

Lenten Devotional Guide
2023



LENT

Otterbein United Methodist Church

Wednesday, February 22

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

Look at Me!

Do you remember when you were a kid? The world evolved around you, didn't it? Well at least you thought so. You were the one and only star of that widely successful "Me" show. If we were lucky, though, at some point, a parent, sibling, teacher, or someone else helped us realize that we had to share the stage with others. At some point children, we hope, develop empathy and humility.

Unfortunately, if we look at the world around us, we see a lot of folks like the Pharisee in our scripture verse. All they are interested in is their status. They have to be the prettiest, the richest, the thinnest. All good things that come their way they are, of course, entitled to; any bad things are the fault of others. This idea of entitlement seeps into all aspects of their lives, even their relationship with God.

Years ago, there was an old county song which had the verse "Oh Lord it's so hard to be humble when your perfect in every way." I fear that's a way a lot of us feel.

It's the sin of vanity, of pride. It keeps us from living in the manner Christ wanted because it keeps us from remembering that we are all sinners, none of us more or less deserving of the grace Christ offers. No one has earned salvation.

It also sets up barriers between us. If we believe we are a better person than our brother or sister, we can, in our smugness, convince ourselves that not only are we the author of our success but that our less fortunate brothers and sisters are totally responsible for the situation they are in. In most situations neither of these are true, but thinking in this way keeps us from acting with love and compassion.

So, during this holy period, try turning off the "Me" show. Open your eyes and ears to the poverty and injustice around you; use that hand you were patting yourself on the back with instead to reach out and help a brother or a sister.

Jim Clough

Thursday, February 23

[John 1:29-34](#)

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said,
"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

John 1:29

Have you ever had to assume the duties or position in a job or an organization? This is similar to what is happening in this passage. John the Baptist's mission has reached its completion. He is stepping aside so Jesus can take over. He knew he was not the Christ but simply the forerunner of

Christ. His role was to prepare the people for the Messiah and he did this by preaching repentance and salvation. John tells us that he baptized with water and Christ will baptize us in the Holy Spirit.

How can this meeting between John the Baptist and Jesus apply to us today? It prepares us for the Easter story, as the **Lamb of God** has biblical meaning in the Passover Lamb. Twice a day, morning and evening, a lamb was slain in the temple as a burnt offering for sin. Jesus was destined to become the lamb of sacrifice, to take away the sin of the world. Sin is a worldwide problem and we all need our sins forgiven. Do we realize that when we do inappropriate things, use crude language, etc. that Jesus' death was required for every one of those sins? Sometimes we don't consciously understand that every sin is actually committed against God.

We are saved from these sins by being baptized by the Holy Spirit which means that we have the spirit of God inside us to enlighten us, strengthen us, and cleanse us. We are reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus as we take the Lord's Supper or Communion. Our mission, as believers, is to go out into the world and tell about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that there is salvation available to everyone. In 1273, St. Thomas Aquinas stated that there are three things necessary for the salvation of man: **"to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do."**

Kathy Billhimer

Friday, February 24

[Titus 2:1-15](#)

In this section of the letter from Paul to Titus, Paul outlines what Titus should teach the people of Crete. He starts the lesson with a general, and important, message that the teaching should be in accord with sound doctrine. He follows that with specific things that are to be taught to different groups of people, recognizing that the challenges may be different at different ages and situations. For older men, the lessons include being temperate, self-controlled, sound in faith, and to be good examples to others. For older women, to be reverent, not slanderous, not be addicted to wine, and to teach the younger women what is good, again being a good example to others. For the younger men and women, he includes teaching of self-control and love. These are lessons on how to LIVE, not just how to believe. It is an encouragement to make sure their daily lives reflect Christian beliefs and doctrine. They are important lessons for us today as well.

I want to concentrate on the later sections of the chapter, Titus 2:11-14 (NIV):

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

The passage includes the term “present age.” Even though it was written a long time ago, it is relevant to our lives in our present age. Are we saying “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions? Are we living self-controlled, upright, and godly lives? Are we focusing on Christ and what he would like us to be? What can we do better than we are doing currently to be sure that we are living the way Paul instructed Titus to instruct the residents of Crete? Are we able to accept the “grace of God that brings salvation?” Are we living in a way that is above rebuke by critics of Christianity?

I know that I, personally, need reminders of those lessons and could do much better in a lot of my daily doings – and I don’t think I’m alone in that. During this season of Lent, let us think about the sacrifices Christ made for us and vow to LIVE in ways that honor that sacrifice and bring us more in line with our beliefs.

Janet Gloeckner

Saturday, February 25

[Titus 3:1-15](#)

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

This Scripture lays out for me the whole purpose of Jesus' coming to the world and dying for our sins. During this Lenten season, it brings to my mind:

the **kindness** of God,
His **love**,
His **mercy**,
His gift of the **Holy Spirit**,
His **grace**,
all leading to our becoming **heirs of eternal life**.

So Paul encourages Titus and us to live godly lives, even though we are not saved by our own righteousness. We can never repay the Lord with our good deeds, but it is reasonable and profitable to honor Him in so far as we are able by helping others.

Prayer: *Our Father, thank you for the great love you have shown us in Jesus Christ, how he paid the price for our sins. Show us how to live lives that are giving and fruitful to the glory of God. Amen.*

Judith Espinoza

Sunday, February 26

[Deuteronomy 8:1-10](#)

*Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God,
to walk in His ways and to fear Him.*

Heavenly Father,

It is right and just that I remain aware of my obligation and duty towards you. I am to have no other gods before (or alongside) the Lord God. You have led me out of my own private deserts again and again. You have fed and clothed me. You have humbled and tested me to know what was in my heart. You have chastened me. These have all been signs of your loving care. I confess that I have been rebellious and disobedient many times in my heart, Lord. I am not grateful when you ask something painful or difficult of me. I am not worshipful when my flesh is tired and weak. I am not obedient when you ask me to give again to those who use and mistreat me. But I have found you to be loving and trustworthy in all things. Therefore, I will pray for a 'right attitude'. I will not forget your divine gifts. I will love you with a deep love in my heart. I will pray for the strength and wisdom to pursue the journey you have set for me with a sense of reverence and appreciation, even when I do not understand. And I will bless your name when you bring me safely home. Amen.

