

I Love to Tell the Story

2023 Member-Written Lenten Devotional



Grace Lutheran Church

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www.glcpa.org

Welcome!

Welcome to the 2023 Grace Lutheran member-written Lenten devotional. This year our devotions center around our favorite Bible stories. Our theme this year is "I Love to Tell the Story." We all have favorite scriptures and Bible stories that continue to be important in our lives. While some scriptures have really helped us to get through a challenging time, others are constant support in how we should live our lives. People wrote about why a particular scripture was important to them, how it reminded them of their own life, and the lessons they learned from the story.

Last year we included the prayer petitions found in the Morning Prayer service in our Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) hymnal, and they are just as poignant this year.

Mighty God of mercy, we thank you for...
The sustaining goodness of creation...
The gifts of healing and forgiveness...
The gifts of relationship with others...
The communion of faith in your church...

Merciful God of might, we pray for...
Peace and harmony...
Places of strife and warfare...
The hurts of your children...
The church of Jesus Christ in every land...

Our devotional writers chose a Scripture prompt to reflect upon an experience of God in one of these ways and wrote a prayer to accompany it. May these devotions add to your preparation for Easter as you contemplate the life, death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you to every contributor who helped make this devotional a reality.

Thank you, Grace Church Family

Thank you to the Grace Church family members for sharing your favorite stories with all, so your words may also guide us on our way through the Lenten season.

Sally Horn, Coordinator, Congregational Care Team
Pastor Scott Schul and Pastor Carolyn Hetrick

Lent 2023

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a penitential season of forty days (not counting Sundays), designed to prepare us for the joys of Easter. There are many ways for you to deepen your Lenten journey:

MIDWEEK LENTEN WORSHIP: “Stars of Night”

Many of us love to look up at the sky while lying in the grass, at camp or on vacation. The vast beauty of Scripture tells us our Creator traced stars with the tip of a finger. Abraham pondered them as God promised he'd be the father of nations. The holy sign of the birth of a Savior reminds us God draws us into seeing the night sky. The ancient church gathered late in the evening the night before Easter to celebrate the stories of God and the people of Israel to prepare to celebrate the joy of new covenant and resurrection on Easter.

The Easter Vigil features as many as nine Old Testament readings before celebrating the first dawn and the gospel. Our Mid-Week Lenten Worship focus will be a new, and we hope, exciting one. Each week will feature one story from the Easter Vigil: the creation story; Noah and the ark; Moses leading the people through the Red Sea to freedom; Jonah and the whale; and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. A couple we know well, but others perhaps will feel new. These are longer lessons, so each week will feature only one as we tell and hear the story together imaginatively and dwell with these stories richly.

12:15 p.m. Wednesday Lunchtime Lenten Worship (until 12:45 p.m.)

This short service fits into a working lunch hour and allows the opportunity to attend weekday worship without nighttime travel. This service includes Holy Communion and a weekly sermon.

6:15 p.m. Mid-Week Lenten Worship:

We will hear a reflection by one of the pastors, share in communion and sing Holden Evening Prayer. “God of daybreak, God of shadows, come and light our hearts anew.” Worship will begin at 6:15 p.m. and end at 7:00 p.m., so everyone can join in. We hope as you leave worship, you will do what we imagine the first humans did; what those released from the ark, from captivity, from the belly of a whale, or a furnace did. They looked up at the stars and marveled that God chose to love them and to create in them a clean heart and a right spirit attuned to God's grace and steadfast love.

LENTEN WORSHIP in addition to our Sunday worship services

February 22 – Ash Wednesday Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

March 1 – Lenten Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

March 8 – Lenten Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

March 15 – Lenten Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

March 22 – Lenten Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

March 29 – Lenten Worship at 12:15 p.m. and 6:15 p.m.

April 6 – Maundy Thursday at 6:15 p.m.

April 7 – Good Friday Tenebrae at 6:15 p.m.

SUNDAY WORSHIP at GRACE:

- Worship in person in our Sanctuary at 8, 9, 10:30 and 6 pm
- Listen on the radio at 10:30 am
(103.7 FM, 104.3 FM, 1450 AM, 1260 AM)
- Watch our Livestreamed Worship at 10:30 or later
Visit www.glcpa.org and on the Home Page Alert click the blue words
CLICK HERE to access worship.

Looking for music? Videos of Grace musicians can be found on our YouTube channel, Grace Lutheran State College, PA or <https://tinyurl.com/2w68vzvz>.

The Rev Scott E. Schul, Senior Pastor

The Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick, Pastor

Organizing Your Devotional Time

Just as there is no one way to prayer, there is no one way to make use of this devotional book. Some will choose to meditate on a devotional each day, at a set hour. Others will read more than one devotional at a time. Still others will combine these reflections with other discipleship practices. All of those approaches are valid and worthwhile. Do what works best for you.

One suggested format is as follows:

1. *Pray the Lord's Prayer*

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

2. *Recite the Apostles' Creed*

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

3. *Read the Devotional*

4. *Conclude with either Luther's Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer*

Morning Prayer: I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me through the night from all harm and danger. I ask that you also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Evening Prayer: I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today. I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Feeding Everyone Through Christ

One of my favorite Bible stories is the story in Matthew where Jesus feeds thousands with just five loaves of bread and two fish. The story reads: Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

Most Sundays I have a unique view of at least one service when I am in the balcony video booth. The view from the window is unique in that I can only see the front of the sanctuary and 2-3 rows of pews. Unless I adjust the camera, I have no idea how many folks are sitting in the pews. I imagine this is how the disciples felt that day when they were asked to distribute a meager amount of food to the vast crowd. How would they feed so many people? Did they know how many people were there? Could they see everyone in attendance?

While we may not know the answers to these questions, I am certain the disciples were skeptical about what Jesus was asking them to do. They had to trust that things would be okay, and that Jesus had total control over the situation. Each week, no matter how we gather for worship, we also must trust that we will be fed.

How are you fed each week during worship? This doesn't just mean being fed with the sacrament of Holy Communion, but also being fed through the music, the liturgy, and the entire worship experience. My prayer each week is no matter how many are gathered in person, or watching on video or tuning in on the radio that they are fed through body, mind, and spirit just like the crowds who stood on the shore that day. I pray you are filled with the love of Jesus and one another and can abundantly share that love with everyone around you.

Alyson Hoegg

Thursday, February 23, 2023

Busy Times, But a Time for Everything.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² *a time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;*
³ *a time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to break down and a time to build up;*
⁴ *a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance;*
⁵ *a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;*
⁶ *a time to seek and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;*
⁷ *a time to tear and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;*
⁸ *a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

I love to tell the story of my time at summer camp. When I was in middle school I attended Camp Mount Luther for the first time. My time at Mount Luther quickly became my favorite time of the year. I would anticipate it as it grew closer, and I would mourn the ending of that time as the summer came to a close. At camp, while singing songs together at meals and worship, playing field games, and camping out under the stars, God forged in me a deeper faith, created lasting relationships, and inspired a heart for ministry. Following my time as a camper, I worked there for seven summers (the last being 2022) and I met my husband there as well.

Now as my time working there is over, I come back to this reminder from the writer of Ecclesiastes. This is one of my favorites to read during summer camp field worship under the stars, and every week at Mount Luther would end with our director saying: “and the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us there is a time for everything under heaven” as we were sad to say goodbye to our camp community. Right now this is a reminder for me in a new and very busy season of life (teaching coaching, studying, etc.) that there is a time for everything, and God will make everything beautiful in God’s own time.

Anne Gates

Friday, February 24, 2023

The Season of Lent

It's not something that's readily noticeable to others, but it happens to most just as surely as the sun rises each day. It doesn't happen overnight so that when it does dawn upon us it comes as a complete surprise. We notice it most often when we realize that the type on the printed page is not as clear as what it once was. And then it hits us - the length of our arms has shortened!

To be sure, we really know that it's our eyes and not our arms, but most of us tell ourselves that if our arms were as long as they used to be or just a bit longer all the words would be perfectly clear. Certainly, we've been told over and over again that as we get older our eyes change. And, although we can't make our arms longer, we can arrange to have corrective lenses placed over the bridge of our nose.

