

LENT DEVOTIONAL 2017

This devotional offers daily scripture readings, along with prayers and reflections from the graduates, faculty, and friends of The Presbyterian College. We trust that through it Christ might bless you on your journey toward the cross.



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We are grateful to offer this Lent devotional for your personal use in this season. In using it, we encourage you to set aside a specific time and place each day to read through the scripture, reflect, and pray. As you approach each day's readings, do so by taking a few moments of silence. In a Spirit of prayer, silently open yourself to what word God might offer you on the way with Jesus.

March 1, 2017 (ASH WEDNESDAY)

Scripture Lesson: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
 for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD,
 and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
 'Where is their God?'

Reflection by Roland De Vries,

Class of 2001

Director of Pastoral Studies, The Presbyterian College

Lent opens with a trumpet blast from the prophet Joel, with alarm bells sounding on the holy mountain of God—an alarm that resonates out through the land, to all the people. Women and men and kids are in fear of what this alarm means, in fear of what it means for their relationship with God. Will God condemn them, walk away from them, and speak to them no more? Yet in response to the ringing of these alarm bells, the people turn toward God in prayer, for they have heard that their God is not only a God who judges, but also a God who saves. As the Presbyterian theologian Walter Bryden, puts it, our God is a “judging, saving God.” Or perhaps it is better say that our God is a “saving, judging God.” When God judges it is always, only in the service of God’s love, which seeks our renewal and transformation. God’s judgment is always *for* us, and never merely against us.

With Jesus, and through our life with him, we are set free to turn toward our saving, judging God with freedom and gratitude. With Jesus we may, as the prophet Joel puts it, “return to the Lord, our God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents from punishing.” Lent begins with alarm bells sounding on the holy mountain of God, reminding us of brokenness and sin, but with Jesus we know that we may turn toward the God whose first and last word is always salvation, always love.

Prayer

O God of covenant and creation, standing before you I cannot help but tremble—you are holiness and goodness and truth. But in this moment of silence I also turn confidently toward you, in the name of Jesus, for you are a God who saves. You are gracious and merciful. Thank you, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thursday, March 2, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Jonah 3:1-10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor

shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Reflection by Marion Barclay MacKay, Doctor of Divinity (*honoris causa*) 2016

“And the people of Nineveh believed God...” In this third chapter of Jonah, this is an astounding claim. It has taken the prophet Jonah two tries to get to Nineveh, but here he is, proclaiming the word of the Lord to the Ninevites, foreigners indeed to Israel’s traditional faith. That word strikes deep and the people receive the message Jonah delivers. They are stirred to repent of the evil in their midst. It’s a repentance that ripples outwards, touching the lives of the ordinary folk in the street, rippling through that great city right into the throne room of the king. Begun at the grassroots and endorsed by royal decree, the citizenry of Nineveh along with the herds and flocks of their wealth, become humbled in sackcloth and united in prayer and fasting for the wellbeing of their city and their lives. The people of Nineveh believe God...and take action.

And God takes action towards Nineveh. God’s hand of mercy spares the city, its people and the flocks of its wealth. Repentance has led the Ninevites to the place of divine renewal and a new future.

In the person and work of Jesus Christ, God’s hand of mercy stretches out to us and bestows abundant life upon us with a future that is beyond our imagining. In the whirl of daily living we can easily take God’s mercy towards us for granted. We can grow complacent in our discipleship. We can let hope atrophy within us. If we believe God, may we take action. Repent...and allow divine love to re-ripple abundant life within us.

Prayer

Life-Bestowing God, may we be attentive to your Word of truth for our lives. Strike deep within us to reveal our evasions, our resistances, our waywardness to your call of abundant life in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Grant us the courage to repent, and the humility to receive your gift of mercy. For the sake of Jesus, alive and at work in us. Amen.

Friday March 3, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Jonah 4:1-11

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I

knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ And the LORD said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’

But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

Reflection by Dale Woods Principal, The Presbyterian College

Most of us have questions of God. But we are much less attentive to the questions God might have for us. Jonah has many questions for God, but God has only one question for Jonah: “And the LORD said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’” Or as another translation has it, “Do you do well to be angry?”

It is not simply that Jonah is angry, but that he is angry because he has experienced what he has always known deep down to be true—that God is gracious and merciful and slow to anger. Jonah believed this was good news when applied to himself, but now that it is applied to those he does not like, to his enemy, he is resentful.

The lesson for Jonah is a lesson for all of us. We cannot claim the grace of God for our own lives and then withhold it from others. Anger has its place in our lives, but at some point we must let the grace of God transform it. After all, this is our own experience of grace. As Paul writes, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). Grace did not come to us because we had patched things up with God but while we were living lives largely ignorant of God. It is this same grace that lies behind Jesus’ exhortation that we are to love our enemies.

In a world that continues to live largely by the motto of an eye for an eye, we are encouraged to let grace transform all of our relationships. So in this season of Lent, let us ask ourselves, “To whom might I show a

greater degree of grace?" By doing so, we will become the light and salt Jesus calls us to be.

Prayer

O living God, you approach us and dwell with us as a God of forgiveness and reconciliation. Give us grace to live into your forgiveness and mercy, that it would be expressed authentically in our lives and relationships. Praying in Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday March 4, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 51

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgement.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Reflection by Joyce DeGier VanderSpek

Class of 2012

Minister of Community, Innerkip Church

Do you believe that no matter how much you mess up your life, it can be restored? Even though David messed up completely and totally—his affair with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah—he was able to give us this psalm of true repentance and restoration. Even though he completely and totally messed up and his family bore the consequences by being very dysfunctional, David is called “a man after God’s heart” (Acts 13:22).

The steps of repentance demonstrated in Psalm 51 involve seeing sin, admitting sin, grieving sin and renouncing sin. These steps can only be taken because David knows God’s character. David knows God’s covenant love; God’s mercy, unfailing love and great compassion (verse 1)

David **sees his sin** in verse 3: For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

David **admits his sin** in verse 4 and 5: Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

David **grieves his sin** in verse 8 and 9: Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

David **renounces sin and pleads for redemption and restoration** in verse 10: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

I have the privilege of serving a merciful and compassionate God and introducing people who know what it is to be broken to a God who longs to show them the joy of His salvation. Do you know the joy of His salvation? What is keeping you from knowing that joy? What needs to be seen, admitted, grieved and renounced for you to experience that joy?

Prayer

Merciful and gracious God. We come to you with the assurance of your unfailing love and great compassion. Reveal to us what is keeping us from the joy you offer through salvation, redemption and restoration. Help us to see, admit, grieve and renounce anything that is separating us from you. Restore us so that we can

joyfully sing of your forgiveness. Look favorably on us, O God because of Jesus' sacrifice. Amen.

Sunday March 5, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection by Lucille Marr, Chaplain and Academic Advisor

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. After forty solitary days of fasting, the devil appeared. When Jesus was weak with hunger, the tempter seized his opportunity and attempted to divert Jesus from his mission. Three times, using Jesus' very identity as the Son of God, Satan tempted Jesus to abandon his mission for selfish gain. When Jesus refused to use miraculous powers to feed himself, the temptations escalated, culminating in offering Jesus ultimate power over the kingdoms of the world. Each time, Jesus refused to abandon his mission and insisted that he would hold to his commitment to serve God, and God alone.

For us, the temptations of the world loom large. Materialism and secularism easily distract us from our mission. More seductive, perhaps, is the lure of a gospel that promises prosperity and the good life that by its very nature obscures our mission as Christians to reach out to the poor and the oppressed. The Lenten period provides a time in the rhythm of the year where we are called to turn more intentionally to prayer. It offers us a time to fast, whether it be from something specific, or in attitude. During this season, how will you fast? How will you turn your focus away from the call of the world, and towards the God whom we serve?

Prayer

Our God, thank you for this time of Lent where we are reminded to turn from the lure of the world, and to be more deliberate in turning to you. During this season, please renew our mission, and help us to re-focus our eyes on you. Amen

Monday March 6, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall

anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

Reflection by Harris Athanasiadis,

Class of 1989

Minister, St. Mark's, Toronto

The Prophet Elijah is on the run. Even though he has stood up for God's justice against the reigning powers who have opposed him; even though he has acted courageously and spoken out boldly; fear has caught up to him and he is fleeing for his life.

Once he gets away and has a chance to stop, though, Elijah's fear also manifests disillusionment and despair: "Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors... I have been very zealous for the Lord... for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away..." How is Elijah ever to emerge from this deep, dark pit?