Renée Wenger

Monday, February 27

[Hebrews 2:11-18](#)

Our Big Brother Jesus

We're six days into that most solemn time of year: Lent. Lent, that interesting church season when we spend six days of the week (Sundays are feast days), denying ourselves of a pleasure to both share in the sufferings of Jesus and open our eyes to the idols that have taken over our devotion from God. Are these acts of denial changing our hearts or ploys at work's righteousness? In Hebrews 2:11-18 we are told that Jesus has adopted us into His family and **without** shame, shows us off to the Father since it is only by His holiness we can even come to the dinner table.

But what kind of younger siblings are we? Are we brats, jealous of our big brother and therefore always having to strive to outdo Him in acts of righteousness and perfection? "Look, Dad, what I did!" is not a cry that will get us anywhere without the workings of the Holy Spirit, for God only cares what His perfectly obedient Son did. Or worse, do we do our best to deny we know Him in public, trying to be our own independent person? Use Him to get Dad to do what we want and throw fits if He doesn't? Are we devoted, knowing deep down He loves us as is, no matter how bad we fail, and comes along to help us out so we try to copy Him? Are we fearful Dad loves Jesus best and so we

strive only to fail and just give up trying to live lives pleasing to God? God is a perfect parent and so He knows our individual nature (He gave it to us, after all, and with a purpose in mind to boot) so He does want us to emulate our big brother in His love and obedience but in our own unique, little ways. Thankfully He doesn't expect us to achieve our own salvation work, just thank our big brother for doing all the hard work and stop being such whiny, insolent, "self-sufficient" brats and get in line. Jesus conquered death for us so we have nothing to fear, the passage of Hebrews finishes, even our own failures. So time to keep going into Lent and work at following our older brother's footsteps a little better. And if we miss? It's okay, like His perfect Father, our perfect Brother won't gloat, scold, sigh, snap, or laugh because He intentionally tripped us with a commandment; He'll just take some smaller steps until we can catch up.

Prayer: *Heavenly Daddy, Thank you that Jesus brought us home to You and freed us for adoption. Help us to be honorable little sisters and brothers and thank you for loving us when we're brats. Use this time of Lent to improve our unruly behavior and bad attitudes. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

Tara Eckenroad

Tuesday, February 28

[John 5:24-29](#)

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me will have eternal life."

John 5:24

We are all familiar with John 3:16. You remember, the **"For God so Loved the World..."** passage. It is one of those Bible verses that conveys the love of God to us all. It is that verse we first learned as a child in Sunday School. It is a verse we can still repeat today without hesitation. It is that verse that tells us of God's love and the price God was willing to pay to redeem us forever. It is indeed powerful theology.

Yet in John, chapter 5, verses 24-29, Christ goes further and lays out in clear, concise, truthful, and uncomfortable language the essential doctrine of our Christian faith. He tells us the consequences of our believing or not believing the TRUTH of this scripture. Christ simply and beautifully states, without ambiguity or interpretation, **"those who hear and believes the words of him who sent me has eternal life. Those who hear but do not believe will be lost."**

Lent is a season of reflection and renewal of this truth. Lent is our season of Hope. Lent presents to us a clear choice. That choice is to believe in faith, that Christ died on the cross and arose so that we may have eternal life, or reject this truth and think that is "just part of a story." We can deny or believe. It is our choice to make.

Gods promises are stated in these verses. These verses are the essence of Lent. **This is our TRUTH!** It renews our faith and belief of a life with Christ. It gives us the assurance of a life everlasting. We have a choice.

Ron Cartee

Wednesday, March 1

[Deuteronomy 9:13-21](#)

The book of Deuteronomy deals with the relationship with God by means of the covenant of the law. Some may see this fifth book of the Bible as a series of rules that must be obeyed. However, on closer examination we see that Deuteronomy explains how people should make this relationship with God work. In the passage today, Moses reminded Israel of God's hot displeasure and desire to destroy them, and would have had it not been for Moses' interceding and prayer. During this intercession, Moses reminded the Lord that Israel was His inheritance and His people and to remember their forefathers. The people were reminded of the need for greater determination and belief in what the Lord would do. The Israelites (at least most of them) would go on to cross the river Jordan into the Promise Land. Later in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people: *"I have set before you life and death, the blessing, and the curse. So, choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days."*

During this time of Lent and throughout our lives, God wants us to have a relationship with Him that is characterized by faithfulness, loyalty, love, and devotion.

Prayer: *May I stand in solidarity today with all my brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering. May we be united in your love, and may I work to build your kingdom here on earth. In the name of the Risen Lord, I pray. Amen.*

Bill Pollard

Thursday, March 2

[John 3:16-21](#)

I am reminded of one of the first sermons I preached as a youth minister. It was titled "Teaching God's Love For Us." One of the most memorable verses from the bible, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* I however choose to reflect on verse twenty-one that says, *"But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."*

We walk in our everyday lives with the burden that weighs heavy on our heart. God is teaching us and knows the future, that is why He sent His Son to die for our sins. God shows His love for us through acts of healing, answering our prayers, and teaching us when we do wrong. Just before this, Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus how we as sinners and evil doers can be born again. John 3:16-21 tells us how we as Christ followers must stay true to the light that was placed inside of us. Jesus is that light. God knew that this life would be full of challenges and uncertainty. He knew that we would fall short and make mistakes. So He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life. He taught his Gospel and showed us the right way to live. He willingly gave his own life as a sacrifice for our sins. He is our loving Savior and Redeemer. While Jesus was on the earth, He taught His gospel. He taught that if we believe in Him, repent of our sins, and are baptized of water and of the Spirit, we will not perish. We will be forgiven. Jesus's sacrifice makes that possible. The main question I ask myself is "What will I do with Jesus?" He gave us that when he died for us. The right to choose light. Our life does not end here, we will dwell with Him and our Father and walk those streets of Gold.

Thank you.

Ricky Goodwyn, Jr.