Even though new glasses are designed to improve our vision, objects those first few days still appear a bit out of whack. But, in no time at all, our eyes quickly adapt and then, lo and behold, the black type of the written word comes clearly into focus.

Lent is the time in the church year to readjust our spiritual focus. Perhaps we might call it a bifocal time - a time to be nearsighted and look at ourselves and a time to be farsighted and look at others.

Taking measure of ourselves and our spiritual lives, we come to find that Lent historically has been, and continues to be, a time when believers have sought to improve their praying. They have looked meditatively for the presence of God in their lives. They have taken the weeks of Lent to reshape their lives to make that Presence a reality in their being.

At the same time, we lift our eyes from the half-moons of our spectacles to look out the larger upper portions, at others around us and in the world. We look not for their faults but for the positive attributes they might have. Not only do we look out at those about us, but we reach out to them as well, by encouraging the goodness we see in them.

The season of Lent is a time of grace whereby we refocus our vision. We take it not only personally but communally as well. In that sense, it's like a journey that we, as a committed band of God's People, travel together. It is only together, joined with others, that we can be the Lenten body of Christ that will celebrate Easter as the risen body of Christ.

Isn't it so?

Pastor Larry Louder

Saturday, February 25, 2023

Seeing Clearly

²² They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" ²⁴ And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village." Mark 8:22-26

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This quirky little story from Mark's Gospel has long been a favorite of mine because it's the only Jesus healing that doesn't go as planned. Imagine! Here's Jesus, the Son of God, the most powerful being in the universe, ready to amaze everyone with a miraculous healing of a blind man. But things go horribly wrong when, instead, the man reports that he can see people, "but they look like trees, walking." So Jesus quickly takes a second crack at the healing and finally the man is able to see clearly.

Why did Mark include this story? Was it to embarrass Jesus or call his divinity into question? No. Instead, Mark shared this story to remind us that Jesus will go to any length to bless us. When the blind man's sight was not perfectly restored, Jesus could have blamed it on the man and quickly moved on. But Jesus didn't leave him to suffer. He kept working with the man until the man's sight was fully restored. That's grace and mercy in action!

It's the same for us. When we get off-track in our faith, or our lives become snarled in bad decisions, Jesus won't abandon us. No matter how many times it takes, Jesus will keep working with us until our vision clears and we can see things as he does. Why? Because he loves us and loves to bless us. Friends, Jesus never gives up on us. So don't ever give up on Jesus, even when all we can see is a world filled with crazy walking trees.

Prayer:

Jesus, no matter how long it takes, help me see myself, my neighbor, and my circumstances clearly, so that I can love others the way you do. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Monday, February 27, 2023

Love Never Ends

(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. 1 Corinthians 13:7-8a

One of my favorite Bible readings since childhood is 1 Corinthians 13. In my early teen years, I memorized most of the verses because they spoke strongly to me. However, it was when I learned musical settings of the text and poured out my heart through song that they became one with my soul.

When I was 15, I was asked to sing in various churches across York and Lancaster Counties. When I acquired my driver's license at 16, I began honoring requests. Several songs I had studied incorporated these verses.

One setting remains firmly engrained in my mind. The singer sustains the word "LOVE" for six slow beats before finishing the phrase "...is of God, and anyone that loveth knoweth God" (1 John 4:7). The song begins with the traits of God's love and finishes with "Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things...love NEVER ends."

In this setting, the "sound" of true love unfolds from the singer's first note: the pure, peaceful aural equivalent of a blooming rose. Musical study invited me to embrace the word (love), consider what the composer wanted to convey (a boundless love that would never fade), and combine this with my spirit's understanding (unwavering courage). I would start quietly, steadily increasing the volume until I reached "God," the peak where music and scripture intertwined and became One.

Before singing, I would close my eyes and envision what God's love might *sound* like. I envisaged love that was *patient* (six slow beats is a long time when you are singing one word) and *kind* (the composer placed the note where it could be sung comfortably, embraced by peaceful chords); love that emanated warmth, with no sounds that suggested arrogance or other human failings. The final words, "Love never ends," seemed endless – ten even slower beats. I imagined myself being filled with Gospel's promise, which helped me to sustain the note with confidence until the end. Each time the closing words challenged me to keep my heart open to God's love so I could pass on the gift.

Although my human failings mean I repeatedly fall short of sharing love as God intends, these words remain a lamppost to guide my journey.
Love never ends.

Laurel Sanders

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Focus on what really matters

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, (Jesus) entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Luke 10: 38 – 42

There aren't many bible stories for which I truly feel a personal connection. This one is the exception. Without a doubt, I would have reacted the way Martha did. As I think back through my life (despite knowledge of this story), I was Martha time and time again. As a full-time working mother, I too often took on the role of taskmaster and was so focused on keeping everyone fed, clothed, clean and completing homework or other daily duties, that I far too often missed the opportunity to truly enjoy the special moments occurring in the day.

Certainly, the message of this scripture is that we should remember to keep God and his teachings central in our lives and we definitely should. I hope Jesus doesn't mind that I am using it to also suggest that we should not get so caught up in daily life tasks that we miss, or fail to fully appreciate, the wonder of the relationships we have with our family and friends. It is too late for me to get back those years during my children's childhood, but I am trying to remember to relish the times I have with those most dear to me and to focus more on what God is calling on me to do with my time.

Dear God,

Help us to focus on your teachings and the relationships with which you bless us. Guide us to avoid distractions and less important life tasks that steal our time and attention from life's greater purpose. Amen.

Carla Rossi

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Trusting Jesus to Heal

²⁴[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Mark 7:24-37

A woman begs Jesus to cast an unclean spirit out of her daughter and surprisingly he tries to dismiss her. Jesus’ response is not compassionate or kind like we might expect, but instead he is flip and insulting. Yet she is undeterred. Her desperation, her need for this healing, and her belief that Jesus can save her daughter are so great, the woman transforms his insult into a compelling image of the abundance Jesus brings to our hurting world. “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*” She tells him that there is enough. His power, his ability to heal and transform the brokenness in the world is so great that even discarded bits that fall like crumbs are enough to fill her need. At this, Jesus relents and sends the woman back home where she finds her daughter fully healed.

I find it powerful that it is a woman who spars with Jesus here. I am moved by her passion and her quick reply. I am sad that Jesus’ first response is to turn away from her need since she is not in his “group.” And yet, I am grateful that we have this story where Jesus relents and expands his work to “outsiders.” This encounter reminds us that the boundaries of race, gender, culture, religion, politics, and whatever else human beings think should divide us are not in fact a barrier to God’s transforming power. Even though sometimes it takes a moment to realize that.

She persisted. She called for action despite the disrespect Jesus showed her. Jesus’ initial response troubles me, and yet I find hope that he was moved by her response and healed the child. We see Jesus change course and open his ministry to the wider world.

Deacon Alicia Anderson, Campus Minister for Lutheran Campus Ministry

Thursday, March 2, 2023

Jimmy Red Shoes: A bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench

With an inmate population at Rockview State Prison that fluctuates between 2000 to 2700 inmates, it's no surprise that there are active, vibrant faith communities "inside the walls" right off Route 26, just past the Nittany Mall.

I'd been going into Rockview for church once a month for a few years when my coworker Jennifer had a terrible car accident on Route 350 on the top of Bald Eagle Mountain on a Saturday night. I had not yet experienced (let alone personally practiced) the type of prayer that you see inside jails – quick and confident. Early on Sunday I got a phone call that Jenn was in very bad shape. It had been a head-on collision. Jenn was life-flighted, and her family was told to prepare for the worst (later I found out her aorta was partially severed along with other serious injuries).

As I walked into the beautiful stone chapel at Rockview, the first person I saw was Jimmy Red Shoes. Jimmy got this prison nickname because shiny red leather sneakers were available cheaply at the prison commissary. Jimmy wore them all the time. I saw Jimmy Red Shoes, told him about Jenn's accident and asked him to pray for her. In my fashion, typical for me at that time, I went into the church service and participated, just like every other week. I am ashamed to admit that I don't even remember if I prayed for Jenn at church that morning – honestly, it was probably a coin-toss.