First, there is sleep. Second, there is food and drink. Fortified in body, he is able to take the time to search his soul, discern next steps and hear God's call in this new situation (40 days and nights). Not only is Elijah given a new mandate; not only is he given new purpose and confidence; but he hears God's voice as he has never heard it before (not in thunder, lightning and earthquake, but in sheer silence). From this space of silence, Elijah will recognize signs of hope where he never knew them before. Elijah is not alone. There are still seven thousand souls who have not abandoned fidelity to God. This is a time of silence, hiddenness and preparation. Later, there will be opportunity to come out of hiding and declare faith from the roof tops.

Prayer

Find us, O God, when fear, disillusionment and despair take hold of us... Give us rest and nourishment for body and soul... Assure us that we are not alone... Inspire us to hear your call to us in the silence of our hearts. Amen.

Tuesday March 7, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 4:1-16

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.' Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was

very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' Then the LORD said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Reflection by Andrew Johnston,

Class of 1986

Doctor of Divinity (*honoris causa*), 2007

Minister, St. Andrew's, Kingston

Generations before us have pondered deeply about this story. Phrases from its translation into English have become part of our language (from 'Am I my brother's keeper?' to living 'east of Eden') and of our culture (Dante named the outmost regions of the lowest part of hell 'Caina'). Just the names Cain and Abel conjure up emotions and situations we all know only too well. There are days when it is not easy to look in the mirror. That is certainly true this day.

A family is settled and at peace. Then suddenly envy and anger overwhelm, and all falls apart. How fragile is our hold on the good, how easily we do harm.

This story follows immediately the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God. A rupture between humanity and God leads directly to rupture between human beings.

The character often overlooked in this story is the Lord. Why would God have accepted the offering of Abel and not that of Cain? There is no clue given, and with this mystery we are given a strong reminder that God is God. But the Sovereign One is also the Gracious One whose will is life. There is punishment for the murderer, but not retribution—Cain is sent into exile, a time of wandering, but 'the Lord put a mark on Cain', a mark of mercy and protection.

When we look in the mirror, we see not only ourselves. We also see the grace of God.

Prayer

Holy One, I hear Cain offer to you the first prayer recorded in the Bible, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear’. With this story and these days of Lent, I am drawn to acknowledge the reality of sin in my life also. I thank you for the grace you manifested to Cain, and to me and all humanity in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday March 8, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Exodus 34:1-9

The LORD said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.’ So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, ‘The LORD.’ The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,

‘The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.’

And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped. He said, ‘If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.’

Reflection by Victor Gavino, Class of 2009

The Law that God wrote on the tablets of stone is a true portrait of the character, mind, and will of God. With these commands, we understand that God is God of order, of justice, and of mercy. This was a most cherished revelation to the people of God: at last, God is not One who is far off and transcendent, but also One who is near and who cares for his people. And then in a majestic gesture, God, the LORD, appeared before Moses with an equally great revelation of his character: God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding with loyal steadfast love and faithfulness.

Sometimes with blinders and tunnel vision we see only the written commands and dismiss them as legalistic and antiquated. We must never forget God’s

self-declaration to Moses, his eternal love for his people however underserving we might be. To this majesty—to this cosmic revelation—there can be only this response: worship, confession and surrender to the One.

Prayer

Almighty God, as Moses did in the majesty of your presence, I kneel and bow down before you. Through the commandments and your self-declaration, I perceive your perfection. Confronted with this, in my weakness, I am undone. Forgive me. Thank you for loving me despite my imperfections. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Thursday, March 9, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 51:1-3

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Reflection by Karla Wubbenhorst

Class of 1998

Minister, Westminster-St. Paul’s, Guelph

Pursuers of righteousness, remember what is said of Abraham’s faith: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” *Seekers of the Lord*, God (I-am-who-I-am/I-will-be-who-I-will-be) is assuredly somewhere out ahead of us, preparing a future we cannot now imagine. More than the keeping of holy disciplines, Lent bids us cultivate this righteousness that comes from believing—this righteousness that comes from acting today in the full assurance of God’s promise for tomorrow.

So did Abram act when he set out from Haran, one man, believing the promise of a great progeny. Later, Abraham thought he knew how God would fulfill that promise. True, his progeny hung by one slender thread, but while Isaac lived there was hope. What power of believing then, must Abraham have had, to lift the knife, and prepare to cut that thread! So too did Christ, when he went to the cross, one man, believing in a future where, through his sacrifice, God would lead “many sons and daughters” to glory (Heb. 2:10).

In Isaiah’s days of the exile, glory is departed, the land is a wilderness-waste; can it ever be fruitful again? *Righteousness-pursuers*, *Lord-seekers*, followers in Christ’s Way, cherish this belief, and act from it—not

less because it is future tense: “the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”

Prayer

Lord, I’ve been there in the wasteland, at the end of my own strength, a minority of one. I’ve seen that one slender life-line, your token of good-faith to me—Cut. Off. So we begin again. But I am in the dark. At these times, Lord, make me a righteous person, living from faith, that though I do not yet see the fruitful garden in the desert or sing with the multitude swarming up to Zion, I shall. I *shall*.

Friday, March 10, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Micah 7:19-20

He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors
from the days of old.

Reflection by Linda Park

Class of 2001

Minister, St. Andrew’s, Lindsay

I’m often bothered, challenged, and even upset by the number of times that Jesus commands his disciples to forgive one another. In Matthew’s gospel there’s the parable of the unmerciful servant who was shown mercy by the king but then goes out and has his debtor thrown into prison (for a minuscule debt compared to his own!). In Mark’s gospel we read that if we are at worship and remember that we have something against a brother or sister, we’re to stop worshipping and go and forgive the brother or sister. There’s also that famous passage in Luke, when Jesus says we need to forgive seven times in a day, and if we think the number seven is literal, think again. Seven is the symbolic number of perfection or completeness in the ancient Jewish tradition. It’s no wonder the disciples threw their hands up in the air and cried out, “Increase our faith!” (It doesn’t actually say they threw their hands up but I imagine they did.)

And of course, there in the perfect prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, it says “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” And just in case you didn’t get the seriousness of what Jesus was saying, he expands it saying, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” There’s no question that we must forgive others, and that’s hard to do.

But then, I love to reflect on those passages about God’s mercy and forgiveness, as in Micah 7. When I do, I rejoice, I praise Him, and I give thanks for His goodness and unending grace to me. I say to myself, “He is so patient and compassionate, forgiving me again and again.” So do you see the contradictions of our hearts, embracing God’s grace and yet hoarding it from others? Sure, it’s not easy to forgive others: to bite your tongue when you want to bring them down; to not be happy when things don’t go well for them; to not gossip and tell your “true” side of the story. But if we draw on God’s grace and forgiveness, you must also give forgiveness.

Mirsolav Volf writes, “Forgiveness flounders when I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners.” I cannot exclude myself from the community of sinners when I draw on God’s mercy. I cannot exclude my brother or sister from the community of humans for they are made in the wonderful and complex image of God. Therefore, in this season of Lent, I want to rid my heart of contradictions and practice giving forgiveness as I embrace Jesus’ passion.

Prayer

God of grace, make my hearts whole with the love of Jesus proven to us on the cross. When I experience the pain of forgiving another, help me to remember the price Jesus paid for my sins. In his precious name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 11, 2017

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.

Reflection by Liz Chan, Class of 2016

Lent is a journey; a pilgrimage we celebrate each year as we walk to the Cross and Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ. It is a journey of preparation; a pilgrimage of faith. God's people traveled the road to Jerusalem often and Psalm 121 is a song on their departure for yet another pilgrimage. It is a Psalm of assurance reminding them and us of the identity of our ultimate help. They questioned where their help came from. Did it come from the mountains surrounding Jerusalem or the hills bordering the valleys they walked in? We also question where our help comes from. Does it come from the strength of our personal resources or the speed and connections of technology?

Psalm 121 assures us all that our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. We can be guaranteed of his help because God watches over us, guarding specifically our feet, our right hands, and our lives. He does this by His active love for us. The Psalm says the Lord shows His love for us by keeping awake, creating light to walk by and shade to travel in and protecting the times and spaces of our lives.

As we continue this journey of Lent walking towards the Cross, let us remember and take heart that the Lord is with us. He does not leave us alone and He watches over us, as our helper, actively loving us and cheering us on to the end of our pilgrimage.

