter how far wrong
you've gone,
You can always turn around.*

Turn away from your sins.
Do what is lawful and right.
Then you shall surely live
In Christ's loving light.

* From "I'm New Here" by Gil Scott-Heron

Don Popielarz

March 25, 2023

Hebrews 10:4-10

It's probably clear to you by now that everything in the Bible leads us to Jesus. God the Father had a plan for his son; not a fun plan, either. Jesus knew what was ahead of him – his own sacrifice “once for all.” Jesus trusted his Father in Heaven as he followed His plan.

God has a plan for us, too, and there will be trying times. No one ever said our Christian lives would be easy. Like Jesus, we need to trust in God's wisdom.

In Hebrews 10:9-10 (NIV), the writer says, “‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Jesus taught his disciples to pray The Lord's Prayer, as we pray it together every Sunday...”Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done...”

Kathryn (Zerler) Anderson

March 26, 2023 - "5th Sunday of Lent"

John 11

The death and raising of Lazarus foreshadow Jesus' own death and resurrection. It's a reminder that in Jesus, the fullness of humanity becomes present to God. The sorrow of death is real: Jesus weeps for his friend; Mary and Martha are in anguish; the whole community mourns. Yet Jesus' shout into the grave for Lazarus to come out provides us with hope for God's voice echoing over our own lives, declaring that life and not death shall be our end.

And yet, what's important to note about this text, especially in light of the Lenten season, is that the hope of Christ does not ignore the reality of death. We cannot move too quickly past the shadow of the Cross just to reach the sunrise of Easter. Lazarus really dies, and the whole community must wrestle with that - for Jesus knows that his ministry will also be struck by the forces of evil and he too must enter the grave. Again, the call to discipleship via the Lenten journey, is to grapple with death's touch.

Yet Jesus presents us with the means of viewing death properly - we need not fear it as our end, but the passageway into new creation: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (v. 25-26).

The Cross may hang over us all, but in Christ, it is only the veil separating us from the Kingdom fully come. The tombstone may be rolled over our lives at some point, but the call of Christ can penetrate even the depths of the grave. May we hear Jesus' voice clearly in life, so that even in death, we will know the voice of our Shepherd calling us into life everlasting.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

March 27, 2023

Psalm 143

“LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief!”

David is seeking God’s help. He is in turmoil. As I ponder Psalm 143 I think of Ukraine and their leader who is also in turmoil and seeking God’s help. The citizens of Ukraine want to preserve their freedom, country, and keep their loved ones safe. Russia’s aggressiveness to take over Ukraine is not acceptable to its citizens. Ukraine continues to fight for what is theirs.

Many prayers and support throughout the world have been sent to Ukraine. The Ukraine symbol of the sunflower is now being used to show love and support throughout the world. Talented chiefs, medical staff, military aid, and various volunteers are assisting the citizens of Ukraine. God has been sending that support and opening the hearts of people around the world.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, is blessed with calmness and strength from God. He uses his courage, strength and positivity to keep the Ukrainians to continue the effort of saving their homeland. Volodymyr’s faith and courage has transferred to the citizens of Ukraine, which allows them to keep strong and never give up the fight!

Faith Smith

March 28, 2023

Ephesians 2:1-10

This passage explains what we all know: through Christ we are saved. When we die, we can return to life through Christ. One of the things that Christianity attempts to do is to answer our big questions about life in ways that we can understand, and some of humanity's biggest questions have always been about death. Why do we die? What happens when we do? This passage answers those questions and explains the basis of our salvation.

We commit sins because we follow “the course of this world.” We are imperfect; we cannot resist “the passions of our flesh.” We are tempted every day by all sorts of desires. Early Christian leaders spoke of the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth. While only one of these—wrath—is specifically mentioned in this passage, all of these are passions of the flesh. These are the things that tempt us. We're proud of ourselves, and we sin in order to preserve our pride. We want to look better than we are. We're full of greed—for money, for possessions, for everything. We are envious of the things that others have. We lust, we lose our tempers, we overconsume. We're lazy. All of these are temptations of the flesh, and they all end in our deaths.