As I came out of church I saw Jimmy again, just outside the sanctuary, near the chaplain's office. In a somewhat condescending, haughty tone, I admonished HIM not to forget to pray for Jenn. Jimmy looked at me, kind of confused, and very matter-of-factly said "what do I think I have been doing for the last hour". Now I was the one with the confused look. He told me that right after I had asked him to pray, instead of going into the service, he had found a prayer friend from a group he prayed regularly with, asked the chaplain if they could use one of the offices, and prayed the whole time the rest of us were in church!

Jenn's recovery was so rapid and complete that even her doctors called it a miracle. When I told Jenn about Jimmy she cried. Jimmy was very happy too but was not as shocked as me at the miracle of that Sunday morning prayer. His faithful, fervent prayer was also confident and sure – like calling a good friend and asking for a hand. It had a power and direct impact on Jenn's physical life, and also on my spiritual life. I went into this ministry thinking I was going to save other people. What Jimmy taught me was to shut up and pray.

Isaiah 42 speaks of "A bruised reed (that) he will not break" and of "a dimly burning wick"; Of "bring(ing) out the prisoners from the dungeon; from the prison, those who sit in darkness." I tell this story often and remember the day I went INTO our local jail to be shown the weak dimness of my prayer and prayer life. Who was the better friend to Jenn? As a prison minister, was I saving Jimmy, or did Jimmy save me? That Sunday, Jimmy's actions were the shining light.

Jesus used Jimmy to reignite some smoldering wicks.

Doug Laplante

Friday, March 3, 2023

Daniel and the Lions

Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; sleep fled from him. Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he came near the den, he cried out anxiously, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel then said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong." Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. No kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. Daniel 6:16,19-23

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I've always loved this story. It starts off sad, because Daniel is in the den, condemned to die, because people have lied to the king about Daniel. Even though the king knew in his heart that Daniel was innocent, he had no choice but to follow the law.

Fortunately, God did what the king was unable to do. Through Daniel's prayers and faith and God's mercy, the lions did no harm to Daniel. He was saved. The people who lied about Daniel were not so lucky. Soon, at the king's command, they took Daniel's place in the den and their outcome was much different. From that time forward, the king encouraged everyone to believe in Daniel's God.

Daniel's faith is an inspiration to me. Though I don't face a real lion, I – just like you – have my share of worries and troubles and sometimes they feel like they might overcome me. When I start to feel overwhelmed, I think of this story and, like Daniel, say a prayer or two and put my trust in God. God has always proven to be so much bigger and stronger than any of my worries, and finds a way every time to draw me back out of that pit.

Prayer:

Dear God, whenever I am scared, help me to trust in you, like Daniel did. Save me from my lions, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sheri Rider

Saturday, March 4, 2023

“I thought he was with you....”

⁴¹ Now every year (Jesus') parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor. Luke 2:41-52

I read this scripture for the first time when I was teaching Sunday School at Grace. Being the same age as Jesus was in the story, the middle schoolers were in awe that Jesus dodged his parents and stayed behind to hang out at the temple on his own—what a rebel!

I, on the other hand, felt stressed out and had great empathy for Mary and Joseph as they lived through every parent's worst nightmare- leaving a child behind unknowingly.

This scripture reminded me that parenting is hard—even for Mary and Joseph! I can't imagine the moment they realized that Jesus was not among their group. Did they blame one another for the oversight? Did they fall to their knees and pray to God that Jesus remains safe until they were reunited?

This story ends well- Jesus was found—safe and sound. Even though Jesus was the Son of God, he also was the precocious son of parents who were truly human, doing the best they could. Once the flood of relief wore off was Jesus grounded for his shenanigans—especially since he was old enough to “know better?”

I wonder who looked after Jesus during those three days. Was he hungry? Where did he sleep? Was he ever afraid and wished he had gone home with his parents?

Thanks be to God for the village of family and friends that he put in our lives to help us raise our children and keep them safe. Jim and I are grateful—just as Mary and Joseph must have been.

Steph Flanagan

Monday, March 6, 2023

Moses

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

Exodus 2:1-4

I remember hearing this story when I was in 4th grade in public school. In those days, the teacher read a passage from the Bible (of course the KJV) and then we all stood next to our desks and said the Pledge of Allegiance. This was the first thing in the morning ritual.

This story particularly stands out in my mind because we never spent much time on the Old Testament in these classroom readings. In my recollection most teachers chose readings from the New Testament. But for some reason the Old Testament was all this teacher ever read. And I know she read this passage several times during the course of the school year. As I found out years later, this teacher was Jewish. In those days I didn't know much about what being Jewish was. For that matter, in those days, I didn't know what a Presbyterian, or Methodist, or a Lutheran was either. My family was Catholic. This was the beginning of my understanding that there were other kinds of people out there. I lived a sheltered early life.

I have always had a "mind that was made for radio" in that I would visualize stories being read with pictures that were vivid and often extravagant. In this scripture, I could see a lake with cat tails growing wildly. Snuggled in an eddy of this lake was a glued together boat made of leaves floating in the water. I can recall that it conjured a million questions. "How is this baby eating?", "Why doesn't he float away?", "What's going to happen to this kid?". I know I never asked anyone those questions. I just troubled over them in my mind. I'm not sure I ever resolved those questions, but the story has stuck with me. Happily, Moses, like that little boy in 4th grade, got out of the boat, off the lake and lived a life!

Robert Griffin

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Love and Fear

^{16b} *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* ¹⁷ *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.* ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.* ¹⁹ *We love because he first loved us.* ²⁰ *Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.* ²¹ *The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.* 1 John 4:16b-21

* * * * *

My dad always loved old Western movies. I watched a lot of them growing up, and I grew to love them too. One time when I was watching one, my son – just a toddler then – excitedly joined me and asked the one question anyone needs to know to make sense of such a movie: “Daddy, which ones are the *good guys* and which ones are the *bad guys*?”

That may work well in movies, but that’s not reality. Life’s heroes have flaws, and the villains usually aren’t completely bad. And so in this remarkable first century letter that we call First John, the author tells us that we’re supposed to love *everyone*, without exception. That doesn’t mean we should ignore evil or let it run wild in our world. Far from it. Often, loving our neighbor means we must actively oppose evil.

Perhaps the most jarring thing about this story though is that it identifies the opposite of love not as *hate*, but as *fear*. Fear becomes the seedbed of all the other things that drive out love. And so if we want to try to love more fully and completely, our task is not to identify the people we *hate*, but to honestly admit the people we *fear*. Fear is a powerful thing. But love is always *more* powerful. As John reassures us, “perfect love casts out fear.”

Prayer:

Jesus, help me admit to you and to myself the people I fear. Then drive that fear from me and replace it with love. Let your love transform my heart to love others, I pray in your holy name. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

The Best is Yet to Come

It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was visiting my wife at her nursing care residence. An afternoon worship service was planned by a visiting pastor. His message was based on the Jesus' raising of Lazarus. The familiar scripture takes place in John chapter 11. The story addresses the subjects of life, death and resurrection found in scripture.

Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was ill, praying that Jesus would visit and heal him. Jesus delayed his arrival for several days and Lazarus passed away. He was not in a hurry. Lazarus would live again.

I've often wondered why prayers aren't answered or the answer is slow in coming. Many times, we wait for the Lord in the midst of a bad situation and wonder why he doesn't respond more quickly. I believe he is always listening, but this scripture helps me understand that God answers in his way, in his time, for his purpose.

Jesus speaks one of the most powerful Christian messages ever: *"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."* John 11 shows Jesus' power over death and this reassurance is a bedrock of our Christian faith.

Jesus wept, revealing his compassion for Mary, Martha and others at the grave, sharing their grief and revealing his human side. I think that Jesus was feeling our pain and our sin too. Then there is the cave, the stone, the grave clothes. Perhaps he was feeling the agony of what laid before him. Fully God, fully human. There is nothing that I am going through that He hasn't experienced.