Prayer

O Lord, Maker of heaven and earth, I am grateful for your intimate love and care for me. Thank you for helping me on this journey of Lent and this pilgrimage of life. Watch over me and guard me this day and forever more for the sake of Your name. Amen.

Sunday March 12, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Reflection by Andrew Thompson, Class of 2010 Minister, Knox-St. Andrew's, Dutton

Peter, James and John had gone up the mountain, alone with Jesus. Six days prior, Jesus had been talking with his disciples about travelling toward Jerusalem. There he would suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. There he would be killed, but he would be raised again to life.

No doubt they had a lot on their minds. Perhaps they went up to pray and clear their minds, but instead of receiving solace and comfort, the disciples are overwhelmed with fear.

Jesus is transformed before them. His face shines like the sun; his clothes become bright as light, a voice sounds from heaven and they are afraid. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." God declaring Jesus' identity is what makes them afraid.

If we could see and hear God as clearly as they, would we react as they did on that mountain? What would we do if we witnessed God in such a way? Encountering God can be frightening and challenging.

Moses saw God in the burning bush. The disciples saw God in human form as Christ. The early Church saw God in the coming of the Holy Spirit, tongues of fire. Jacob saw God as an angel with whom he actually wrestled.

We might not experience the glory of that mountaintop, but each and every person we meet bears the image of God. When we give up fear and it is replaced with openness to the Spirit, then the places we go and the things we do can be opportunities to change the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Sometimes we cling to our fear and refuse to see God's presence all around us, but we can let Christ touch us. We can hear those words, "do not be afraid."

Prayer

Heavenly Father, hallowed be your name. Your glory fills the earth and the heavens and yet you stoop down and breathe life into your people, inviting us to fellowship with you. Cause us to be a people that would hunger and thirst to know you, and let your love cast out all our fear.

Monday, March 13, 2017

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Horeb they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses. 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from

us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Reflection by Elkanah Shekari, Class of 2016

The people of Israel seem to have preferred their ugly and difficult past to their beautiful future with God. In the wilderness, the Israelites chose Pharaoh, the gods of Egypt, and their own enslavement over the freedom to live in God’s grace and God’s mission in the world. In choosing Egypt over the Promised Land they were choosing Pharaoh as their benefactor, rather than God. They were saying they believed that the gods of Egypt were more trustworthy than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We might ask: Who in their right mind would choose Pharaoh over God?

In the wilderness, God sent poisonous snakes as punishment of the people’s unfaithfulness, which struck and killed many Israelites. When the people realized their folly and looked to God for help, in the form of a bronze serpent on a pole, they were healed and saved from suffering and death.

We are not much different from the Israelites. In many ways, we have rebelled against God, who loved us so much and who sent his Son Jesus to die for us. We often prefer to serve other masters than the God of freedom and mission. And just as God’s people had to look to the bronze snake on a pole in order to be saved, we also have to look unto our Father’s Son who was crucified on a tree for us to live. This story reminds us that our Heavenly Father’s arms are always wide opened to welcome us home, where we belong.

Prayer

Dear Father, remind me always that you have provided a way to return to you when I have wandered. Help me to remember that you love me as the sinner that I am—but you also love me enough to lead me forward into a transformed life. Amen.

Tuesday, March 14, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labour in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.

Reflection by John Vaudry

Class of 1977

Minister, First Church, Pembroke

The Book of Isaiah is filled with hope for the future; that is, confident expectation of God’s blessing. The prophet was able to encourage those in exile with the message that in due time God would fulfil his promise and restore them to their own land. He also held out a vision of the ultimate kingdom of God, a renewed universe almost beyond imagining.

Mention of how God is going to ‘create new heavens and a new earth’ is an echo of the first verse of Genesis and the original creation. That creation has been marred by human sin with all its far-reaching consequences for our lives and the life of our planet. This world produces pain and misery that weighs heavily upon us. But one day ‘these things shall not be remembered or come to mind.’ Evil will be overcome and goodness will prevail. We can be glad now as we anticipate the joy of that day.

Isaiah draws on life as it is experienced now to paint this picture of life as it will be in the final kingdom when Christ returns. Images of infants and old people, houses and vineyards, wolves and lambs, all point to the wonder of the new creation.

The vision is of grace, yet also of judgment. The “serpent,” representing the evil one—“its food shall be dust!” And sinners who reject the Saviour will also be condemned. In Isaiah, as Alec Motyer has said, “Undeniable grimness sits alongside unimaginable glories; both are the word of the Lord.”

Prayer

Father, we pray that we may see many foretastes in this world of that glorious kingdom you will bring when you restore all creation. In Jesus' name. Amen

Wednesday, March 15, 2017

Ezekiel 36:22-32

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. ³²It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

Reflection by Roland De Vries,

Class of 2001

Director of Pastoral Studies

This passage from the prophet Ezekiel has difficult words as bookends—at the start and at the finish. These difficult words: God says, “I am not going to do all this for your sake, but for the sake of my holy name.”

Of course there is nothing difficult for us about the “all of this” that God is going to do. God is going to transform our hearts and our lives. Our uncaring and ungracious hearts are going to be transformed into hearts of compassion and concern. Our selfishness is going to be displaced by an orientation toward the good of our neighbour. Our self-preoccupation is going to be transformed into faithful worship of God for His glory and goodness. All of our disgrace and shame, which often weigh heavily on our hearts, are going to be lifted

and banished. “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.” Good news!

But still there are those difficult words as bookends to the passage: “I’m not going to do all of this for your sake, but for the sake of my holy name.” God seems to be saying that we haven’t earned this transformative work in our lives; we haven’t even gone out of our way to seek it. As a result, God must give it out of jealousy for his own Name—but this is not some kind of selfish jealousy. It turns out that God’s jealousy for his own name is a jealousy for love—God’s jealousy is God’s desire that His own expansive love would touch and transform us. Good news!

Prayer

O God, you are the deep well of love from which all love flows. You are love. And we are deeply grateful that you have been jealous for your Name, jealous to live up to your name as Love. We celebrate your love, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thursday, March 16, 2017

Exodus 16:1-8

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.’ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, ‘In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?’ And Moses said, ‘When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.’

Reflection by Glen Davis

Class of 1963

Just 45 days earlier, God had engineered the most amazing rescue of the Israelites. They had sung and danced for joy; they had celebrated long into the night.

But now they are doing what? “The whole congregation... complained against Moses and Aaron...”

Complaint is a dangerous thing. Complaint declares that the future will be terrible. “We’re all going to die, and you brought us out here to kill us.” Complaint paralyzes faith in the God who holds the future. Complaint also falsifies the past. “If we had only stayed in Egypt where we had our fill of meat and bread!” No they did not. Back in Egypt they were slaves living in misery. But we too glamourize “the good old days” because we’re anxious about the future. Looking back with rose coloured glasses prevents us from seeing ahead to the future God holds for us.

Then, complaint divides the community of faith. The people said, “Let’s choose a captain and go back to Egypt.” They already had captains to lead them forward, but these complainers wanted to go backwards. And finally, our complaints tell lies about God. “It is because the Lord hates us...” There it is. Blame God. We cry, “Why did God do this to me?”

Complaint makes us forget the truth about God. The truth about God is that God will never leave us or forsake us, that God gives us a future with hope, that God loves us with everlasting love.

Prayer

God of hope and mercy, forgive my complaints and save me from the dangers of complaint. Help me to focus on your past faithfulness and on your promise of a future with hope. Help me share that hopeful spirit with those I meet today. In the name of Jesus, Amen

Friday, March 17, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:8-3:3

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.

But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

Reflection by Dan Shute, Librarian

Lent was not, according to Christian tradition, about eating. In fact, Christians used to practice a partial fast during Lent; they would eat but one meal a day, and that vegan. Though the stomach craved food, the mind was to feast on a spiritual banquet centred in a vivid commemoration of Jesus’s death and resurrection.

Possibly with this in mind, the framers of the daily lectionary for Lent gave us a text about symbolic eating. The prophet Ezekiel in exile in Babylon received, in a vision, God’s word in the form of a scroll that he ate, a scroll that tasted sweet to him. What the prophet found sweet disturbs us: laments, sighing, and wailing.

The city that Ezekiel loved was to be destroyed and the people who did not die by starvation, disease, or sword, were to be hauled off into exile to join those already in exile. Yet beyond these woes lay Ezekiel’s vision of a new Jerusalem with Temple-sourced river, on whose banks grew trees whose leaves were for healing—the healing of the nations, so the prophet John said.