Friday, March 3

[Hebrews 4:10-16](#)

Many times in my life I have kept so busy that I could barely keep up with what I was doing. Usually this ended up with me getting sick...maybe a bad cold, or perhaps the flu. Either way, I ended up in bed for several days recuperating. I realize that God wanted me to take time to rest, and since I was too stubborn to do it on my own, He intervened. Thankfully, I have gotten the message, and now I try to balance my schedule with rest. Along with the physical rest for my body, it is also important to have spiritual rest. This is time for reflection, and time when I can really talk with God, and focus on what He is leading me to do. I have come to look forward to my quiet time with God, as I know He always has my best interest at heart. I don't always ask for a certain outcome, because I know that what I want may not be in line with what God wants for me. Rather, I lean on walking closer with the Lord so that I can best hear what He is saying to me. Perhaps you, too, have a busy schedule, but it is important to slow down, rest, and spiritually renew your relationship with the Lord. After all, Jesus rested on the seventh day. If He needed to rest and reflect, why should we think we don't need to?

Prayer: *Lord, help me to slow down and focus on You. Help me to listen to what you are saying to me today through prayer and scripture. Amen.*

Linda Jordan

Saturday, March 4

[John 4:1-26](#)

This scripture stuck out to me. It has so much truth behind it. God is the only one we should follow, however there is bad on this earth. The bad likes to try and pull people away from the Lord. They will test you, trick you, and do everything they can to get you away from him. But you can't let that happen. You have to push them away and show that God is the only one you need to follow. Life would be nothing without him. The tricky part is letting people around you impact this. Non-believers, haters, people that just haven't found God yet. You have to show them that there is a better side. You are nothing if you are not in with the Lord. We have to help them understand they can change, how amazing he is, and how much he does. He has truly changed my life and can change everyone else's. We just have to help people get there. Lead them away from the bad spirits, the bribes, the games, they all have to go. With the Lord on your side nothing is impossible. He is the only spirit we need to follow. So, let's push them away and help everyone in trusting him.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, Thank you for all the wonderful things you have done. Help us to push away the bad and learn to follow you. Lead us in the right pathway to keep the bad out and you in. Help us to keep trusting and following you with our whole hearts. Amen.*

Chelsea Joiner

Sunday, March 5

[Mark 3:31-4:9](#)

Jesus Describes His True Family

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus Tells the Parable of the Four Soils

Mark 4:1-9

Jesus was roaming around the countryside engaging in his ministry to help people understand what God was like and bring them to God. In those days, of course, there was no e-mail, telephone, Instagram, etc. so there were probably long stretches of time when Mary had no idea exactly how her first-born child was getting along. Did he have adequate food and shelter? Was he healthy? Of course she was concerned about him as all mothers would be! So Mary, along with her other sons, found out where Jesus was and journeyed to check on him. The reception they got from Jesus must have been quite hurtful to Mary and her sons. Seems it certainly would have been after making the difficult effort to locate him and check on his well-being! Was Jesus indicating that in our spiritual family the relationships are ultimately more important and longer lasting than those formed in our physical family? Have you found this to be true?

Chapter 4 opens with Jesus telling the parable of the four soils. In those days the method for planting was that the farmer, as he walked along, would throw handfuls of seed from a bag slung over his shoulder. Of course, some of that seed would fall on rocks, hard ground etc. and was not able to sprout and grow as did the seed that landed on the prepared soil. So it is with us. We can be present at church for every service or occasion, but if we are not open and receptive to hearing the Word and putting it into practice, there will be no growth in our spiritual lives.

Prayer: *Lord, please help us to nurture the relationships we have with our families and our friends. May each of them know how much we love You by the lives we model before them. Help us to be receptive to Your Word in our private and public worship to thereby constantly grow in our faith and commitment to You. Amen.*

Rosalie Bailey

Monday, March 6

[John 4:27-42](#)

I often find myself unsure of how to be a witness for God. I struggle to understand how to spread his message, or how to speak to others about his grace. But in this passage, Jesus sows the seed of faith within a woman who is not seen as worthy. A woman who has no reason to believe his word, and yet she drops her water pot to run and tell others of Jesus, of the Messiah who told her everything that she has done. And the others did not turn her away, but welcomed her, and ran forth to Jesus. I may not have all of the right words at all of the right times, but I do have the Lord with me. And through me, he will send his message to those who need it. He will sow the seed of faith in those around me and help me tend to it, and strengthen it, so that we all may reap the benefits of his eternal love and salvation. And I know that just like the other Samaritans that the woman talked to, the people I bring God's word to will see for themselves his salvation, and will not have to only take my word for it. They will know that the Bible holds the truth, his truth, and the path to righteousness.

Jesus knew that each generation of believers will sow and reap, sow and reap, and that the way to bring people salvation was not through conquering countries through violence. He would save Gods' people through a path of peace and kindness, like the humble farmers who would care and tend to their crops and livestock. Jesus is our farmer, he is our shepherd, and he tends to us every day to help us grow and overcome our hardships. Jesus died so that we may continue to reap the benefits of his salvation. Jesus loved us so that he could show us how to love our neighbors and ourselves. And this passage reminds me that I am a part of his plan, and a part of his kingdom forever.

Marian Woodington

Tuesday, March 7

[Jeremiah 2:1-13](#)

The prophetic call to repentance is a universal theme that we find in the text often and not limited to the prophets. It sets the tone for the New Testament as John the Baptist and Jesus' first message was one of repentance. It makes sense that repentance is such a common aspect of the Biblical message. We as people make mistakes pretty frequently and are often in need of stepping back and making amends. As often as we find the message of repentance, we also find the act of contrition. What remains the connection between the two is God's enduring grace, a grace that accepts our plea of forgiveness and the grace that calls for repentance.

God's grace can be found in many ways but this passage in Jeremiah is a little different. The heading in my NRSV titles the section "God Pleads with Israel." I think it is an apt description. This call for repentance does not focus on why the Israelites need to repent, but instead looks to the cause of their infidelity. God wonders where the story has gone wrong. This tactic is effective; it is a rhetorical practice of asking someone else to reflect on the events notated and to remember how much has been done for them. It sounds like a loving parent reminding a child of all that they have received, hoping that they will show appreciation, or in Israel's case, repent. God has every right to chastise and lament the state of Israel's faith but he chooses a different option, maybe a more loving option. Giving them a chance to hear again the glory of God's presence and offering them the grace-filled choice of moving in a different direction. If anything, this foreshadows what happens with the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God continues to challenge us, through these same texts, through the life and ministry of Jesus and through our interactions with each other in the church. Hopefully, this Lenten season, you hear anew the call to repentance and feel afresh the grace of God in your life.