The pastor concluded his message with a question. He asked, "What would you say, after seeing Lazarus walk out of that cave? Silence followed. Then from his wheelchair at the back of the room, Ronald shouted "HOLY MACKEREL". Smiles and chuckles followed. It was easy to imagine Ronald standing with a smiling Jesus, and Jesus saying "Ronald, you haven't seen anything yet, the best is yet to come."

Lord, we thank you that You will raise all of Your believers to life one day, just like You raised Lazarus from the dead. Help us to keep believing in You and looking forward to the best that's yet to come. Amen

Herm Harrington

Thursday, March 9, 2023

The Woman at the Well

John 4:1-29

News travels quickly. News outlets push notifications to our cell phones. Social media posts instantly notify us of the latest trends, shamings, or praise. Judgements are made quickly: the random assignment of emojis as well as comments express our view on the subject. Often, we are passengers along for the ride by reading others' opinions. In her day, the woman at the well could avoid the criticisms of the chatty early morning ladies by coming to the well later in the day. She would have found no solace in this age of Instagram, Facebook, and Snap barrage of never ending critics, or would she?

In a recent discussion with youth, I wondered if we would know if we were actually talking to or in the presence of Jesus. News and social media highlight the many troubling actions of others. How would we know if it was really Jesus - in the Uber, at Champs, or even in the park on a bench? The clues would be found in the relationship.

Jesus knew when and where to find her. He knew of her kind nature as well as her sins. As a Jew, he did not profile her for being a Samaritan. Instead, He brought her peace and satisfied her curiosity about the Messiah. He saw in her the most amazing woman that would share his good news with all. Perhaps the Samaritan woman could have become a social media influencer?

I am not sure how, when, or where I will meet Jesus. Like the Samaritan woman, I believe we will know. I believe that he will provide a peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7). Even though in this world that seems to broadcast hate, prejudice, and judgment; Jesus can still calm our anxiety in this fast paced world.

Dear God,

Please help us to reveal you to others. Help us create trusted relationships with all people. Help us to reach out to all people in need - regardless of race, gender, gender identity, and circumstance. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Cindy Fritz

Friday, March 10, 2023

Little Children

“but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.’”

Matthew 19:14

Few pieces of scripture are used more to support children in worship and in the life of the church. Jesus, in other areas of the gospel, tells us to nurture and never lose our childlike faith. This passage has always been one of my favorites from my youth. The welcome and belonging that it gives me can still be felt. The innocence, the inclusion, the sense of home in Jesus that is there all the time, is driven home even more by these words of welcome.

But what does that welcome and belonging look like in our church?

One Sunday in January two of my kids (one was an acolyte) went to 10:30 worship by themselves. They sat down in a pew up front and began the service the way they both had done for years, this time however the youngest, five years old, sat with their older sibling since my parents were away with my other two. The acolyte did their duty which included communion assistance. This left the five-year-old to navigate one of the most anxious parts of the service, the logistics of communion. For those who have been to other congregations in your lifetime, you know the feeling and the questions. How does this congregation do communion? Intinction, common cup, pouring chalice, or something else? Do I kneel or stand? Do I leave the pew going left or right? How do I get back to my pew? Yet this five-year-old took communion like she had been doing it all her life.

I don't say this as a brag, in fact I rarely sit with my children in worship since I work on Sunday mornings. Instead, I say all of this to show us three things. First, our young people are watching, they see what we do, and they do that too, so pay attention to what you do. Second, other than faith, comfort and belonging are perhaps the most important things we can gift to each other. Lastly, what we do in our routine each day, week, month, or year, matters more than we know. So, what are you going to do today that helps another grow in faith or feel comfortable enough to have the courage to walk to Jesus, to communion like this five-year-old?

Peter Horn

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Anna in the Temple

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:22-24, 36-38

To most people in the temple that day, Jesus was just another baby. But somehow Anna knew that Jesus was different. He was special. Why? Because he was the Messiah – the Christ – the promised one who would save his people. So she could not contain her joy. She told anyone who would listen that this baby – this Jesus – was the one we had all been waiting for.

I experienced that joy with the two children we adopted. To me, they were not just run-of-the-mill babies. They were MY babies, the ones I had been waiting for all my life. To me they were the most beautiful and precious babies in the world. Even though one is married and the other is ready to graduate high school, I still think they are the most beautiful and most precious children on the planet. That’s just how a mother’s love works.

Someday, those same feelings I have for my children will be the very feelings I have for my grandchildren. Isn’t it wonderful how God “wires” us to feel so much love? That’s how Jesus feels about all of us too. We are all so different. Yet Jesus loves each of us individually, fully, and completely. To him, WE are the ones he has always been waiting for. He will never leave us. He will love us forever.

Prayer: Dearest Jesus, thank you for giving me my wonderful children. Thank you for claiming me as part of your eternal family too. Continue to unite us and bind us in your love, I pray in your holy name. Amen.

Linda Schul

Monday, March 13, 2023

The Servant Girl Speaks Out in Faith, 2 Kings 5

A number of years ago, during our bedtime routine reading, my daughter and I read the juvenile fiction book “Adara”, which she found in the Grace Lutheran Stinson Library. “Adara” is written by Beatrice Gormley and is based on the Old Testament Bible story of Naaman and Elisha found in 2 Kings, chapter 5. I was not familiar with this Bible story, but it became one of my favorites after reading this book. The book “Adara” is a fictional account based on the story of the great commander of a king’s army who was healed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. “Adara” is told from the point of view of the servant girl who suggested Naaman go to see Elisha to be healed. The only part of scripture that mentions the girl is:

Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. The girl is never mentioned by name, but apparently this passage captured the imagination of Beatrice Gormley who wrote a novel about the girl beginning on the day of her life when she was apprehended and put into slavery. As I think about this girl I realize how she could have been full of hate and spite for the people who were holding her in servitude. Instead, she decided to try and save Naaman’s life. She also could have decided not to say anything to her mistress, as she must have known that she might be punished for speaking out. And what incredible faith she had in the healing powers of Elisha, for if he had not healed her master, she could have been held accountable for the waste of money for the trip and the humiliation, etc. The fact that this powerful army captain was listening to the advice of a girl, nonetheless a servant girl, is quite unusual too. A lot of questions exist about this passage. Beatrice Gormley must have had these questions too and decided to weave a story around how this could have happened. Reading the story has made the passage memorable for me and relatable for my daughter.

Clearly FAITH is central in this story. The faith of the servant girl and the faith of General Naaman to listen to her and to make the journey to Israel to see Elisha. I urge you to read the entire chapter 5 of 2 Kings. In addition to faith being central in this story, you will also read about the pride of General Naaman and how again listening to his servants and humbling himself allowed him to receive healing.

Susa Buda

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

**God Has a Different Timetable;
but He Always Loves Us Through Christ**

One of my favorite stories in the bible is the death of Lazarus and his resurrection by our Lord Jesus Christ, described in the gospel of John (11: 1-44). It says clearly in this chapter that Jesus loved Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. When Lazarus was ill in Bethany, his both sisters sent a message to Jesus, hoping that He will cure his illness. But, Jesus intentionally stayed two more days in the place where He was staying. Dr. James Dobson in his book titled, "When God doesn't make sense", quotes this bible story and says "Jesus usually shows up about four days late."

Even though God said that He will listen to our prayers, He never promised us that He will answer our prayers immediately and in the way we want Him to respond. In the case of Lazarus, Dr. James Dobson says that "Jesus only appeared to be late; but He arrived at the precise moment to fulfill the purposes of God – just as He always does." We should never forget that the timetable of God, the Father, is completely different from ours, for specific reasons, which we may not know.

Jesus told His disciples that He was glad that He was not in Bethany when Lazarus died, so that they may believe. It is clear that Jesus planned the whole sequence of events so that His disciples would be benefitted. When Jesus came to Bethany and saw Mary and the Jews who had come along with her weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, troubled and wept. There were only three instances recorded in the gospels when Jesus wept during His ministry on earth. The other two instances were when He wept over the city of Jerusalem and in the Garden of Gethsemane, which we will remember during the holy week.