In a world where suffering, by sheer volume, is greater than ever before, any focus on the redemptive value of suffering is suspect: merely a tool of the cruel to enforce their twisted will. For us, suffering can be redemptive, as George Hebert, the 17th century poet-pastor said:

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.

Prayer

Our God, you speak to your people in words that are sweetness to our lips and our ears and our hearts—they point beyond our suffering, and also through our suffering, to the new world you are giving in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Saturday March 18, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 95

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!

Sunday, March 19, 2017

Scripture Lesson: John 4:28-42

Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my
work.

For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.'
Therefore in my anger I swore,
'They shall not enter my rest.'

Reflection by Joyce DeGier VanderSpek

Class of 2012

Minister of Community, Innerkip Church

"Wow! That was so amazing it gave me goosebumps."

When is the last time you experienced awe that elicited a visceral reaction like this?

Psalm 95 invites us into the head, heart, and soul space of awe and wonder with the word "Come." Come, let's sing, shout, thank, and praise **our** great God. Psalm 95 invites us to worship **our** Creator and Redeemer. Psalm 95 invites into awe, wonder, worship and relationship with the Creator and Redeemer.

The great God and King who created the deep seas and mighty mountains is not only all powerful and worthy of our worship. This God is our God! Our God who shows us his face because he wants to know us and be known by us.

In reflecting on Psalm 95, Timothy Keller preaches: "God invites us to share our fears because God knows we need security. God encourages us to share our aspirations because God knows we need dignity. God invites us to share our failures because God knows we need acceptance. God invites us to share our confusion because God knows we need guidance. God encourages us to share our weakness because he knows we need challenge. Can you be that open with God?"

Psalm 95 starts with an invitation but ends with a warning; "don't harden your hearts!" God offers his people repeated blessing, deliverance, and care but is aware that humanity has a propensity to hardness and ingratitude.

How will you position yourself before your Creator and Redeemer today and as you gather with others tomorrow? The invitation is here. Will you come?

Prayer

Merciful and gracious God. Thank you for creating and sustaining all of your creation. As we journey through this Lenten season continue to draw us into a transformational relationship with you, our Creator and our Redeemer. Protect us from anything that would harden our hearts and give us your peace. Amen.

Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

Reflection by Lucille Marr,

Chaplain and Academic Advisor

Jesus and his disciples are passing through Samaria. Although it was the fastest route when walking from Judea to Galilee, Jews usually avoided travelling there because of their ancient hostility with the Samaritans. In an astonishing encounter, Jesus meets a woman at an ancient well where he rested while his disciples went to buy food. She has left town in the heat of the day to draw water at this little-used well. Her brief encounter with Jesus has the woman running back into town, the water jug forgotten. In her excitement she cries out: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples fret and urge him to eat. Reminiscent of the wilderness temptation, Jesus reminds them of his mission. He insists: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." The story ends with Jesus accepting the townspeople's invitation to spend time with them. Many come to believe: "We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

This story reminds us of Jesus' deep caring; it tells of his unconditional love that went beyond respectable boundaries of his time. Even in his own fatigue and physical hunger, Jesus was touched by the deep spiritual hunger he saw in his brief encounter with the Samaritan woman. We never hear her full story, although we do

know that she previously had five husbands, and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married. Did she drop her water jug and run back into town to tell her neighbours how Jesus had judged her? No. Her response to her time with Jesus reflects the joy she experienced in God's unconditional love.

Like the Samaritan woman, we too may be burdened with shame. We may be failing to live fully up to our own standards for ourselves. The Samaritan woman's witness of Jesus' deep and unconditional love is also to each one of us. This Lenten season, know that whatever the burden you carry, you are loved; you are loved unconditionally.

Prayer

O Divine Love: We come to you as we are, burdened in our weakness and sin. Embrace us in your love, so that in your unconditional love, we may also love. Amen

Monday, March 20, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 24:1-27

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac.' The servant said to him, 'Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?' Abraham said to him, 'See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your offspring I will give this land", he will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.' So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was towards evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, 'O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink", and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom you have appointed

for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.'

Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder. The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, 'Please let me sip a little water from your jar.' 'Drink, my lord,' she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, 'I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.' So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, 'Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?' She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' She added, 'We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night.' The man bowed his head and worshipped the LORD and said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness towards my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin.'

Reflection by Harris Athanasiadis

Class of 1989

Minister, St. Mark's, Toronto

In this passage we are introduced to ancient cultural practices of courtship and marriage that are quite alien to most North Americans today. Abraham's son Isaac must be married. It is his father's responsibility to find him a bride. Abraham believes that the choice of bride must be from his own people who live far away, not one of the Canaanites who are neighbours.

Regardless how all of this can sound to us Canadians who celebrate intercultural relationships and each person's freedom to follow their heart rather than the dictates of a parent, the key here is faith as trust. Abraham must entrust this great responsibility to his senior servant. He must trust that this servant will do exactly as Abraham has asked and rely on Abraham's God as his own for guidance and direction when the decision must be made. There is no way to keep contact once the servant makes the journey. Abraham must trust him the way he has had to trust God all these years, against all odds.

What is fascinating in this story is that the servant learns not only about trust, but also about God's faithful, steadfast love. Good things happen. Rebekah happens to come to collect water just when the servant arrives. Her graciousness and generosity opens a door. Faith and love make possible what would otherwise never happen. The

servant experiences all this as God's providential presence and working, all the way through.

Prayer

Give us faith, O God, and give us love in our hearts. Open us up to see and experience your faithfulness and steadfast love to us as Abraham and his servant experienced it in Rebekah's graciousness and her family's openness. Amen.

Tuesday March 21, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 29:1-14

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

Jacob said to them, 'My brothers, where do you come from?' They said, 'We are from Haran.' He said to them, 'Do you know Laban son of Nahor?' They said, 'We do.' He said to them, 'Is it well with him?' 'Yes,' they replied, 'and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep.' He said, 'Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.' But they said, 'We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.'

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh!' And he stayed with him for a month.

Reflection by Andrew Johnston,

Class of 1986;

Doctor of Divinity (*honoris causa*), 2007

Minister, St. Andrew's, Kingston

The similarities between this scene and that read yesterday are unmistakable. So are the differences. Jacob is no Isaac. But now, after hearing so much about Jacob that is negative, it is good to see a better side—Jacob seeking out his mother's family, watering his uncles'

sheep, approaching Rachel with such respect and affection.

What follows can be seen as payback. Jacob is tricked into marrying Rachel's sister, and has to work fourteen years for his father-in-law before he is united with his beloved. But might this highlight another dimension of his better side?

I think about the calmness with which Jacob responded to Laban's treachery. I remember that this story of Jacob marrying Rachel is set between his dreaming at Bethel ('surely the Lord is in this place' 28:10-22), and his wrestling at Peniel ('I have seen God face to face' 32:22-32). I wonder if deep down, Jacob trusted that God's presence was with him, God's purposes would be worked out, God's promises were sure ... in spite of who he had been and how he was being treated by Laban.

How do the people of God respond to their own failings and the injustices inflicted? As I think of Jacob, I remember a story I heard about Martin Luther. The great reformer suffered bouts of deep depression. At such a time, he placed his hand upon his forehead and 'remembering' the waters that flowed down at his baptism, said to himself, over and over again, 'I am a child of God'.

Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father, I consider myself your dear child. Not because I deserve it, nor could ever merit it, but because my dear Lord, your son Jesus Christ, would be my brother ... Since I may consider myself his brother, as he regards me, you will permit me to become and remain a child of yours, forever. Amen. (Martin Luther, 1483-1546)

Wednesday March 22, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things, and became
worthless themselves?

They did not say, 'Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that no one passes through,
where no one lives?'

I brought you into a plentiful land
to eat its fruits and its good things.

But when you entered you defiled my land,
and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal,

and went after things that do not profit.
 Therefore once more I accuse you,
 says the LORD,
 and I accuse your children's children.
 Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
 send to Kedar and examine with care;
 see if there has ever been such a thing.
 Has a nation changed its gods,
 even though they are no gods?
 But my people have changed their glory
 for something that does not profit.
 Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
 be shocked, be utterly desolate,
 says the LORD,
 for my people have committed two evils:
 they have forsaken me,
 the fountain of living water,
 and dug out cisterns for themselves,
 cracked cisterns
 that can hold no water.