Adam Blagg

Wednesday, March 8

[John 5:1-24](#)

From Death to Life

It is a sobering fact that from the time we are infants we experience human suffering, be it psychological, physical, emotional, or social. Like the sick man in our Bible story, we live through painful times.

When we become Christians, we also learn that to be a follower of Christ is to become keenly aware of His suffering. He carried our pain and was sorrowful for the suffering humans are subjected to and cause on others around them.

As a member of the church I was pastoring, a middle age man confessed to me: "Before I accepted Christ in my heart, I caused much heartache to members of my family. Now that I am a born-again Christian, I grieve over the pain that I have caused my Savior and my loved ones." During Lent, we are observing the time when He prepares to go to death for us. We feel grief that He carried our pain to the point of death.

That is not the whole story however. For, as He promised, He carries us beyond death to his own Life Everlasting. Our human suffering is but a preamble to a new life without suffering. As He said "...as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son also give his life to anyone He wants to, (v. 21) ... "I assure you, anyone who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from Death to Life" (v. 24). Rejoice!

Samuel J. Espinoza

Thursday, March 9

[Romans 2:12-24](#)

Paul said that those who just hear the law are not necessarily righteous. But those who obey the law are righteous, even the Gentiles, who don't have the law, may have the law written on their hearts. The true righteous will be decided when Jesus judges everyone.

Jews who have the law and brag about their relationship with God are not saved unless their actions reflect the law and what they say. They dishonor God and his name among the Gentiles if they don't do what they say. Do we dishonor God as Christians when we do things that go against our Christian doctrine? Do other people observe us and say, "I want to be a Christian" or "What a hypocrite!"?

Bob Jellum

Friday, March 10

[John 5:30-47](#)

John was a torch, blazing and bright, and you were glad enough to dance for an hour or so in his bright light. But the witness that really confirms me far exceeds John's witness. It's the work the Father gave me to complete. These very tasks, as I go about completing them, confirm that the Father, in fact, sent me. The Father who sent me, confirmed me. And you missed it. You never heard his voice, you never saw his appearance. There is nothing left in your memory of his Message because you do not take his Messenger seriously.

Key verses from *The Message* translation

In our Sunday School class, we have been exploring what it means to be a United Methodist and how Jesus' life and words shaped the way John Wesley saw his work in the world. One of our discussions was about "Doing" - what does it mean to be "striving for perfection" (in love) as John Wesley taught? Wesley believed that we (like Jesus) must work for the transformation of our society, to bring the Kin-dom of Heaven here on earth. We do this work knowing that transformation is only possible through God's grace. AND, we do this work WITH God and WITH each other. There are many, many ways for us to work toward perfection - and all of us have different gifts to share. As the verses from John state, the witness for Jesus is the work that God gave Jesus to do. Perhaps we too can be a light and witness shining the way to Jesus and to the transformation of the world through the grace of God.

*Blessed are we, living in this small space,
in these bodies we now inhabit,
within the walls of circumstance,
in these short years and finite strength,
and with these eyes that see only so far.*

*We are fragile, contingent beings.
Yet blessed are we,
recognizing that it is our limits as well as our gifts
that can shape the natural contours of what is possible,
that guide us to what is ours to do.*

Blessed are we when it is not our greatness that speaks, but our littleness.

*For it is our vulnerability that is the truest thing about us,
the place where mutual connection is possible,
where competition ends and community begins.*

*And oh how blessed are we in our fragility and dependence and brokenness,
knowing that You, O God, hold all things together.*

There is no cure for being human...but for each other, we are all good medicine.

Kate Bowler

Christy Blagg

Saturday, March 11

[John 7:1-13](#)

In today's passage, Jesus' brothers are encouraging him to go to Judea for the Feast of Tabernacles. They want him to go show his disciples the miraculous things he can do. In some ways, it makes sense. If he's the Messiah, why doesn't he just go show everyone that he's something

special? They even say to him, *"No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world"* (vs. 4). Jesus, however, knows that the Jewish leaders are looking for a way to kill him (vs. 1). Going to the festival in the way his brothers want him to go could prove disastrous for him. Jesus also realizes that he's not really the one calling the shots. It's all about God's timing, not his or that of his brothers.

How many times are we like Jesus' brothers in this story and want things to happen right away? Why can't I just find that dream job? Why can't this relationship be fixed now? Why isn't the medication or treatment working faster? Sometimes things just take time. Yes, it would be easier to rush through the hard, uncomfortable parts to get to what we really want. But maybe it's in those difficult times that the real learning and healing happens. Maybe the job that wasn't in your plan gave you skills that were beneficial as you worked your way to your dream job...or maybe steered you in a direction you didn't even know you wanted to go. Going through that broken relationship was hard, but maybe it led you to another relationship you didn't know you needed. It's frustrating the medication didn't work as well or quickly as you'd hoped, but now you're able to provide support for others going through the same situation. Just like Jesus' situation, it's important to trust in God's timing. He can see the big picture; we can't. Those parts we'd rather skip just might end up being the best parts after all.

Melissa Miller

Sunday, March 12

[Mark 5:1-20](#)

Whenever I read this account from Mark it always triggers memories of a former patient from many years ago who wreaked havoc on the locked behavioral unit where I worked. A sizable fellow of imposing stature, it was frightening to witness his frequent rage-filled outbursts aimed at staff, other patients, and even himself. Occasionally, he would flip the hefty medication cart sending paper cups and water pitchers flying.

It's understandable that the Gerasene community feared the demon possessed man in today's scripture. And, being a Gentile, it's doubtful that he had ever heard of Jesus, much less prayed for deliverance from his torment. Jesus and his disciples had just arrived at the cemetery after sailing across the stormy lake. It seemed an unlikely place to set anchor, but Jesus knew a soul was in distress. Our all-knowing, merciful Lord knows our needs even when we fail to pray.