Our Savior is always kind and sympathetic towards us during our times of trouble. We live in a sinful world, and we are also sinners. Hence, we will face troubles and trials during our lives on this earth. But God promised us through His son that He will never abandon us. As Paul says in Romans (8:37-38), nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Jeya Chandra

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Your face, Lord, I will seek.

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"

Your face, LORD, do I seek.

Psalm 27:8

A favorite scripture - This verse has become very important to me in recent months in my walk with the Lord. It has moved me much closer to and made me much more dependent on Jesus. During the fall, I experienced several uncertainties which caused much concern. Long periods of waiting. I exhausted myself trying to get answers online and trying to solve problems which ***might never happen***. I reached a point where I knew I had to stop. But how? In a timely devotion, Ps. 27:8 was highlighted. It gave me the help I needed. I repeated it, seeking Jesus' face, multiple times many days. Immediately, I felt release from everything that was concerning me. I realized I was not in control. Over the next several days I found that I no longer had the pull toward the computer and I no longer thought about future ***possible*** problems, let alone solving them.

I now "seek His face" every day. I think that to seek His face brings one to an intimate relationship with Jesus, one that can make our walk with Jesus during Lent even more spiritually gratifying. It's a short verse, but powerful.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your presence with us. Thank you that when we call out to you, you are there, and you listen. Thank you for the assurance that no matter what we face you will walk with us. Thank you for helping us through scripture. Amen.

Carolyn Fishburn

Thursday, March 16, 2023

The Wedding in Cana

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. John 2:1-11

Jesus' mom was at a wedding. Jesus and his disciples were there, too. They ran out of wine, which would likely bring the days-long celebration to a disappointing end. When Jesus' mom raises the issue with him, he seems to dismiss her prodding to get involved, yet he instructs the servants to fill six large stone jars with water (20-30 gallons each). When the chief steward tasted it (he had no idea where this wine had come from), he was amazed, saying; "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus had transformed water into wine. Extraordinary wine. The best that had been served at the party.

Notice, hardly anyone knew about this amazing event, this "sign" as the gospel writer calls it. It is the first remarkable thing Jesus does in John's gospel. Healings and other signs will follow, but this is the first. And only Jesus and his mother, plus the servants who helped know what has happened. Not even the steward, and certainly not the guests. The first sign Jesus does that indicates he has come from God to change the world happens quietly in the midst of a family and community gathering. Jesus repurposed the water jars for ritual washing into a huge amount of wine for the celebration. Excellent wine in massive quantities. *(I did the math – 6 jars x 25 gallons each = 150 gallons. There are 128 ounces in each gallon, so that's 19,200 ounces which is the equivalent of 3,200 glasses of wine!)*

Quiet abundance. That's what catches my attention in this story. Without fanfare or even, it seems, any realization from those celebrating at the wedding, Jesus creates an absurd abundance of wonderful wine. The party can continue. This sign tells us that God is here, doing amazing, frivolous, and unreasonably generous things.

Where do you notice quiet abundance in your life? How does God's lavish generosity appear for you? Like the guests at that wedding, we may notice some amazing things when we simply look.,

Deacon Alicia Anderson, Campus Minister with Lutheran Campus Ministry

Friday, March 17, 2023

Shiphrah and Puah

¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Exodus 1:18-21

Most of us are familiar with the characters of the book of Exodus. We know about Moses and his siblings, Aaron and Miriam. We are probably aware of Pharaoh and his daughter, who rescued Moses as a baby from the Nile. We maybe even know about Joshua, who led the Israelites into the promised land after Moses died. But do you know about Shiphrah (shif ruh) and Puah (poo ah)? They are mentioned in Exodus 1:15-21.

Shiphrah and Puah were midwives in Egypt. Their job was to deliver babies. In this passage they receive orders from Pharaoh to not let any Hebrew baby boys live. For Pharaoh the Israelites were growing in number and becoming too powerful. This was happening even though the Israelites were under slavery and oppressed. Pharaoh wanted their number to decrease, and he asked the midwives to help him.

What did Shiphrah and Puah do? Did they obey Pharaoh? No. They let the Hebrew babies live and, on top of that, they lied to Pharaoh. They told Pharaoh the Hebrew women are too good at birthing babies. The babies arrive before the midwives arrive!

I think the midwives were in a difficult place. It was a hard choice. Should they disobey their leader or should they follow their conscience? Because they feared and respected God, they chose to allow the babies to live. As a result, the midwives were blessed and the Israelites multiplied.

When faced with a difficult choice, as hard as it may be, we need to follow the midwives' example and choose right over wrong, love over hate. We also need to be advocates, to take risks to help someone needing help. What difficult choice are you facing? Who needs you to be their advocate? May you be reminded of Shiphrah and Puah as you face these questions.

Prayer: God thank you for midwives. Thank you for the ministry of Shiphrah and Puah. Help me fear and respect God in all my decisions. Help me be an advocate for all people. Amen

Lois Lynn

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Compassionate Caregiving

³⁰ There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹ The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet, but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" ³² Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³ They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." ³⁴ Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him. Matthew 20: 30-34

I sit in a season of caregiving, a season familiar to many others who too have lingered there. For some, caregiving is not a season but rather a permanent vocation or even calling. Caregiving is hard, frequently unseen and often reduced to a series of tasks that the care receiver cannot do independently. Caregiving at its base is rooted in connection and compassion. This relatively simple bible story offers a beautiful biblical blueprint of Jesus' compassion and care.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with plenty to occupy his thoughts. As he passes two blind men, the crowd dismisses these people who seek his attention and his healing mercy. Jesus stops. Jesus listens. Jesus is moved by compassion to touch their eyes and heal them. While the world wishes to silence these blind men who are nothing but an irritation, Jesus wants to hear what they have to say. And he feels it. And he responds. Jesus is not too busy to stop and offer compassion to two people who desperately seek it.

There are many among us who pour out unheralded compassion to those who may easily be dismissed. Direct Support Professionals spend their days enabling our brothers and sisters with disabilities to live life as fully as they are able. Nurses, childcare workers, home health workers work diligently each day to support people who need their assistance. Family members reorganize their lives to accommodate the demands that illness or injury inflict on a family member. All offer time, care, and the touch of compassion.

Our Lord is a compassionate God. He is there for those in great need; he is there for those who minister to those in great need. We are all His beloved.

Ellen Herman Campbell

Monday, March 20, 2023

Reassurance

Psalm 23:4 – Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

As a child, I feared the dark. We lived in an 1808 Colonial home my parents were renovating, with many dark corners and squeaky floorboards. Outside my bedroom window a walnut tree cast shadows, compounding bedtime worries. Since Mom cared for Scott and me all day, Dad usually put us to bed, read a Bible story, calmed us, and helped us say our prayers.

When I was ten, Dad suggested I could memorize Scripture to guide me through life. He promised to help me learn whatever verses I chose. Three suggestions resonated with me: Psalm 23 (The Lord is My Shepherd...); 1 Corinthians 13 (If I speak with the tongue of men and angels but have not love...); and Matthew 6:28b-33 (Consider the lilies of the field...). Psalm 23 spoke most strongly. Every night I recited a few verses until the psalm became part of my being.

One day I blurted out, “I don’t want to walk through the valley of the shadow of death!” Dad responded that even though life is a blessing, we all sometimes face events that are dark and scary. If I would memorize some Scriptures, during those times I would be able to rely on God’s words to calm myself. (I doubt Dad envisioned me climbing squeaky staircases in our house and reciting those words, but I did...and it helped!)

Years later I read a Philip Keller book that describes shepherding and gives a line-by-line interpretation of Psalm 23. I learned the staff has a unique shape, allowing a shepherd to insert it into dangerous places and pull a particular sheep to safety quickly. I then imagined God doing the same with me: walking ahead, watching for danger, and rescuing me (even if the ‘rescue’ was spiritual rather than physical).

During the pandemic, verse 4 regularly blessed me with reassurance. Usually I recited it while washing my hands. When I would reach its sister verse at the end (“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”), I often felt my burdens lessening.