Reflection by Victor Gavino, Class of 2009

A leaky water bucket is at the very least annoyingly useless. A broken cistern that can hold no water is a vile deception, for it claims to take in and store water in exchange for the promise of a reliable reserve for the sustenance of life. Yet, it cannot fulfill its promise since it simply allows precious water to ebb away uselessly into the ground. A broken cistern conjures an image of death. There is no life to be had from a dry well.

God rescued the people from slavery and brought them to a fertile and fruitful land, a blessing like no other. And yet the people, their leaders and their priests all forgot the Source of blessing and turned instead to worthless things to make those things their objects of worship—useless, impotent false gods. These gods were dry cisterns: in form, mimicking a source of life but never able to be. A deception.

God alone is the source of life, the source of living water. In this season of Lent, let us be reminded that only in Christ is life to be found.

Prayer

Loving God, I thank you that have brought me this far along in my journey in you. Remind me again and again that you are the one true source of life so that I may never fall into the snare of the deceiver. Keep me under your wings. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 23, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Samuel 15:10-21

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.' Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the LORD all night. Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, 'Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument

for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal.' When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, 'May you be blessed by the LORD; I have carried out the command of the LORD.' But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?' Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.' Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night.' He replied, 'Speak.'

Samuel said, 'Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, "Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed." Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?' Saul said to Samuel, 'I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.'

Reflection by Karla Wubbenhorst

Class of 1998

Minister, Westminster-St. Paul's, Guelph

"For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught. To say the things he truly feels; And not the words of one who kneels. The record shows I took the blows—And did it my way!" — Paul Anka

This could be Saul's song. We're tempted to admire such self-possessed people, except self-possession is no biblical virtue. When Saul judges it better to spare an enemy king's life and to seize enemy livestock to offer as a sacrifice, instead of putting king and cattle to death, it is the *second time* Saul has disobeyed God's explicit command. In I Samuel 13, Saul presumes to offer sacrifice himself, instead of waiting for Samuel, as he's been told to do.

Often in church-life and in questions of personal morality, we convince ourselves that if only we act pragmatically, reasonably, and from pious intention we can replace God's judgment with our own. So convinced is he, that Saul twice says he *has* obeyed God! Samuel corrects him: "to obey is better than sacrifice." The meat's quality and Saul's pious purpose of offering it to the Lord do not negate the great impiety of second-guessing God.

What shall God do with those who insist: "I'll do it *my way*?" God cannot work with them, and will find other, more obedient people. Samuel tells Saul plainly: "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king."

Prayer

Lord, I want to have that Christ-like spirit which says: “not my way; but yours.” Yet I more often resemble Saul—headstrong, sure of my own rectitude, and judging your word in the court of my opinion. Forgive. Melt. Mold. Fill. Use... your servant. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Amen.

Friday March 24, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Samuel 15:22-31

And Samuel said,
“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?
Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is no less a sin than divination,
and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.”
Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the LORD.” Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.” As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.” Then Saul said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God.” So Samuel turned back after Saul; and Saul worshiped the LORD.

Reflection by Denise Allen-Macartney, Class of 2009 Minister, Gloucester Church, Ottawa

Saul’s troops were unstoppable. Now they have returned from victory. But Saul, it turns out, modified the plans. He had followed orders; but whose orders?

“I feared the people and obeyed their voice.”
Now, Saul is planning a major worship event. But it is not the sort of worship God desires. God doesn’t seek worship just for the sake of worship. God seeks our whole-hearted trust. Trust that results in action. Obedience.

Obedience is an unpopular concept, unless you’re training puppies! Instead of urging blind obedience, we encourage children to make wise choices. Ultimately, though, we all obey someone: peer pressure, experts, or our own instincts.

God doesn’t ask for blind obedience. God seeks eyes-wide-open obedience. Obedience that flows from bedrock confidence that *God is good, God is wise, and God is trustworthy.*

King Saul made what seemed a reasonable compromise. Maybe we’ve been there: changing course because we fear the people. Modifying unpopular scruples, adjusting words or actions, because we fear being ridiculed or overruled and losing our capacity to influence.

But King Jesus takes a different approach. Jesus gave up his capacity to influence, precisely *because* he deeply trusted the Father.

“Father,” Jesus prays, sweating drops of blood, “if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42)

To obey is better than sacrifice. This is not about winning a popularity contest. Or accomplishing great goals. This is about heeding the word of the Lord. Letting *his will* direct *our actions*.

Prayer

Father, show me today what fears divert me from trusting you. What voices do I heed, instead of heeding yours? You, alone, are truly good. You are wise and trustworthy. For you, Father, have raised my Lord Jesus from the dead. And nothing can separate me from your love in him. Help me hear your voice today. Help me trust you, so that in word and action, I obey you. Amen.

Saturday, March 25, 2017

Psalm 45

Ode for a Royal Wedding

To the leader: according to Lilies. Of the Korahites. A Maskil. A love song.

My heart overflows with a goodly theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.

You are the most handsome of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you for ever.
Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your glory and majesty.

In your majesty ride on victoriously
for the cause of truth and to defend the right;
let your right hand teach you dread deeds.
Your arrows are sharp
in the heart of the king’s enemies;
the peoples fall under you.

Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever.
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity;
you love righteousness and hate wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you

with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;
your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and
cassia.

From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;
daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour;
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house,
and the king will desire your beauty.
Since he is your lord, bow to him;
the people of Tyre will seek your favour with gifts,
the richest of the people ¹³with all kinds of wealth.

The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven
robes;
in many-coloured robes she is led to the king;
behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.
With joy and gladness they are led along
as they enter the palace of the king.
In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons;
you will make them princes in all the earth.
I will cause your name to be celebrated in all
generations;
therefore the peoples will praise you for ever and ever.

Reflection by Liz Chan, Class of 2016

Lent includes fasting days and feasting days. Typically, each day is a day to fast from something to help us pray or focus more on Jesus—except for Sunday. Sunday is a feast day. It is a day to feast on God and His eternal love for us. Psalm 45 is a Psalm that reminds us of one of our greatest feasts—a wedding. It is a royal psalm that is set in the kings' court on his wedding day. In verse four this earthly king feasts on the defense of truth, humility and justice. He fasts from going along with what is culturally acceptable and feasts on doing what is right regardless of the cost. He fasts from pride in his own strength to perform awe-inspiring deeds to feast on humbly following where God leads. He does this because in verses 6-7 the Lord of all is revealed as the One the King loves. These verses are quoted in Hebrews 1:8-9 “Your throne, O God is forever and ever” and refers to Jesus' throne. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour is the Truth, who loves righteousness and who humbled Himself to death for our sakes. It is His victory over our sin and death and His eternal delight in us which we can feast on during Lent and always.

Lent is a time to fast and a time to feast. Fasting from self-reliance and pride, to feast on trust and humility. What will you fast from and feast on this Lent?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, I thank you for this time to fast and to feast. I desire to fast from _____ and to feast on _____. Help me to be faithful to You, O God as you continually transform me by your Holy Spirit more and more into Your image. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Sunday, March 26, 2017

Scripture Lesson: John 9:18-41

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’ He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

Reflection by Andrew Thompson, Class of 2010 Minister, Knox-St. Andrew's, Dutton

When you encounter Christ, you are never the same. Everything changes, hopefully for the better, but it's not always the case. In this passage, a wonderful miracle occurs. Jesus spits on the ground and applies mud to the blind man's eyes and, after washing, the man comes back seeing.

Now that he is healed, will his life be better from now on? Not really. In fact, no sooner does the man receive healing than Jesus seems to disappear from the story. And the time of Jesus' absence was not easy. The healed man tries to go home again but he can't. His parents reject him. There is no welcome or celebration. There are only questions. There were doubts about the legitimacy of the healing by the religious leaders. He is no longer welcome at his place of worship. Is this what being blessed by God looks like?

What amazes me is that this man continues in the faith in spite of the outward circumstances. All he had to go on was Jesus' touch and his words, "Jesus put mud on my eyes and told me to go and wash." Jesus' touch and word was enough, and with that he risks everything.

We are not so different from this man. We have never seen Jesus face to face. Yet there is a sense that Jesus has touched each one of us and we have heard his words.

We might not have the right words to express it, but we echo the man's testimony, "One thing I do know, there was that scripture. There was that answered prayer. If it was not for God's grace where would I be?"

This one thing I know "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

Prayer

Gracious God and Loving God, in this season of lent, draw us close to you. We want to experience your touch. We want to hear your words. Where can we go, for you alone have the words of eternal life. In the name of your Son, hear our prayer. Amen.