The power of Jesus over evil was absolute as thousands of demons left the man for the swine herd. Although dramatic and memorable, this scripture is not just about defeating evil, and pigs plunging to their death. It also speaks of mercy, faith, joyful obedience, and discipleship.

Filled with joy and gratitude, the healed man hoped to accompany Jesus and join his ministry. Instead, Jesus directed him to remain in his own community to testify to the Lord's mercy and what

He had done for him. That seemingly random trip across the lake to save one man opened a door to faith for those who had never heard of Jesus. A new disciple in Christ had been born. Word would reach countless others as the man obediently shared the message of Jesus.

Perhaps now, when I read this passage, I will focus less on the terrifying imagery of demon possession, and more on its message of discipleship. As Christians, each of us is called to witness by proclaiming the gospel message to others. Through prayer and obedience to that call, we can be that connection that opens a door to salvation for someone who has never known about redemption and eternal life that is promised through faith in Jesus Christ.

Carole Gaines

Monday, March 13

[Jeremiah 7:1-15](#)

I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you but you did not answer.

Jeremiah 7:13

Some years ago, my minister asked this question: "Do you hear first and then listen or do you listen and then hear?" I thought the answer was simple. If we are going to hear, we first have to be listening, but then we need to be listening to hear. After pondering this question for some time, I'm not sure which should come first, but my conclusion now is if we want a connection to God or with God, we have to practice hearing and listening.

During Lent, we talk about fasting by giving up certain foods we enjoy. I have also heard about mind fasting where we would try to clear our minds and not be distracted by outside noises and by letting go of our own thoughts to make room for God to fill up with His love and peace and to help us find direction and purpose in our lives.

Mother Teresa said, "The beginning of prayer is silence. If we really want to pray, we must first learn to listen, for in the silence of the heart God speaks. To be able to hear God we need a clean heart, for a clean heart can see God, can hear God, can listen to God; and then only from the fullness of our heart, can we speak to God. But we cannot speak unless we have listened, unless we have made that connection with God in the silence of our heart."

Peggy Kennedy

Tuesday, March 14

[Romans 4:13-25](#)

A popular economics professor on my Hillsdale College campus commonly makes the joke, "Every resource is scarce... except for God's grace." He makes an excellent point! In a world where

material resources always run out, we can always rely on the Father's mercies to be an abundant, everflowing stream. Romans 4 highlights this feature of the grace of God. It is infinite and plentiful. And as the passage explains, we as humans rely on its boundlessness to be restored.

The passage opens by explaining that God's covenant with man is not earned by accordance with the law. In fact, it's the exact opposite. The marvelous grace of God is the only way the covenant, spanning from Abraham to David to the Messiah and now to the church, can come to be. The narrative of God's restoration with humanity begins with grace, and as we'll see as we unpack the Lent and Easter story, grace will be a continuous theme. And as the passage has made clear, there is no earning this grace. By definition, grace cannot be earned. But Romans 4 does explain the key to receiving the Lord's never-ending mercies.

Faith. We must believe in the God, *"who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."* We have to trust in this ever present, generous grace. Romans tells us plainly, "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham." The reconciliation of Easter, the great promise Romans speaks of, comes only when we exhibit the faith to surrender to our dependence on God's grace, a process which requires great humility and meekness. But the reward of this meekness is certainly worth it. It is the justification provided through God's ample and plenteous grace. As we enter into Lent, may we prepare ourselves to willingly embrace God's abundant mercy so that we can receive this great promise of justification and renewal.

Jonathan Williams

Wednesday, March 15

[John 8:12-20](#)

"Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness."

Death is guaranteed to all of us, but only a few ever feel ready. With the many distractions throughout our lives, death can seem distant, and unlikely to garnish our day-to-day focus. That is until the loss of a loved one refocuses our perspective that tomorrow is never promised.

Recently, two 13-year-old friends of my daughter both suffered unexplainable health emergencies. Both girls were happy, healthy Christians who loved giggling with friends, animals, and of course, their cell phones. Within about a week of each other, they both became severely ill. Sadly, one collapsed and passed away after only a couple days of being sick. The other has spent months in the hospital, requiring countless blood and platelet transfusions to stay alive. She has continuously fought this battle with a smile on her face and is the first to reassure her parents at her bedside that she "will be okay." Sure enough, a donor was finally found and she will likely start the bone marrow transplant process within a week.

No one knows why both of these sweet God-loving girls have suffered, or why one survived and one did not, but their passion for Christ showed brightly throughout their many achievements and tribulations during their lives. And that same love and devotion has helped give hope to the many family and friends trying to carry on.

Just as the Pharisees argued with Jesus, we are also guilty of not being the disciples he calls us to be. But by keeping our faith alive, and Jesus in our heart, we too will be blessed and have eternal life. Tomorrow may not be assured, but God's love is.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for sending your Son so we may be forgiven of our sins. Please help me treat every day as the miracle it truly is. Amen.*

Emily Joiner

Thursday, March 16

[Romans 5:12-21](#)

When I was in junior high and high school, students changed classes to go to their next subject. Otherwise, no student was allowed to be in the hallway. If a student had to go out in-between classes, the teacher would give them a hall pass. That pass provided the way to freely move about in the hall.

In this passage of Romans, Paul is explaining the difference of Sin equating Death (both physical and spiritual) and the gift of life through Jesus Christ. He stated that sin entered the world through Adam's disobedience to God and, as a consequence, death. So humankind inherited the downward spiral of sin, disobedience, and death. Really depressing! One man's transgression would cause the death of so many.

But Paul continues with how another man could provide another way. Jesus was the gift by the grace of God to save many. Jesus overcame death for us. Paul certainly knew the difference between condemnation and life with Christ. He was an early persecutor of believers before he had the "struck by lightning" encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul didn't have his hall pass!

For three days, Paul remained without sight. From Acts chapter 9, we learn how Ananias went to Paul, laid his hands on him, and said *"the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* Paul was immediately healed. He stayed for several days with the disciples and then he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues as the Son of God.

Paul's conversion was immediate and profound. He knew that one must receive and believe in God's abundant grace through His son, Jesus. He chose life in Christ, eternal life. Paul was no longer condemned under that penalty of death. He was now a faithful witness to write all his letters and travel freely all over the Middle East to spread the good news of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Paul found his hall pass!