What happens when we die? We can be saved. We can be made “alive together with Christ.” Not because of anything we did or didn't do—as imperfect humans, we're incapable of causing our own salvation—but because of God's mercy, love and grace. God saves us from our sins—our failures—not because we deserve it, but because it is God's gift to us. This passage is very clear about that. Our salvation is “not the result of works.” We may not boast of it. If we do, we fall guilty to the sin of pride, and we lie to ourselves. We do not have the power to save ourselves. Only God has the power to save us from our sins by forgiving us, and he does so when he chooses to do so, not when we choose.

For many people, this is a depressing passage. No matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, we cannot save ourselves. There are a lot of ways in which this is terrifying. As human beings, we want to have control. We want to control ourselves but we can't, because we are imperfect. We can resist some, but never all, of the temptations we face. If we rely only on ourselves, we fall prey to the sin of pride. We have to rely on God, and not just on God, but on Jesus. Jesus understands us, and Jesus is the way in which God understands us. It is because of Jesus that God saves us. His kindness to us—based on his understanding of our imperfections—is the means by which we are saved.

Kristen Robinson

March 29, 2023

Matthew 22:22-33

I guess there are religious fools in every generation? In Jesus' day, one group of such fools were the sticklers of the law, the Sadducees. They didn't believe in the resurrection because it wasn't discussed in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which is where they got their rules to live by. The Sadducees worked in the temple, so they looked righteous on the outside, but were corrupt, greedy and ritualistic on the inside. They were sort of like that gorgeously wrapped white elephant gift, with something really nasty in it. Maybe that lump of coal?

The Sadducees were intent on trapping Jesus by asking him a hypothetical question about what the law says about a woman being married several times and then to whom is she married to when she gets to heaven? They didn't even believe in resurrection or heaven!

Sorry, but I can picture Jesus rolling his eyes at their trap. Jesus stops them in their tracks and impressed the crowd around him by pointing out that the Sadducees were wrong on two accounts. He told them that they didn't know what God said in the Torah AND that they didn't know how God works! Imagine the looks on the Sadducees' faces. Busted!

Jesus knew from Exodus 3, and the Sadducees should have known, that when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, God said "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." What he's telling them and us is that God is the God of the living, past and present. Oops! Those religious leaders didn't know their own text. Makes me wonder how well do we know the Scriptures?

And as for how God works or what heaven will be like? I know from Scripture that God is our creator, our redeemer, our comforter, our healer, our good shepherd, our rock, our forgiver, and our Holy Father, who is all powerful, everlasting and full of compassion and grace. Who am I, who were the Sadducees, to question how God works? I am content to let God be God. He is different than us. Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. He is all knowing and full of love. Let's trust that he knows what is best for us on earth and in heaven. Whatever God has in store for us in heaven will be good and love filled, because that is who He is!

Paula Thompson

March 30, 2023

Philippians 1:1-11

The gospel begins with Paul and Timothy greeting the people of Philippi. Paul's letters begin with who is sending the letter followed by a greeting, this letter is to the leaders, elders, and overseers of the church and gives them a blessing of grace and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ. The greeting is for all of those in the church "all God's holy people".

Paul devoted his whole life to preaching the gospel even doing so in a time of his life when he was in prison. Even though Timothy also was a devoted Christian and had a deep faith in God, Paul did all the preaching on that day. In Paul's joyous prayers for the people he prays with joy for their partnership in the gospel, meaning drawing people together. For us being followers of Christ, we are partners in the gospel of ministry by working, sowing and reaping a harvest together. Paul is talking about the good work and carrying it out to completion, on the day we see Jesus Christ face to face.

Paul: I thank God every time I remember you, I always pray with joy. He lived a prayer filled life. His love for the people of the Philippian church drove him to pray often for them. Who are we praying for today? Isn't it a blessing to know that someone is praying for you and me. Do we pray with joy as Paul did? We pray with joy because God hears, moves and performs in greater wisdom than we have.