Monday, March 27, 2017

Isaiah 59:9-19

Therefore justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us;
we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness;
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
We grope like the blind along a wall,
groping like those who have no eyes;
we stumble at noon as in the twilight,
among the vigorous as though we were dead.
We all growl like bears;
like doves we moan mournfully.
We wait for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.
For our transgressions before you are many,
and our sins testify against us.
Our transgressions indeed are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
transgressing, and denying the LORD,
and turning away from following our God,
talking oppression and revolt,
conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart.
Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;

for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking,
and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.
The LORD saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm brought him victory,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.
According to their deeds, so will he repay;
wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render requital.
So those in the west shall fear the name of the LORD,
and those in the east, his glory;
for he will come like a pent-up stream
that the wind of the LORD drives on.

Reflection by Marion Barclay MacKay, Doctor of Divinity (*honoris causa*), 2016

The prophet's words are not for the faint-hearted. There is desolation in these verses. Justice and righteousness are too distant to be a lived reality. A bankruptcy of compassion, kindness and concern for others means days are dark and bleak. Any sense of well-being and hopefulness has withered away. Life has disintegrated and yearned-for deliverance has not come.

The prophet leads the way through such a barren landscape of life: our sins, our transgressions are many. We've turned away from God; we've indulged our lying tongues that demean others; we've usurped God's good intentions for human relationships and for all creation. Even when there is a thin trickle of integrity and goodwill, this too is dashed of life.

It's a portrait of human living from which many of us shy away. It's too grim, too painful, too overwhelmingly desolate. Yet, there are those in our midst for whom such barrenness is so very, very real. Think about those whose community is rocked by yet another senseless act of violence that leaves death and desolation in its wake. Think about those who live amidst the rubble and ruin of war. Think about those whose daily survival depends upon those they can bribe. Think about those who know only grinding poverty, day in and day out. So many people know first-hand a life where there is no justice, where truth is silenced, where any action for good suffers scorn and ridicule.

The call of these Lenten days is to confess our iniquity, and look to the One who brings divine justice and righteousness to life into our midst.

Prayer

God of mercy, we fail your gracious love for us in thought, word and deed. Too easily we turn aside from what is right, just and true in the ordinary unfolding of

our lives. Too often we remain deaf and hardened to the cries of those who yearn so deeply for your deliverance and justice. In our iniquity, preserve us. Restore within us your good intention of righteousness and justice that we may serve You in faithfulness and deep joy. For the sake of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 28, 2017

Isaiah 42:14-21

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,
I will gasp and pant.
I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.
I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them.
They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—
those who trust in carved images,
who say to cast images,
'You are our gods.'

Listen, you that are deaf;
and you that are blind, look up and see!
Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind like my dedicated one,
or blind like the servant of the LORD?
He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear.

The LORD was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness,
to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.

Reflection by John Vaudry

Class of 1977

Minister, First Church, Pembroke

In the Prophecy of Isaiah, the nation of Israel is at times personified as 'the servant of the LORD.' The people were called to serve him faithfully, but sadly, servants of God may be disobedient and lacking in faith. And Israel failed to live up to its high calling. In fact, it sinned grievously, and this resulted in a time of exile and chastisement in Babylon. Israel became 'blind' and 'deaf,' confused and humiliated. The Church, also, is meant to be God's faithful servant, but sometimes loses its way and dishonours its Lord.

Isaiah declares that when the God of grace and judgment acts to restore his wayward people, no

'mountains and hills' can stand in his way. The LORD will 'lead the blind' and 'turn the darkness before them into light.'

In due time God did restore the exiles to their own land. From Israel, also, emerged a truly faithful servant who was all that Israel had failed to be (Is.42:1-9).

The New Testament unveils the identity of this unique servant of the LORD. It sees Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled ultimately in the person of the One who walked the *via dolorosa* until he came to the cross of Golgotha. In awe we see that there 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Is. 53:6). This is Jesus Christ our Lord, 'who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we give all honour, praise and glory to you, for your obedience and suffering on the cross have redeemed us, and enable us to be restored to true servanthood. Amen.

Wednesday, March 29, 2017

Isaiah 69:17-22

Instead of bronze I will bring gold,
instead of iron I will bring silver;
instead of wood, bronze,
instead of stones, iron.
I will appoint Peace as your overseer
and Righteousness as your taskmaster.
Violence shall no more be heard in your land,
devastation or destruction within your borders;
you shall call your walls Salvation,
and your gates Praise.

The sun shall no longer be
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
or your moon withdraw itself;
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.
Your people shall all be righteous;
they shall possess the land for ever.
They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands,
so that I might be glorified.
The least of them shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the LORD;
in its time I will accomplish it quickly.

Reflection by Roland De Vries,
Class of 2001
Director of Pastoral Studies

The world imagined by Isaiah seems impossible—so beautiful, of course, but also impossible. The end of violence; the end of destruction; the triumph of peace; the building of a home. In this vision faithful worship becomes commonplace, beautiful lives are an everyday reality, and tears are a thing of the past.

Our lives are invariably marked by broken promises, anxious thoughts, failures of compassion, troubled sleep, and memories of violence. And from the perspective of our lives, Isaiah's vision may strike us either as cold comfort or as a soothing hope for a better day. Whatever our personal response, however, Isaiah's impossible vision is not intended to be any less impossible. His vision is not presented as something within the realm of what humans can accomplish or cobble together—it is a gift of God. Sheer gift. "They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands..." The living God is at work, and our faith entails a waiting on the thing that God will do.

This is a significant element in our Lenten journey. That we are waiting for something that cannot be predicted, planned, controlled, or achieved. We are waiting for God to act. We are waiting for the impossible (the earliest Christians thought it to be just as impossible as we do)—we are waiting for resurrection.

Isaiah's vision is a vision of a world given through the grace and power of God, and God's re-creation of that world will be no less a miracle than the creation itself: no less a miracle that our own life and breath within it. We are waiting for resurrection.

Prayer

Gracious God, help me to grasp in a deeper way, with renewed faith and with bold hope, that you are a God of the impossible. Help me trust the future that you are bringing to our world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, March 30, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Exodus 16:9-21

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining." And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God."'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance,

as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents."'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Reflection by Dan Shute, Librarian

Lent, those forty long days before Easter, was not, according to Christian tradition, about eating. In fact, at the high point of Christian asceticism during the early middle ages, devout Christians observed a Lenten fast for the full forty days. This was not a strict fast, but the first and only meal of the day was taken in early evening. This solitary meal was no Mardi gras pig-out but a simple vegan repast. By the Reformation, the Lenten fast had been considerably relaxed, and the Reformers showed little inclination to reinstitute such severity.

Fundamentally, the Reformers were right. Lent is properly a time to prepare for the commemoration of Jesus' death and resurrection, and only secondarily a spiritual journey of unpleasant self-discovery starting at self-examination, continuing in repentance, and ending in reengineering. Contrary to what we might like, it's not the journey but the arrival that counts. Fast, if it helps us reach Christ; eat at McDonald's and shop at Walmart if it help us reach Christ. (Just for the record: in an insanely consumerist society, fasting is much more likely to get us where we want to go.)

But, you say, our text is about eating. The Israelites wandering in the Sinai desert were not, strictly speaking, eating vegan since the manna was apparently an insect secretion that occurs in arid wastes. All the same, manna, sweet though it might have been, was severely simple. In the same way, Lent focuses us on a severely limited message: Christ crucified and risen. Wasn't it Ben Johnson who said that execution in the afternoon wonderfully focuses the mind the in morning? Even so should the re-presentation of Jesus' execution wonderfully cause us to reconsider our most cherished goals.

Prayer

Our God, in this pathway of Lent you confront our preoccupation with self-discovery and self-development. You confront us with a stark word and a stark reality—the reality of Christ crucified for us. Give us boldness,

by your Spirit, to dwell with an in that reality. We pray in Jesus' name.

Friday March 31, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Ezekiel 33:10-16

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel. Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?' Say to them. As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? And you, mortal, say to your people. The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress; and as for the wickedness of the wicked, it shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness; and the righteous shall not be able to live by their righteousness when they sin. Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die.

Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die', yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right— if the wicked restore the pledge, give back what they have taken by robbery, and walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity—they shall surely live, they shall not die. None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right, they shall surely live.