Prayer: *Lord God, thank you for sending your Son to us. Such an abundant gift of grace that we do not deserve. May we be faithful followers like those early believers. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Liz Lawson

Friday, March 17

[Romans 8:33-47](#)

*He who belongs to God hears what God says.
The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.
Romans 8:47*

Those who accept Jesus as the source of spiritual truth are free from the enslavement of sin. They choose heavenly things over worldly ones. They have God as their spiritual father rather than claiming a father based on genealogy.

There are times God may send situations into our lives or ask things of us that we do not feel capable of dealing with. We ask for His help or some sign to show us the way. Other times the demands of our job, family, or friends interfere with our following God's plan even though he has answered our prayer request. At those times, do we try to use our resources and make our own plans, turning our back on God's request and focusing on solving our earthly desires and demands first?

I am guilty of trying to solve all my problems on my own. I ask for God's help, but then I read or talk to others and arrive at a solution I think will work. I do not wait for God's response. I need to remember to be patient and instead of trying to find an answer on my own, I should use my waiting time to listen for God's answer. Then, I must be willing to implement the answer given to me and not adjust it in any way. In the hymn, *The Summons*, by John Bell, the songwriter gives us many examples of listening to God and following his example and answers. Another example of listening to God taken from the wonderful music for the worship service at Otterbein on February 5th was the last line of the refrain from the song *When You Call*, sung by the College chorale. The line states: *I am yours. I pray nothing earthly interferes.*

Mary Sue Wenger

Saturday, March 18

[Romans 6:12-23](#)

In Romans, Paul reminds us that in response to humanity's continued rebellion, God has responded with renewed promises of forgiveness, grace, and blessing. Unfortunately, the reality is

that too many of us who have experienced the extravagant graciousness of God repeat the mistakes of Israel and continue to live unchanged lives. It is as if we think that God's grace and forgiveness has given us a license to act in ways that continue to contribute to the hurt and brokenness in the world without guilt or fear of consequences. Our sin is inconsequential, trivial, and 'no big deal' because God forgives us.

But Paul emphatically condemns such attitudes. Sin is still a 'big deal.' To habitually sin or nonchalantly continue to sin is to serve sin rather than God and to remain in bondage to sin and death. In other words, we become instruments (weapons) of sin and perpetuate brokenness in the world: the poor are neglected, the vulnerable are oppressed, outsiders are ostracized, violence rages unchecked, apathy prevails, destruction spreads, and deception reigns. Paul insists we may have been helpless slaves of sin before our baptism (our union with Christ Jesus), but that is no longer true. Through our identification (participation) with Jesus in his death and resurrection we have been set free from the power of sin and death and are now 'slaves to righteousness.' We have received a grace that not only forgives us, but also transforms us and sets us free so that we may live and love like Jesus more and more each day. When we present ourselves as individuals and as Christian communities under the reign of God rather than sin, we become the instruments of righteousness --- the hungry are fed, injustice is exposed, violence is renounced, outsiders experience hospitality, the lonely are visited, broken lives are healed, hope is restored, and the kingdom is made visible on earth here and now. During this season of Lent may we hear the challenge of Paul. Let us reflect upon who we serve. May we turn to God and allow his sanctifying grace to change us and realign our lives. May we allow the Spirit to renew and refresh us so that we might live and love like Jesus and truly make a lasting, positive difference in the lives of other people in our neighborhoods and throughout the world.

Dan Brown

Sunday, March 19

[Galatians 4:21-5:1](#)

Lent is a time of the church year set aside to remember the love of God poured out on us through Jesus on the cross, in His death and His defeat of death and sin, in His resurrection that brings us Eternal Life.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul instructs these early Christians (Judaizers) that Gentile believers need not obey Jewish laws to be saved. This was a particularly pressing controversy in young churches and new converts.

Do we today fall into this same mindset? Do we try to make fellow believers talk as we do, act exactly like we do, practice beliefs as we do, and negatively judge those who aren't exactly like us in all aspects of worship, beliefs, and practices? Can we have a civil discussion about differences in opinion without becoming hostile to those whose opinions may be different than our own?

It seems that our divisive political discourse would indicate not; our tendency to not respect those who are different than we are would seem not; or who have a different vision for the future (even in the UMC) than we do would truthfully seem not so!

Paul wrote in the verses referenced above that *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1).

Christ died to set us free from sin and a long list of rules - not free to do whatever we want. That would return us to slavery to our selfish desires. We must stand against those who would enslave us with rules or laws, methods, or special conditions for being saved.

Christ taught us we only need to fully love God and our fellow man as ourselves for salvation!

As we contemplate God's love for us as demonstrated by Christ's death and resurrection, let's also remember to be compassionate and tolerant of ALL others.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus and his death and resurrection to give us, who believe, eternal life. Bless us with harmonious relationships with our fellow men and women in order to transform this world to what you would have us be. Amen.*

Mike Earman

Monday, March 20

[John 6:1-15](#)

During Lent we focus on Christ's sacrificial life, how he lived his life and the lessons he taught through parables. As with all of his teaching, they are multifaceted with hidden messages within the obvious.

Lessons learned from Paul's telling the story of feeding the 5,000.

We all know the story Paul relates to in John 6:1-15. Let's look past the obvious to see his underlying meaning. Feeding of the 5,000 was an opportunity for Christ to show how faith in God, not in our age, abilities, or resources, can produce miracles. He took a small boy's few loaves of bread and fishes and turned it into something great. The underlying meaning is to never think that because of our age or limited resources, we cannot be of service to God.

We learn that God gives in abundance. He will take whatever we give in time, ability, or resources and multiply it beyond our wildest expectations. The young boy came forward, even though a few loaves of bread and a few fishes could never feed 5,000 people. He took the first step, a step of faith. God will work through us but we must take the first step. No matter how little we have to offer, have faith, take the first step, and let him do the rest!

Vicki Gaines

Tuesday, March 21

[John 6:16-27](#)

As you read this scripture, I invite you to draw your attention to the last verse: *"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."*

As Lent takes place, one of our main focuses should be on our relationship with God. It is easy to become distracted or tempted by outside factors: maybe it's been a busy week, you have guests coming to visit you, or technology has been overpowering. There can be a number of situations that may pull our attention away from God, whether it's intentional or not, it happens.