These words have been a lifelong comfort, and I am grateful!
Laurel Sanders

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

Thoughts on Habakkuk:

Many years ago, I attended a Bible Study on the Book of Habakkuk. I don't think I had even heard of Habakkuk until then, it is not one of the oft quoted books in the Bible. However, that study, so many years ago, has stayed with me. Basically, the book of Habakkuk offered guidelines on how to handle turbulent times in our lives. Chapter 1 opens with Habakkuk's lament to the Lord: *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law becomes slack. and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgment comes forth perverted.⁵ Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told.*

In other words, be patient. Habakkuk insisted the Lord was everlasting and too pure to look on evil and tolerate wrongdoing, but he would wait and see. Chapter 2: *"I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint."* OK, I'm waiting, explain yourself, God. As chapter 2 goes on, the Lord says help is coming: *"For there is still a vision for the appointed time, it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."* Help is coming in the Lord's time, when the time is right. In the third and final chapter Habakkuk prays, ending with the familiar verse: *"Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls,¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will exult in the God of my salvation."* The lesson I learned from Habakkuk was, when troubles arise, I should:

1. Make my complaint to the Lord. 2. WAIT for His answer or action and, finally, 3. Be joyful in the Lord my Savior regardless of the circumstances knowing that help will come when the time is right. *Lord, during the days of Lent, while we wait to celebrate the resurrection, may we have the patience and faith of Habakkuk. May we stand on our ramparts and wait and praise your name. Amen*

Alice Griffin

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

What are you doing here?"

⁹ 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?" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ 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, ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ 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?" ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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. 1 Kings 19: 9-15a

Many years ago, while in a former congregation, we were faced with a polarizing decision whether to build a new modern church or stay in an older limited building with a second floor sanctuary. I had purposely avoided entering the debate for quite some time because to do so would have opened me up to hard feelings and scorn from the opposing side. One Sunday, during this time, the appointed Old Testament Lesson of the day was this text from 1 Kings. I had an overwhelming sense that God was using this text to speak directly to me and ask, "Why are you sitting here when there is so much to be done?" Certainly, for Elijah there was the risk of vulnerability outside that cave just as leaving my cave opened me up for possible difficulty, but I believe that is just where God chose Elijah and me to be. To keep this story short, I will say I went on to be appointed chairperson of the building committee. This was certainly no easy task as the opposition was very strong and many decisions hurt feelings and caused pain. In retrospect I see I really had no other option than to leave the comfort and safety my cave offered as there was much needed work to be done. This text should speak to all of us constantly as God is always asking each of us "What are you doing here, Elijah?" There is so much work that needs done in the world to have any of us sitting in our respective caves. Yes, leaving our cave may probably make us uncomfortable and possibly sometimes vulnerable but our mission is outside.

Don Widener

Thursday, March 23, 2023

The parable of the good Samaritan

My favorite bible story is "The parable of the good Samaritan". (Luke 10:25-37.) A lawyer asked Jesus what should I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus tells him to love God and his neighbors. So, the lawyer says, "Who is my neighbor?" Hence the parable is told. There are four main characters in the story, the robbers who stole the traveler's money, the priest, and the Levite who passed by the fourth character, the victim, who lay in the ditch by the side of the road. The Samaritan had compassion on the victim and bound his wounds and took him to an Inn and paid for his care.

I can identify with three of the characters in this story. How often I pass by someone broke down along side of the road and I don't stop to lend a hand. I look in the rear mirror and feel guilty. Hoping that someone else will stop. I also have been a victim and been desperate for a way out of a bad situation many times (although never been beaten!) I have been robbed. When a crisis arises, I can't handle always someone arrives to solve the problem for me. For instance, we were returning from a camping trip towing a used single axle trailer when suddenly the left rear wheel came off and rolled past us and into a ditch. I pulled over with the trailer leaning left on a brake drum and it was pouring down rain. As and I was standing with the wheel wondering what to do I noticed a car stopped on the opposite side of the highway and the driver rolled down his window about one inch. He shouted, "Take two lug nuts from the other wheel". Then he drove off. Why hadn't I thought of it? He was my Good Samaritan!

There are other stories like this involving being in Georgia at my first job down to our last dollar, A broken shower faucet and the water shut off and no plumber in sight (this past week) and other crisis. Always someone helped me get back on track.

So in light of all the victim stories I decided to become a good Samaritan myself and pay back all who have helped me. I volunteered for then Helping Hands missions to New Jersey to help flood victims from Hurricane Sandy. I volunteer at the Emergency Department at Mount Nittany Hospital twice a week. I help sick people get from their cars to a wheelchair and get registered at the desk. I escort relatives back to the treatment rooms to visit patients. All of the doctors, nurses and employees show compassion for the patients. It is a gratifying experience for me and others working there.

Jesus asked, "Now of the three in the parable, thinkest thou who was neighbor unto him that fell among thieves?" The layer said, "He that showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said unto him, "Go and do thou likewise." *Let us pray that we all become Good Samaritans when the need arises! Amen.*

Bob Byers

Friday, March 24, 2023

The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11)

Lately, I find myself involved in the tango of parenting. You know how it goes: you encourage your child to try new things, like a new activity, habit, or make a new friend; then your child pushes back with their own opinion of how the situation is going to unfold. Many of you know that this is much easier to do when they are young. As children grow into teens and young adults, parenting can be challenging. Most of us recognize that there is an expiration date for arranging sleepovers, birthday parties, and playdates. Forget about clothes shopping and haircuts- parental approval is not solicited or advisable. What seemed like a blink of an eye, you get thrust to the real stuff: "what are you going to do after graduation?" What happens when the plan changes and resembles 52 card pick-up? What if what your child identifies other than the gender assigned at birth? Read on to find all the answers!

I found answers in the Wedding at Cana. Mary attends the wedding with her son, Jesus. Notice, she did not suggest he shower, shave, or put on a suit. Clearly, she loves the couple getting married and notices something wrong (they have run out of wine) and wants to help her friends avoid embarrassment. Mary knows her son is both human and divine and has the ability to rectify the predicament. Jesus pushes back on this idea. Instead of an argument or further discussion, Mary informs the servants to be helpful to Jesus.

Mary has raised her son. Their close relationship has come with strings attached. From his inception, God and angels have been part of their faithful trusting relationship with God. Mary has suggested to and given an affirmation to Jesus. Now is the time. You got this. This is the beginning of acknowledging his own path.

Like our children, Jesus needed to come to his own decision. The love and respect he has for his mother as well as his love and responsibilities to God have culminated in this starting point of the first miracle. I mentioned that there are answers to the above questions: love, respect, and prayer. We cannot predict the path our children will take. However, our relationship has been woven with love, respect, and prayer; these are tools needed for the journey.

Dear God,

We ask you for guidance. The journey ... parents and kids...can be an unfamiliar path and sometimes our actions do not appropriately communicate the profound love for our children. Help us to demonstrate our unconditional love and help to repair hurt that we may have been caused by our words and actions.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Cindy Fritz

Saturday, March 25, 2023

"Hi-Yo Silver, away!"

Revelations 19:11-16

Growing up in the mid-west, our Saturday morning was filled with my favorite shows: The Lone Ranger, Sky King, and My Friend Flicka. You got it ... I couldn't get enough horses in my life!

When I received my first bible (an original Revised Standard Version) I was thrilled when I found the Concordance. Predictably, I looked up those passages containing horses. Imagine my wonder when I found a verse that talked about the Lone Ranger!

Revelations 19:11: *Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.*

Surely, the stories about my TV hero were learned from the Jesus stories in my Bible. The Lone Ranger always came in on Silver and he corrected injustices. And Jesus would always come back on his white horse to save us. Then came the next verse ...

Revelations 19:12: *His eyes are like flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he had a name inscribed that no one knows but himself.*

As a third grader, I am pretty sure that I didn't know what all of that meant, but I did imagine Jesus just as I saw the Lone Ranger, with a big white hat and a mask to obscure his identity. We all knew that a white hat meant that he was a good guy, and he had to hide his identity so that the bad guys couldn't find him. As I got older, I forgot about these verses, but the pages are dog-eared and my bible appears well-used. It could be that we got a Good News Bible in middle-school; and that's about the time when we stopped investigating The Bible and started studying the parts that we had to learn. Maybe it is time to take another look ...