Reflection by Dale Woods

Principal, The Presbyterian College

There are many things we need to live full lives. Outside of the physical necessities, hope lies close to the top of the list. Without hope we quickly sink into despair. And so it is for Israel at the time of Ezekiel when the people lament "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?"

To say it another way, Israel is asking, "What's the point? The cards are stacked against us and there is nothing we can do about it." But God reminds the people through Ezekiel that their sin need not be the last word. In the New Testament, we hear the same promise in the words of John: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Confession is not about running ourselves down or wallowing in our sin. Confession is God's way of lifting us up. Confession allows us to tell the truth about ourselves so that we can be set free from those things that are destructive to our lives. It allows us to get our beliefs and our actions aligned once more. C. S. Lewis once wrote that there is a difference between making a confession and making an excuse. An excuse lets us off

the hook, but confession takes our actions seriously and seeks to set right the damage done by them.

Sometimes in this life we do things that we deeply regret. Like heavy suitcases being dragged through an airport, they weigh us down. Ezekiel's words are words of encouragement and comfort. We can take the suitcase of regret and leave it in the baggage claim area for God to deal with knowing that when honest confession leads to a changed life, "none of the sins we have committed shall be remembered against us." That is an amazing promise. In this Lenten season, is there a past sin we need to confess and to correct? Why not bring it to God in prayer and find the hope God offers in new life?

Prayer

O living God, thank you for the freedom we have to bring our confession before you, knowing that the freedom in which we also approach you is the very freedom in which you will set us on our way—freedom from shame and guilt and every burden. Freedom to be alive as your children. Thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, April 1, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Reflection by Glen Davis, Class of 1963

In the musical, *Les Miserables*, the policeman, Javert, is the ultimate upholder of the law. For him, crime demands punishment. There is no room for mercy or forgiveness. He is the epitome of one who "marks iniquities." And when he is finally offered mercy at the hands of the one he has persecuted for so long, he cannot accept it. He would rather die than abandon his principle

of marking iniquities. So we witness with horror the scene where he throws himself off a bridge with a terrifying cry of self-righteousness.

In Psalm 130 we hear another cry, a cry from the depths of the soul. "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand?" This person, sleepless, heart poured out to God, hands wringing, tears falling, waiting, waiting for the Lord "more than those who watch for the morning." This is serious supplication. This is the cry of one who is experiencing guilt and fear because of sins committed. But finally it comes, the word of assurance, "There is forgiveness with you...with the Lord there is steadfast love and ...great power to redeem."

Hear this today, if you hear nothing else. Our God does not mark iniquities. Our God is not Javert, whose only goal is punishment and vengeance. There is no need to carry the burden of sin, for with the Lord there is steadfast love, and forgiveness and redemption. Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for not marking my iniquities. Thank you for your steadfast love and forgiveness. Help me to live today—forgiven, loved and free. In the name of Jesus, my redeemer. Amen.

Sunday, April 2, 2017

John 11:32-45

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection by Lucille Marr, Chaplain and Academic Advisor

Lazarus had been dead already for four days when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany. Deeply moved by the grief of Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha and their many friends, Jesus wept, joining his tears with theirs. Then a strange thing happened. He asked them to remove the stone from the tomb. In protest—surely the dead man's body would already smell - they complied. In their trust in Jesus, they saw God's glory manifested, for God answered Jesus' prayer. The dead man emerged from the tomb, alive. In this prelude to Jesus' own death and resurrection, many believed.

The bewilderment and deep grief that follows loss turns lives upside down. Whether we have been devastated by the death of a loved one, divorce, or an unfulfilled dream, the world becomes a dark and hostile place. Nothing is the same. For a time, hope may be all but extinguished. But we are not alone. Even as he was moved to tears on the death of his friend Lazarus, Christ also weeps with us. Our sorrow is his sorrow. Yet there is hope. As God showed his glory by bringing Lazarus back to life, he restores the darkness of our grief. As we travel this Lenten journey, we can look to the light of our hope in Christ.

Prayer

O God, our hope is in you. As we travel this Lenten journey, please heal us in our places of sadness and loss. We ask that you restore our darkness to light as we anticipate with hope the joy in the resurrection of your Son Jesus. Amen

Monday, April 3, 2017

1 Kings 17:17-24

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' But he said to her, 'Give me your son.' He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, 'O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, 'O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again.' The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.'

Reflection by Elkanah Shekari, Class of 2016

A widow has welcomed the prophet Elijah into her home as a guest, but now she is having second thoughts about her hospitality. Her son has become very sick, and she believes the presence of Elijah is the reason for this sickness since, as a man of God, he somehow brings her sin to light—thereby causing the sickness/death of her child. In her culture, misfortunes were generally attributed to sin or sinful living. So it was logical for her to connect her loss to her sin. But then the story takes a turn, Elijah prays, and the boy comes alive. When she receives her son, she finally believes that Elijah was God's prophet. Did she doubt him at first?

Over a century earlier, King David said: "my sins are ever before me" (Psalm 51:3), yet he also needed the Prophet Nathan to remind him of his guilt (2 Sam 12).

This season of Lent plays a similar role for us that the Prophet Nathan plays for David and that the Prophet Elijah plays for the widow. Lent reminds us of our sins, which are ever before us, and we are admonished that the best way to address sin is to confess to the Lord.

But the raising of the widow's son also tells us that the resurrection of the dead is possible. Lent reminds us that while Jesus was crucified in our place, the grave could not hold him captive. Jesus is Lord. This is good news to which we need to respond with gratitude and confession.

Prayer

O Father, against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love and abundant mercy. Forgive my transgressions, which are ever before me and before you. Restore your joy to me and grant a willing spirit to do your bidding. Amen.

Tuesday, April 4, 2017

2 Kings 4:18-37

When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, 'Oh, my head, my head!' The father said to his servant, 'Carry him to his mother.' He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband, and said, 'Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.' He said, 'Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath.' She said, 'It will be all right.' Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, 'Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.' So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, 'Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her, and say to her, Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all

right?' She answered, 'It is all right.' When she came to the man of God at the mountain, she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away. But the man of God said, 'Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me.' Then she said, 'Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not mislead me?' He said to Gehazi, 'Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer; and lay my staff on the face of the child.' Then the mother of the child said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you.' So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, 'The child has not awakened.'

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, 'Call the Shunammite woman.' So he called her. When she came to him, he said, 'Take your son.' She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

Reflection by Paul Wu,

Member, Board of Governors

Minister, Taiwanese Robert Campbell, Montreal

It is easy to miss the Shunammite woman's proclamation of 'peace', or 'shalom' in this passage. Twice in this passage she makes this proclamation. The first time came after her son's unexpected death, while she was preparing to go to Elisha the man of God. When her husband objected, "Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath," she replied, "shalom." The second time came as she was approaching the man of God, and his servant was sent to inquire of her: "Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?" Her reply was once again, "shalom". Most English translations of this passage interpret it as some variation of 'it is well' or 'it is alright'.

But what if this unnamed Shunammite woman was not simply replying with the contemporary equivalent of 'no problem'. What if she was actually proclaiming 'shalom' in the true biblical sense. The shalom that is evident regardless whether things are good or bad. The shalom that does not passively accept one's fate, but actively seeks out transformation and reconciliation. The peace that surpasses all understanding, even daring to proclaim that death is part of this peace. The peace that drives us to grab hold of God and won't let go—trusting in God, who in time will make all things right.

The Shunammite woman got her son back from the dead, without knowing how or what price that Elisha the

man of God paid. She didn't need to know the inner working of God's grace, only to receive it with a thankful heart. Shalom indeed!

Prayer

O God of everlasting peace, you are good and your faithfulness endures forever. We thank you for watching over us. When things are well, we give thanks to you. When things are not so well, we still praise you. Grant us your peace that we may truly live a reconciled relationship with others and with you. Grant us your peace that we may courageously proclaim it throughout our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday April 5, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 32:1-9

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. Zedekiah had said, 'Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the LORD; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?'

Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.' Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver.