Something that we need to remember to do is to put our energy into God and what he has in store for us. Taking time at the end of your day to pray or gathering with a community to study the word of God are all wonderful ways to do so. All of our efforts should go into something that matters, into something that gives us eternal life (aka God!). So as the week and season of Lent continue, try to recenter your focus into things that will not spoil or age, but into the everlasting love of our awesome God.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to find your love despite the chaos of our lives. Grant us strength so that we may focus our attention not onto materialistic items that will not last, but to your power and holiness. Let us also help others in the same way you help us. Amen.*

Lena Blagg

Wednesday, March 22

[Romans 8:1-11](#)

This scripture releases us from the pressures of living up to expectations set by society. Paul is encouraging us to turn over our problems to God, to "get over ourselves." We become so self-absorbed that we push God out of our lives. When God becomes our focus rather than ourselves, we can release anxiety and begin to experience life on God's terms.

However, Paul does remind us that God's terms can be rather strict. He requires us to live as Jesus did. That can be very difficult to do. Then we get into the question of 'moral muscle.' Do we rely upon God to lead us or can we do the right thing without God's guidance?

There are times in everyone's life when stresses become unbearable and the best choice, maybe the only choice, is to turn to God. What a feeling of relief that can be!!

Wouldn't it be wonderful to do this on a daily basis rather than only in dire circumstances? By accepting the spirit of God in our lives, we redirect the focus from ourselves and allow God to guide us. We get to experience life on God's terms.

The words of John Wimber express this release much better than I can. Here is his text from *Spirit Song*, a hymn you can find in the hymnbook on page 347.

O let the Son of God enfold you with his Spirit and his love.
Let him fill your heart and satisfy your soul.
O let him have the things that hold you,
and his spirit like a dove will descend upon your life and make you whole.

Sandra Hodge

Thursday, March 23

[Romans 8:12-27](#)

*We know that the whole of creation has been groaning
as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

8:22

*In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what
we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans.*

*And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because
the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*

8:26-27

Sometimes prayer is hard. It's easy to give thanks for the endless blessings we enjoy and to offer heartfelt appeals for family, friends, and neighbors when difficult decisions must be made or when illness and grief surround those we love.

Prayer becomes tougher as we dwell on worldwide tribulations. Creation continues to groan today just as it did in Paul's time. Violence abounds. Russia is bringing death and destruction to Ukraine. Since 2006, forty-eight thousand people have been killed in Mexico due to drug-related terrorism, and in 2022, the US experienced six hundred mass shootings.

Man-made activities such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation are speeding up climate change. In the valley, flocks of butterflies no longer fill the purple flowered bushes, and the call of the Whip-por-will is becoming rare. The Sahel Region of Africa has lost millions of acres of farmland to the desert which increases famines among its people.

As Paul was writing his letter to the Romans, there was a huge discrepancy of wealth among the people. That unequal distribution of resources remains today. The United States is comprised of only 5% of Earth's population, yet it consumes 17% of the world's energy and produces 15% of its

goods and services. While we enjoy full stomachs and warm beds, more than 828 million of the world's people go to bed hungry, and 60% of the population have no toilets.

What do we say as we go to pray about the horrors, sorrows, and injustices of our groaning world? Do we ask God to solve the multitude of problems? Do we ask God to show us how we can make a difference? Do we ask that suffering people be comforted and that those who do evil be punished, or do we pray for those who prey upon others?

We often just don't know where to begin. We have no words. Paul lets us know that it is possible to bring problems to God that are too overwhelming or confusing to vocalize. He reminds us that we don't have to worry about praying the wrong way because the Spirit searches our hearts and will carry our wordless groaning to God.

"God is praying with you, through you, and even for you." (Mark D. Roberts)

Barb German

Friday, March 24

[Jeremiah 23:1-8](#)

In Jeremiah 23:1-8, God is telling the Shepherds how they have not done a good job of watching over and managing his flock. Flocks require a lot of work and time and, without proper care, won't survive. I think this message is telling us that we need to take care of the things God has blessed us with and protect his word. God blesses us in many ways and gives us countless blessings that we sometimes take for granted and don't take for all they're worth. Every day there are little things we could all be thankful for and thank God for that we don't always pay attention to. We have to take care of all the blessings and things we have in our life that make us happy. For instance, if we plant a garden in the spring but fail to water and weed it, then the garden will not be successful and produce goods. Even the little things such as waking up and having food to eat for breakfast are simple things that we should thank God for giving us and take care of the things he does give us.

Another thing I take from this passage is that we need to do God's word. We need to spread the word of his love and make the world a better place by doing what he tells us and helping others. In the reading God is telling the shepherds they have failed to be a good judge and continue to participate in evil doings as they did not take care of their people and serve them how they should. We should serve each other with respect, compassion, and love.

Christian Joiner

Saturday, March 25

[Romans 9:1-18](#)

*...I raised you up for the very purpose that I might display my power
in you and that my name might be proclaimed to all the earth.*

Romans 9:17 (NIV)

For whatever reason, this passage brought to mind the following from *In the Valley*:
"Nor 'til a life is broken is it ready for the Master's use."

A piece of wood once bitterly complained because it was being cut and being filled with rifts and holes. But he who held the wood and whose knife was cutting into it so remorselessly did not listen to the sore complaining. He was making a flute out of the wood he held and was too wise to desist when entreated to do so.

He said, "Oh, thou, foolish piece of wood, without these rifts and holes thou wouldst be only a mere stick forever – a bit of hard black ebony with no power to make music or to be of any use. These rifts I am making, which seem to be destroying thee, will change thee into a flute, and thy sweet music that shall charm the souls of men. My cutting of thee is the making of thee, for then thou shalt be precious and valuable, and a blessing in this world."

David could not have sung his sweetest songs had he not been sorely afflicted. His afflictions made his life an instrument on which God could breathe the music of His love to charm and soothe the hearts of men.

"Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, 'why hast thou made me so!'"

Romans 9:20

The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love; Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; Where there is sadness, joy.