As you read on in the scripture you will find Paul is not only preaching to the people in Philippi, he is speaking to us as well. He wants harmony and unity for all in the church. He had everyone in his heart and he continued to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ whether in chains or not. He wants all to know we can go to Jesus in all circumstances. We are all followers of Jesus, all partakers of God's grace, all share in the grace of God that helps us through our circumstances. This be to the glory and praise of God.

Joyce Vance

March 31, 2023

Psalm 31:9-16

A Prayer in Distress

I dimly read this passage with an old man's eye.
I barely hear their muffled words.
My body so battered. I cry.

I live alone. Dead are all my friends and family.
No one to talk to and no one to comfort me.

I am so distressed!
Forgive me Lord. I cannot lie.
After all these years . . .
Is it better that I just die?
I cannot remember my life as a young boy.
It has been so long since I experienced any joy.

My spirit slowly ebbs. My life worn out by sorrow.
I dread what the future has in store for me tomorrow.

I am forgotten. Out of mind like the dead.
Only thing, my obituary has yet to be read.

What is worse is the paranoia. I hear the whispering of many.
I feel the terror all around! They all scheme against me.

But, I trust in you Lord. In your hands is my destiny.
Even though I am a broken tool. Rescue me from my enemies.

On your servant, let your face shine. Do not put me to shame.
I beg you. O My Lord, Please call me by name.

Save me my Lord. Save me my God above.
Save me with your mercy. Save me with your love.

Don Popielarz

April 1, 2023

Mark 10:32-34

Jesus predicts his own death, again, to his twelve disciples in these three verses from the Gospel of Mark: “They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again, Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him.

“We are going up to Jerusalem,” Jesus said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

Mark makes it very clear that Jesus was not only the son of God imbued with God’s wisdom, but also a baby who grew into a young man with human qualities. Jesus struggled with what he knew was coming.

Mercifully, God did not inform us what will happen to us in our lives on earth. Instead, God gave us His only Son who inspired thousands of people with the words of God the Father. God filled each of us with the Holy Spirit.

Through God, Jesus taught us his Father’s commandments. When asked which of God’s commandments is the greatest, Jesus answered, “The most important one, is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:29-31 (NIV)

Amen!

Kathryn (Zerler) Anderson

April 2, 2023 - "Palm Sunday"

Matthew 21:1-11

How can we justify the celebration and victory of Palm Sunday when just a few days later we turn to the horror and tragedy of the Cross? Perhaps, because as Jesus revealed, God is up to something beyond what we may understand or think we are seeing.

For the people of Jerusalem that day when Jesus entered riding a donkey, they were crying out "Hosanna" which means "God save us!" Perhaps they believed they were witnessing the return of God's Chosen; but, given that those same crowds would yell out, "crucify him," a few days later, it's likely they were simply caught up in the wild hope that God was at work in Jesus.

When we reach this point of the Lenten journey, when we return to the road to Golgotha, perhaps our call is not just to declare Christ our King and wave our palms boldly at his entry - perhaps the more faithful call is to hope against all hope that God is truly present in this life. When we shout "Hosanna" today, may our voices not just ring out with liturgical repetition, but may we wholly believe that God has come to our world.

For that, perhaps, is the true "Triumphant Entry" - that in Jesus, God has come to dwell with and for humanity. God has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to bring the true Kingdom, the true vision for what our world is supposed to be. Our shouts for God to "save us," are not a hopeless cry, but an exaltation of faith, a decree of testimony. God has come to save us in Jesus - indeed, what God began in Jesus' life continues on through his death and resurrection.

Palm Sunday invites the Church to welcome God's activity not only in our own lives, but the lives of all people, all creation. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the LORD, for our God will not be turned away by sin, sorrow, or death itself. Hosanna!

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

April 3, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

When preparing to study scripture and dwell in the Word, I find it helpful to read several versions of the Bible. My personal favorite is the NIV Study Bible followed by The Message, which tells me the same information only in my everyday language.

In Isaiah 42, the divine speaker announces the presence of a servant who is chosen by God and a source of delight for God. God will place His spirit upon this servant so that the servant is able to bring forth justice to the nations, to be a light, to open blind eyes and bring out the prisoners.