Dear Lord, Maybe now is the time for us to forget our old ideas about parts of The Bible and re-read them as a child might, with innocence, naiveté, and dreams. Let us see the new meanings of words that have evolved over the centuries, and let us feel the light of your salvation as we bring these words to life in our lives. Amen.

Revelations 11:16

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

Barbara Vogler

Monday, March 27, 2023

Perfectly Imperfect

⁷ On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. ⁹ A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." ¹¹ Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. ¹² Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted. Acts 20:7-12

* * * * *

I'm forever wondering how the early church decided which stories to include in the New Testament and which were better off not shared. I'm guessing they stuck this one in when Paul was away on business or sleeping in on a Saturday. You can almost hear the discussion between Luke (the primary author of Acts) and his friends. "Oh that Paul. Such a smart guy. Faithful guy. But good grief does he ever shut up?! Remember that time he preached so long that a guy actually fell asleep, fell to his death, and had to be miraculously resurrected? We've got to include that one as a reminder to Paul and every other future preacher that a sermon doesn't have to be *long* to be *good*!"

There was a time not so long ago when pastors were viewed as larger-than-life, perfect, unapproachable demi-gods. I suppose the Church in its "wisdom" decided that the world needed examples to inspire greater faithfulness. All it did was reveal human hypocrisy and drive the poor pastors crazy with an unrealistic expectation of perfectionism. Fortunately, the church of the first century had a much healthier view of the clergy. When Paul literally bored a man to death, it wasn't evidence that the Church was deficient; it was evidence of the greatness of God. Because if God could manage to work through a blowhard like Paul, then God could work through *anyone*. Even us! Thank you, God for making us perfectly imperfect.

Prayer:

Gracious God, help me to embrace and appreciate the person you created ME to be. Don't let me make an idol of some mythical perfect version of me. You made me unique for a reason. Reveal that to me, and use me and my quirks to touch and bless others. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Jesus appears to the Disciples

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
John 20:19-31

Every year, the Sunday after Easter brings the same gospel reading. It is a beautifully written and translated story where Jesus appears to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening as they are behind locked doors and then appears to them again a week later. The first time, Thomas is not there. The others try to tell him that they saw Jesus and Thomas insists that he needs to see for himself. When Jesus returns, he shows Thomas the physical signs of his death on the cross. After seeing this proof, Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God!" which is the clearest, boldest, and most emphatic statement of faith in all of John's gospel. Jesus does not criticize Thomas. Instead, he offers words of encouragement for those of us who have "not seen, but yet have come to believe."

Thomas' story reassures us that as we follow Jesus, we are not required to set aside our critical thinking skills. Our minds, the ability to wonder and doubt, as well as to question and ponder are among the gifts from God that we use as we love and serve our neighbor and the world. Doubt and faith go hand in hand. Questions and uncertainty can lead us to a deeper understanding, a fuller knowledge.

Go ahead and wonder. Feel free to ask questions. Keep exploring what you don't understand about God, other people, the world, and yourself. We will probably not find the kind of proof that Thomas gets, but that is no reason to stop thinking critically. Do not let your doubts frighten you or make you think they mean you don't believe. It is no accident that Thomas' story is used in worship the Sunday after Easter every year. People of faith have been raising questions and experiencing doubts for over 2000 years. You are in good company.

Deacon Alicia Anderson, Campus Minister with Lutheran Campus Ministry

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Growing in Christ

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.” Luke 2:52

Do people usually have bookmarks in their Bible? I have several.

The bookmark that is most special to me is a yellow ribbon with a blue morning glory sticker at the top. Hand-written on the ribbon is “Luke 2:52, He grew in wisdom and in stature”, and of course it stays on the page of this passage. The Bible, with its broken spine held together with scotch tape, was given to me in 1960, by the Grace Evangelical United Brethren Church, in Naperville, Illinois.

For me, the words of this scripture provide the complete direction needed for a young person to grow into the honest, respectful, caring person that God knows we can be. An individual has the potential to fully develop in each of these key areas: physical, mental, social, and spiritual.

For my confirmation, at Grace EUB Church, I had my Bible open to this scripture as I knelt for the confirmation blessing. I knew this passage would encourage and direct me throughout my life.

Although Jesus was unique, he had a normal childhood and went through the same progression as we do. He grew physically and mentally, he related to other people, and he was loved by God.

While this passage guided my path when growing up, I also found it relevant to my years as a mother, when raising our sons. I always said I just wanted them to be good human beings – who were of good character, honest, hard-working, and who cared about others. Of course, taking our four boys to church every Sunday was part of the plan, and reinforced all that we, as parents, were teaching them.

Sally Horn

ps: My second favorite Bible bookmark?
A hand-made tatted cross marking the 23rd Psalm.

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Trusting God and Choosing Joy

*The LORD is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts;
so I am helped, and my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.*
Psalm 28:7

This passage reminds me of one of my dearest friends, who passed away last year after a three-year battle with stage IV lung cancer. Her name was Star, and never was a name more befitting of a person. Although tiny in stature, she had a huge, sparkling personality. We became friends during college and remained close after graduation, staying in touch over the years despite living many miles apart.

It took almost a year of mounting symptoms and missed diagnoses before doctors finally found a large tumor in Star's lungs. By this point, the cancer had spread. A wife and a mother of two, she was not quite 50 years old. She had never smoked a day in her life. It was simply not fair. Star had every reason to feel hopeless, distraught, and angry. Instead, not long after her diagnosis, she shared with me a song by King & Country called "Joy," quoting the lyrics: "I choose joy!" She said she had made a conscious decision to turn the rest of her life over to God, trusting Him completely, allowing Him to be her strength and her shield throughout whatever suffering almost certainly lay ahead.

In doing so, she achieved a sense of peace. She also gave a great gift to everyone who knew her.

Although social media has its drawbacks, Star used it to regularly share what she called "GratiTuesday" and "Thankful Thursday" posts, in which she praised God and gave thanks for blessings big and small. She wanted everyone to recognize the love of God all around them and to learn to choose joy, even during the worst of times. It wasn't always easy. As she once told me, "It's not like I sit around feeling joyful all day. It's hard to choose joy when you're in pain." Yet, right up until her dying day, she was a shining example of how to do this.

Dear Lord, help me to trust that even through life's difficulties, you are always with me, bringing me strength and peace. Help me to always recognize and be grateful for the many blessings you provide, and help me to choose joy every day. Amen.

Karen Walker

Friday, March 31, 2023

God's Peace

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:4-9

My favorite Bible story comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians. During my childhood I had the same two pastors, they didn't baptize me, but they were called to the church before I can remember. The one pastor ended every sermon she preached with, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). As a kid and teen, I found comfort, hope, and joy in these words, even when I had no idea what the sermon had been about. Perhaps some of the joy was knowing that we would soon sing the Hymn of the Day, one of my favorite parts of a worship service. Now that I am a bit older, with four kids of my own, I wonder if God had planted a seed within my heart and mind all those years ago to help me find God's peace in all circumstances.

God's peace finds me especially when I least expect it. The peace can calm me in my anxious moments, my moments of worry or fear, and God's peace finds me in when I am overjoyed. This peace is hard to explain, but I hope you have experienced this peace that guards us with God's love and comfort. And if you have yet to recognize God's peace in your life, know that it is with you always.

Let us pray, Holy God, thank you for your peace that defies our understanding and keeps our entire being safe in your love. Strengthen us to live our lives in your way of love for all people, through Christ we pray, Amen.

Pastor Becky Horn

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Reflecting The Light

⁴ in Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of all people. ⁵ The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:4-5

My brother, Steve, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease (lymph system cancer) in the summer of 1956. The prognosis was 3 years, but he lived 8+. The doctors attributed the extra 5 years to Steve's spirit. He had life experiences in that short time that some people do not experience in a much longer life. His appreciation of life showed in his immersion in studying faith through the Bible. His guiding passage was 2 Corinthians 4:6-18. He passed away in January 1965, with his last words being "Happy Birthday. Happy Birthday – to everybody."