Reflection by Victor Gavino, Class of 2009

The late Francis Schaeffer, theologian, philosopher, apologist and Presbyterian minister, in 1969 wrote in his book *Death in the City*, that people have turned away from God and have become a "post-Christian" society. In striking parallel, Jeremiah's world 2,600 years ago was also one where society had rejected God and people trusted in what they thought they were perfectly able to do in their own strength. It was also a world of high anxiety and despair, with the invading Babylonians just

outside the walls of Jerusalem, ready to break down the city's gates and rush in for the kill. Yes, the Babylonians indeed destroyed Jerusalem but that was not going to be the last word. God's word to Jeremiah was that the time would come when Jerusalem will be rebuilt, that the land would once again flourish with houses, fields, and vineyards. Confident in God's promises, Jeremiah counselled his people to submit to Babylonian captivity for a time in order to survive. Surely, God will not abandon but lead them back to their own land even if it takes years. In a demonstration of faith in God, Jeremiah bought his cousin's land, a land infested with Babylonian forces, a move that in unbelieving eyes would have been considered absolute folly. Not in God's economy, not to Jeremiah's trusting soul. In the end, God did bring the exiles back from Babylon and Jerusalem was restored.

God is faithful, regardless of what people may choose to believe. Jesus, God Incarnate, died and rose from the grave, irrespective of what people may choose to think. Lent brings us back to the truth that no matter the circumstance, faith in Christ, trust in God, is always the best way, the only way.

Prayer

Merciful God, I bring before you our world: broken, rife with conflict, accustomed to injustice. Yet Lord, in Christ you promised that this is but temporary, that a time is coming when all will be made right. Increase my faith so I will not despair but will continue to trust you, always walking in the way of Christ, ever doing justice and loving mercy. Amen.

Thursday, April 6, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Samuel 16:11-13

Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Reflection by Karla Wubbenhorst

Class of 1998

Minister, Westminster-St. Paul's, Guelph

Samuel comes bearing the anointing oil, like the Prince looking for one who'll fit his glass slipper. Jesse's seven older sons are all better-seeming king-candidates than David, yet God insists, "send out for this one," "look closer at him," and "look as I look, not on the appearance but on the heart."

As often with younger siblings in God's upside-down economy of election (Abel/Cain, Jacob/Esau, Joseph/his 10 elder brothers, Rachel/Leah,) the last is raised highest. Yet what disadvantages the younger ones overcome—brotherly ill-will, paternal disfavour, barrenness, subordination to another! How *do* they overcome obscurity, disgrace, prison or “the pit”? They overcome because the Lord, who sees differently than the world sees, singles them out for honour and attention: “You are my beloved son, in whom I delight.”

Frederick Buechner, citing another fairytale, remarks how transformative such notice of God's delight is: “In *Beauty and the Beast*, it is only when the Beast discovers that Beauty really loves him in all his ugliness that he himself becomes beautiful. Paul's word for this gradual transformation of a sow's ear into a silk purse is sanctification.” When Samuel looks closely, he sees beauty in David too—Ruddy. Handsome. Beautiful Eyes. Anointed, with God's Spirit resting on him, David moves in a power more beautiful still. Isn't Lent a good time for divesting our *personae* (our superficial masks) and learning to regard ourselves and others *Coram Deo* (before the face of God)?

Prayer

Lord, my attention is so often on the wrong things: a person's resume, the clothes they wear, the ever-deepening lines on my own face.... Lend me Your eyes. Help me discern and praise your work of beautification in others. And instead of ranking myself in the line-up of my brothers and sisters, help me live as my beautiful Saviour did, entirely *Coram Deo*. Amen.

Friday, April 7, 2017

Job 13:13-19

Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face.
This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.
Listen carefully to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
I have indeed prepared my case;
I know that I shall be vindicated.
Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.

Reflection by Linda Park

Class of 2001

Minister, St. Andrew's, Lindsay

Suffering may be the greatest challenge to our faith. It's the greatest assault on our trust in the all powerful, all loving God. When suffering comes to those we love or when our bodies and minds break down, we begin to

doubt. We doubt either God's goodness or our own worthiness. My theory is that we do this because our hearts do not know or understand love—the radical generous, unconditional love of God.

The default mode of our hearts is that good is rewarded with good and bad is rewarded with bad. The love of our hearts is conditional. When things are going our way we praise God for the blessing, and we think, “I must have done something good” as Maria sang in the *Sound of Music*. But when things aren't going our way, we think, “I must have done something bad.” That's what the disciples asked Jesus when they encountered a blind man. “Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents?” (John 9:2) We also find this kind of thinking in the Book of Job. Job's friends affirm the default mode of our hearts: “Job, you must have done something wrong? Why else would all these terrible things be happening to you.”

However, as people of God's kingdom, our hearts are rebirthed into a new order where wrong is met with grace, suffering is not payment for bad behaviour, and good works are not a means to God's favour. As kingdom people, God's favour is upon us fully, completely, unchangingly. His love for us is unconditional, unchanging, unearned. It's radical love so wide and long and high and deep that Paul prays that the people of Ephesus might not just understand, but know this love that surpasses knowledge.

When suffering comes upon us, our rebirthed hearts can say with Job, “Even if I die, I will hope in Him” (v. 15). And on this side of the cross, we can say it with even more confidence as we look to Jesus dying on the cross for us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, when suffering comes, and it will in this world, may I not be surprised but take hold of your unconditional love. Let not my devotion and love for you wax and wane, but stay firm and even grow stronger so that like Job, I will stand unmoved looking only to you. I pray in the name of the One who stood firm on the cross to the very end. Amen.

Saturday, April 8, 2017

Psalm 31:9-16

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.
For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.
I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.
But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and
persecutors.
Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

Reflection by Paul Wu,
Member, Board of Governors
Minister, Taiwanese Robert Campbell, Montreal

When I was younger, I always felt uneasy with psalms of David that speak about enemies and persecutors. They always sound a bit paranoid and vindictive to my Christian taste. Now that I am older and perhaps a bit wiser, I am beginning to understand David. Having gone through a serious conflict within the congregation that I serve, I am beginning to appreciate David’s burden as a leader of God’s chosen people. I may never truly identify with his agony of being “the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances,” but I certainly share his conviction to turn to God in time of great distress. “Yes, O Lord, you are my God. I trust in you, in your steadfast love. My times, my life are in your hand.”

As a follower of Jesus, I am also beginning to appreciate what it is to be a ‘broken vessel’. Yes “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Cor. 4:8-9) We in Christ have this treasure in us, and without being a bit battered, bruised or broken, this little light of mine may never truly shine. As a broken vessel, we resist the temptation to admire the beautiful jar while forgetting what truly matters—the life of Jesus in us. We are broken vessels in the service of God.

Prayer

O Lord, your steadfast love is truly amazing. Words cannot begin to describe how good it is to know that you are with us. Take us as we are, battered, bruised and broken. Use us as you see fit, for your kingdom and your glory. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Sunday April 9, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This

took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the
Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Reflection by Denise Allen-Macartney,
Class of 2009
Minister, Gloucester Church, Ottawa

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

On the street, “Hosanna!” means something like *You rock, Jesus!* Actually, it’s a cry: *Save us, Lord!* The promised Messiah has come. A conquering hero, like Judas Maccabeus, he will liberate his people. Jesus’ friends have it all figured out. They throw down their cloaks. They wave branches and sing praises. But Jesus, the hero, is about to disappoint everyone.

The prophet Zechariah said the King would come in *righteousness*. That word means both truth and justice. Jesus is a one-person truth-and-reconciliation commission. He is the King, the Judge. But something unforeseen is about to happen. His own judgement, pronounced on the whole earth, Jesus will take into *himself*.

Jesus rides into his capital city to be crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross.

His friends long for a hero to rescue them from trouble. And don’t we too? We cry out for rescue: healing in our bodies and our families; help with money troubles and work troubles; comfort in grief and loneliness.

And what does Jesus do? He walks into our suffering. Takes it into himself. He takes on our judgment, too. Jesus rescues us more deeply than we dreamed; maybe more than we hoped.

He comes to us humbly. Gently. But let’s not mistake his claim: Jesus is Lord and King. He comes to rescue, judge, and heal us by his death and resurrection.

How will we welcome him? With shouts and songs? Then with hearts, minds, hands, feet, and all we’ve got?

Prayer

Hosanna, Jesus, You rock! Who could imagine a King and Judge who would come to us as you have? Today you are welcome *here*: my King, and my Judge. Search my heart, and see what needs rescuing. Help me to embrace again the childlike joy that sings your praise. Help me today to follow you humbly, gently: an agent of your grace.

Readings for Holy Week and Easter

Monday, April 10, 2017	John 12:1-11
Tuesday, April 11, 2017	John 12:20-36
Wednesday, April 12, 2017	John 13:21-32
Thursday, April 13, 2017	John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Friday, April 14, 2017	John 18:1-19:42
Saturday, April 15, 2017	John 19:38-42
Sunday, April 16, 2017	John 20:1-18