While researching Isaiah 42, the words: God's spirit, God's servant, God's delight, provide a correlation from Isaiah 42 to the Gospel of Matthew 3. In this passage, Jesus is baptized, God's spirit also descends upon him and God delights in him. The relationship here is not between God and God's servant, but between God and God's beloved son: "This is my son, The Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Both of these passages provide an opportunity to talk about the role of these individuals as God's earthly representative, as God's chosen ones, as workers of justice in the world. What is their mission and role? Why are they divinely chosen? Why do they need the spirit of God? And is this a role for individuals and/or communities? And how might we, as God's people today, develop our actions and demeanors into ones fitting for us servants of God, ones in whom God delights? Are we God's servants, establishing justice on earth as it is in heaven? Or should we be participating in this work of Justice together as communities of faith?

As churches, not just as individuals, we are God's servants to the world. We participate in God's new thing (Isaiah 42:9), God's new exodus out of exile and brokenness. God's community is God's servants. This is what Isaiah 42 says to me; what does it say to you?

Diana Seaman

April 4, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

One of my favorite things to watch for when I read Scripture are the ways that God gives the world a new understanding of something we have our certainties about. In Isaiah 49:1-7, the people of Israel are reminded of their call to be servants of God. Despite their literal exile, God's message to Israel is that they are not forgotten; they are known and called with a purpose that extends to more than just returning to the ways things used to be.

The message of God is not meant for just the people of Israel and their little corner of the world, but for all the nations— and the people of God are invited into this servanthood work. The Bible is full of stories of “unlikely servants” doing God's work in the world. Their uncertainty, credentials, or seemingly insignificant status doesn't stand in the way of God's call on their lives. Isaiah reminds us that God still equips and calls them.

Can we find ourselves in this narrative? Despite our doubts or our understanding of what it means to be a servant, God creates a new vision. The moment we come into this world, small and new, God “puts us to work.”

God knows us, calls us beloved, and shines through us. The invitation to participate in God's work in the world is no small task, nor does the work depend on us, but we are equipped with a promise that God's message is powerful, that God's light shines through us, and that God does not abandon us. Let this serve as encouragement to be a servant light to all!

Carly Hubers

April 5, 2023

Hebrews 12:1-3

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Jesus is our survival guide. Like Jesus, we are humans. Yes, we will have hardship, pain, and stress. Sometimes, we will go to bed on our last nerve.

When Jesus was faced with opposition, he prayed. Knowing that he would be “at the right hand of the throne of God,” Jesus did not lose heart. He prayed to His Father in Heaven. And so, when you find yourself on your last nerve, slow down and thank the good Lord for that last nerve!

Rejuvenate by doing the things that sustain you: pray continually, find ways to relax, rest, pray before sleep, pray hard, read your Bible, pray before meals, eat well, cook good food and share it, pray alone, pray together, seek help from Jesus...above all, remember that God created you in His image, He is with you always, and you will be with Him eternally. You are never alone.

Kathryn (Zerler) Anderson

April 6, 2023 - "Maundy Thursday"

John 13:1-17, 31-35

Maundy comes from the Latin "maundautum" meaning "mandate" or "command," as in Jesus' "new commandment" (John 13:34). However, is this truly a "new" commandment? Has not God's will always been about "love?" To profess otherwise is to divorce the God of the Old Testament from the New, something that is completely foreign to Jesus and the disciples. For them, there was only the God of Israel and the Scriptures of Israel (Old Testament) - there were no "gospels" or epistles; only the real-time narrative of Jesus' life.

From Jesus' perspective, God's commands have always been to love God by loving others. So much of Jesus' teaching and miracles focus around bringing people back into connection with one another and with God. Perhaps then what is "new" is *how* God's commands are understood. Perhaps it is precisely by Jesus connecting love for others *to* love for God what helps transform those who would follow Jesus into God's Kingdom people.