In his 80-page write-up of my brother's life, my father included Pastor Walt Smith's meditation given at the funeral. The following are excerpts: "The Life of God has become most real and evident to men in the person of Jesus Christ, for as John says, He is the very Word of God become flesh. Only Christ is truly Life as God intended mankind to be." . . . "there are lights which are the lives of saints and pioneers; and these in their turn are not originators of light, but rather reflectors which give light to us because they themselves are turned towards the source of light." That source is the Light of Christ.

These two verses from John will always remind me to recognize the reflection of Christ's Light on those who turn to God and to make that turn to Him, especially when His guiding light is needed.

While the 2 Corinthians passage is too long to place in this devotional, I recommend reading it as the prayer for the day.

Tom Horn

Monday, April 3, 2023

God's Moses

It greeted me every week as I entered my first grade Sunday school class. There it was tacked on the wall bulletin board at the front of the room—a colorful poster with a baby in a basket floating in water nestled among reeds. The baby being rescued from the Nile River by the Pharaoh's daughter was just the beginning of the incredible life of Moses.

God had plans for this special baby. God wanted Moses to be a leader for the Israelites. Moses saw God's plans as a job full of difficulties and challenges. He was reluctant and afraid, making excuses by imploring God to send someone else.

In the last forty years of his life, Moses finally found courage by listening to God. He became the leader that God knew he was by leading the Israelites through the parted Red Sea and bringing the Ten Commandment tablets down from Mount Sinai.

Sometimes we find ourselves thinking only of the challenges we face in our daily lives. We are too busy with what we want to do to take time to listen to God. Maybe we are afraid to change what we have always done to serve God in new ways. We make excuses and expect that someone else will answer what is needed.

You may not see God in a burning bush as Moses did but be assured that God is always with you. It may only be a whisper. It might be through a neighbor in need or perhaps a ministry team request. God has plans for you. During this time of Lent, open your heart and let God's call lead you to new ways of showing and sharing your faith.

Dear Lord. Help me to take time to listen to your call. Like the story of Moses, you are always with me guiding me with love to serve you more fully. Amen

Anne Rohrbach

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

What We Say Matters

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:7

Every sermon I heard as a child included this line, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus, Our Lord.” For twenty years, I thought this was just a line my pastor included as a prayer. I thought it was his creation. I heard it so often it became ingrained in my memory. In college when I began to read the bible on my own and grow in my faith, I came across these exact words in Philippians 4:7. Here were the words of my childhood faith and they were in the bible! Go figure that words that were said in church came from the bible! This verse became my absolute favorite.

So, I encourage you to listen to the worship service. What phrases in our worship liturgy are actually scripture? How much of the bible are we surrounded with every time we gather? God’s Word envelopes us much more than we think.

Peter Horn

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Holy Ground

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:1-5)

* * * * *

This story tells how God called Moses to be a leader of Israel. It contains all sorts of interesting details, like an angel's appearance and a flaming bush that doesn't burn. But of all the amazing things God says and does in this story, what I want to highlight in this devotional is how God directs Moses to remove his sandals because "the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

I used to exclusively think of holy ground as a place where the holiest of God's people walked and dwelt. Holy ground was found in places like Jerusalem and Galilee. Holy ground was in buildings like ancient churches and monasteries. I realize now, however, that holy ground is all around us. It's holy not because of what *people* have done there, but because of what *God* has done.

Is Grace's sanctuary holy ground? Absolutely. But so is my childhood backyard in Kane. God was there too, forming and shaping me. My backyard in Halfmoon Township is holy ground too. God is there, in the forest, the woodland creatures, and holy conversations I've had with my friends and neighbors. You too are surrounded by holy ground, because God is likewise present in all the places you *have been*, all the places you *are*, and all the places you will *one day go*.

So wherever you are right now, symbolically take off *your* sandals. Honor the holy ground where you sit or stand right now, because I promise you that God is also *there*, right next to you.

Prayer:

Holy God, open my eyes to see how you are present with me everywhere I am, and that your presence makes the ground around me holy. Help me to reverence it as a way of reverencing you. Amen.

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Wondrous Love

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38,39)

The words above from the end of Romans 8 are a favorite Bible passage for me. It is often read at Christian funerals. One of my first exposures to it came when I received it written on a small card from my seat mate on a plane from Cleveland, Ohio back home to Pennsylvania when I was in my twenties. My father had just had a severe stroke and I was rushing home. The woman sitting beside me knew I was upset and offered me comforting conversation and this small card with a picture of Jesus on the front and the above words from Romans on the back. I have that card to this day. That woman does not know how much she touched me.

I can picture the Apostle Paul writing these words. He certainly had been through a lot of trouble: persecution, imprisonment, a shipwreck, a thorn in the flesh, and so much more. Yet, he remained confident that God's love knows no end.

Look at that list of worse things in the verse. It covers a lot. Can you add some worse things you are experiencing to that list? How about estrangement from family members, illness, rejection, abuse, COVID, political division, personal failure, worries? Know that NOTHING can separate you from the love of God through Jesus Christ. This is true for today, tomorrow and a thousand years from now.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for these words of the Apostle Paul. Thank you for your love through Jesus that knows no bounds. Teach me to love completely. Amen

Lois Lynn

Friday, April 7, 2023

Show Up!

Some were watching at a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, Joseph and Jesus. Mark 15:40

For the three years of Jesus' ministry, Mary Magdalene followed Jesus. She loved his life – overflowing and abundant – living life flat out at 100%. Wherever they went, she proudly told her story. Here it is: Mary grew up in Magdala, a prosperous seaport. She wasn't prosperous. How could she be – possessed – occupied by seven demons, an emotional illness that controlled her thoughts. She begged for mercy. None was given. But then came Jesus and he wasn't repulsed by her. He came near. As he did, Mary felt a great light forcing her dark away. Suddenly her companions – delusions that possessed her- they were begging for mercy – none was given. And Mary was healed – restored. Everyone in Magdala was amazed at the change.

How could Mary respond to this man, Jesus? How could she not love him? Since that day, Mary decided to be there to support Jesus and his ministry. Mary of Magdala decided to show up for Jesus.

Now, fast forward three years. The religious and political leaders were stung by Jesus' truth telling. And together they decided to do away with him. They whipped him until his flesh was filleted and then hung him on a cross. Mary was there. However hideous was his suffering, Mary was there. He cried out in pain, Mary was there. He died and they placed him in a tomb, Mary was there. Where were the disciples? They were hiding in fear. Mary was there. Mary showed up!

Mary responded to Jesus' love by showing up. The grace that saves Mary saves us. Jesus showed up for us by suffering and dying.

Mary showed up for Jesus. You can too. Jesus needs you to show up. How? Love God and Love Neighbor!

Prayer. Dear Lord, please give me the courage to show up. Amen

P. Stevens Lynn, Pastor Emeritus

Saturday, April 8, 2023

Jesus will meet you there

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome brought spices. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. - Mark 16:1-8

I love to tell this story, but not why you might think. Yes, this is the Easter message of resurrection, and a tale of women. Just as Mary was the first to know of God's plan for incarnation, Mary and the others are the first to know the fulfillment. That would be enough. So why, if not for these reasons, do I love this story?

God breaks into a mundane, heavy task of life, and places where we too wonder who will move this heavy weight? Where we too only see a dark tomb.

God intervenes to encourage us- fear, doubt, grief and pain do not have the last word.

God intervenes with reassurance when we cannot remember what we were told. God provides people and moments drawing us out of ourselves into what God wants to share.

The messenger does not leave the women with "you are looking in the wrong place, try again." God gives them direction to the next moment. Jesus will meet you there. And in each moment.

Because none of us can simply flip a switch and change our whole perspective, especially in challenging spaces. Later writers tried to add on to make the story resolve because they felt uncomfortable. I love that the original ending leaves room for uncertainty and for all of God's possibility. Because in moment after moment when we need to be reminded that resurrection life is real, we will be met there. The truth is so amazing that even in a moment where the first to hear it blinked, the Holy Spirit moved to ensure the good news would be told and embodied. Now God has chosen us to go and tell - for ourselves and a world desperate for all the stones of life to be rolled away.

Thank you, Jesus. AMEN.

Pastor Carolyn K. Hetrick