The movement from Palm Sunday to Jesus' final hours are a sacred time, and while we watch the Lenten drama unfold, isn't it incredible that Jesus' last act in his freedom before his impending arrest is to commune with the disciples and wash their feet? More than any theological training or ministry preparation, Jesus gets down on his hands and knees and scrubs the dirt and grime from his own followers - this is how the disciples are to remember their Master: "I am with you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

As we approach the Cross, we are invited not to look up in wonder at God's glory, but to lower our eyes to the floor, to the dirt, and discover anew the holy ground beneath one another's feet. Through Jesus' self-giving, we are shown the true glory of God: *love*. Humility is preparation for sacrifice; service shapes us for the way of the cross.

This is how Jesus invites us to reinterpret the commands of God: Don't envision them as rules to follow or measurements of judgment; they are pathways of love.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

April 7, 2023 - "Good Friday"

Psalm 22

It's difficult, even believing what we believe about what God is up to in Jesus, to call this day of death "good." How can death, much less the horrific torture of crucifixion, equate the goodness of God? Perhaps that's one reason why Jesus cries out the opening words of Psalm 22 - one of the most honest laments in Scripture and a depiction of the deepest kind of suffering and heartbreak put to words.

What Jesus experiences on the cross is what all humanity experiences at some point in our various journeys: the crushing silence of God in the face of injustice. Where is God when we face sorrow, loss, devastation? Where is God's love - where is God's power? Why God have you forsaken *me*?

Jesus cries out these words, but one thing we need to do is recognize that in the ancient world, when people wanted to quote a specific piece of literature - they would offer up its opening lines. They didn't have access to paper or records, but rather, through an oratory library - they used the first phrases or sentences to call for an entire quotation. Psalm 22, while opening in bitter anguish before God, closes with these words: "in the midst of the congregation I will praise you...For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me but heard when I cried to him" (v. 22, 24).

Jesus cries out to God, yes; Jesus feels abandoned and sorrow of the deepest kind - but he also trusts that even in this torment, even in this hell - *God will answer*. And so Good Friday stands as the testimony of Christ against all the heartbreak of the world that God will answer. We face this darkness, believing that even here, God will be present. God's love will overcome. God knows us, even in the most wretched existence imaginable. God will answer us.

God doesn't crucify Jesus - the world nails Jesus to its own despair and attempts to bury him in a grave of our own making. Yet Jesus believes "dominion belongs to the Lord" (22:28) - even the grave. Thus, we follow Jesus into death, invited to believe, too: God will answer.

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers

April 8, 2023 - "Holy Saturday"

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

Holy Saturday is the Church's "silent" holy day - it marks the time between Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent burial and his resurrection on Sunday morning. In reality, this space is where the Church lives - we are those who stand on the other side of the Cross, but we have not yet come to the final moment of God's victory - the full coming of God's Kingdom.

Holy Saturday is important because it reminds us that our faith is one in which we are called to wait upon the morning of God's new world to break. We sit in the stillness of Jesus' tomb, and yet, we believe that tomb to be empty. Jesus lives - and yet, so often, rather than rush to proclaim this victory, we are called to grieve with the broken and wounded. The shadow of the Cross stretches over our souls, and we recognize that God's presence is felt even in our pain.

Yet, dawn is coming. The darkness can never last, for God's light, the light of Christ's life, can never be overcome. The Church can learn from Holy Saturday the power that comes from waiting upon the LORD, for our hope to be realized by the fulfilling of all God's promises. Lamentations was written in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians - it was written by survivors, trying to grapple with the devastation they'd experienced.

Despite the reality of their pain, their sense of hope could not be displaced. They trusted in a future beyond their present view - they believed that God's power could make right all the wrongs they had experienced. This is what Holy Saturday invites - this is where our Lenten wandering has led - waiting upon the goodness of the LORD to be revealed.

The Cross may reign for a day, but Easter...Easter is eternal. Trust in the light that is coming, my friends, and know that your hope is in the God whose love refuses to allow death to be the last word. Morning is coming - what will the dawning of God's light reveal in your discipleship? Will you be found in the depths of despair, staring hopelessly down at your feet - or will your eyes be raised to the horizon, to the light of victory that is ready to shine?

Rev. Jeffrey Hubers