O, Devine Master, grant I may not so much seek

To be consoled, as to console;

To be understood, as to understand;

To be loved, as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Marylee Huffman

Sunday, March 26

[1 Corinthians 9:19-27](#)

*¹⁹⁻²³ Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone,
I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people:
religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists,
the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—
but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.
I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved
life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!*

*²⁴⁻²⁵ You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins.
Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades.
You're after one that's gold eternally.*

*²⁶⁻²⁷ I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line.
I'm giving it everything I've got. No lazy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition.
I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.*

1 Corinthians 9:19-27, *The Message*

In this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul shares that his freedom in Christ is not used to promote himself, but rather to share his belief in ways that a variety of people can understand. His service to others is rooted in the love of Christ and he relates to different people by trying to experience life from their point of view. In other words, he looks for common ground rather than setting himself apart.

As followers of Jesus, aren't we called to do the same? Looking for ways to understand the life experiences of others without judgement, listening to their stories of pain and injustice and seeking ways to help, call for practice and discernment on our part. That's tough stuff! This Lenten journey reminds us that we are created for community, for each other. Jesus says time and time again: Love God and love each other. Thankfully we are not left to our own devices! God is with us; we are not alone!

Pat Wingert

Monday, March 27

[John 9:1-17](#)

As a child in Christian education, I knew the story of Jesus giving the blind man his sight. At the time, I thought Jesus performed such a wonderful act to set an example on how to proceed through life - help others! Yes, I still believe that is one message Jesus meant to send.

As I refresh my understanding of this Scripture, two other meanings come to mind. As the old saying goes, "Don't judge a book by its cover." In Jesus' time, people thought the man was blind because he or his parents had sinned. Jesus dispelled this idea by saying neither the man nor his parents were sinners. The message here was to keep an open mind and don't pre-judge others. This is one of Jesus' teachings I embrace as I grow older. "You can't judge a man until you walk a country mile in his shoes" (Zach Brown Band).

Another more powerful message recently came to mind as I studied this Scripture. Verses 3 and 4 say Jesus is performing the "works" of God. *"He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me..."* Jesus used this deed with the blind man to emphasize the blind man's gift of sight was God working through Jesus to *"open the eyes of the people of that time."* To me this was God's way of authenticating Jesus as the Son of God. Believing in him and his teachings will open their "eyes" to a righteous life.

Andy and Tammy Duxbury

Tuesday, March 28

[Jeremiah 25:1-17](#)

This scripture is all about people not listening, which happens quite a lot in the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah is sent to tell the people of Judah that they will be punished for not listening. God has sent many prophets to tell them to turn away from false gods and sin, but the people were foolish, just as people are today. Humans in the 21st century may not worship false idols like Zeus, but we definitely worship money and power as deities. God's people invoked the wrath of God, and God sent Jeremiah to give each evil nation a cup filled to the brim with his wrath. After reading this, I thought of Noah and the ark, on a smaller scale. It is a cleansing of those who are evil. God has tried many times to put his people on the right path, but they have failed Him again and again. It seems to me that false idols are one of the most prevalent sins in the Bible, and a very prevalent sin in our time as well.

Prayer: *Dear God, Help us to realize you as the one and only God in our lives. We ask for help against the powers of the modern world, where the desire for money and power seems to permeate our lives always. Amen.*

Micah Blagg

Wednesday, March 29

[John 10:1-18](#)

Seven times in the book of John, Jesus makes statements that say, "I Am..." which point to His unique, divine identity and purpose. In today's passage from John, we read two of them: "I am the Good Shepherd," (verses 11 and 14) and "I am the Gate," (verses 7 and 9).

We learn that Jesus loves and protects us as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for His sheep. Using illustrations like shepherd and sheep were everyday terms that Jesus' audience would easily understand and relate to. Saying He is the gate is a metaphor showing that the only way to enter God's kingdom is to go through Jesus. We must accept Jesus into our hearts first before we can go through the gate. In some translations the verse says "the door." Jesus is the only door by which we may enter and be saved. Sheep are totally dependent upon the shepherd who takes care of them. At night when the shepherd would drive the sheep into a pen or circle of rocks, there was no gate or door. There was only an opening where the shepherd would lay, protecting his sheep and literally becoming their door. What a beautiful picture of what Jesus does for us. Jesus is our good shepherd who sacrificed himself on the cross for our sins. We have this wonderful opportunity to know Jesus and live with him forever. This Lenten season, be sure to focus on this gift of salvation and know your Good Shepherd's voice.

Elisabeth Williams

Thursday, March 30

[John 10:19-42](#)

The Jews gathered around Jesus, saying, "how long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me is greater than all. I and the father are one.

John 10:24-30

Jesus has been in Jerusalem teaching regularly in the temple. His teaching evokes much discussion and questions concerning his identity, origin, and authority, and results in a division among the people. Some believe that he is the Messiah, and others believe he is a blasphemer who deserves to die, particularly the Jewish religious leaders. The problem, of course, is that regardless of what Jesus says or does, the debate does not end. Jesus has given numerous examples of His identity and has performed many miracles in his Father's name. He then tells them, "You do not believe me because you are not my sheep."

Who are Jesus' sheep? Jesus tells us that His sheep are those who belong to Him, who hear and recognize His voice and follow Him, those who have been given to Him by His Father. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, tells us that everything depends on belonging to Him. *"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."* In this scripture, it is not so much that we know Jesus, but that he knows us.

Jesus does not say, "Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep." He says, *"You belong to me and to my Father already. No one can snatch you out of my hand."* Being secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus often speaks.

Jesus is telling the doubters that he is one with God, and he is declaring that he knows all who follow him and they know him for who he is. Yes, we too have times of doubt, but we are called, in faith, to hear the voice of Jesus, our shepherd who knows us, and to follow him in our lives. It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth concerning Jesus.

Prayer: *Good Shepherd, you know us by our name and our identity is not hidden from you. Strengthen us to follow you faithfully each day. Amen.*

Betty Redmond

Friday, March 31

[John 11:1-27](#)

*"Yes Master, all along I have believed that you are the Messiah,
the Son of God who comes into the world."*

The Message

The Lenten season always brings the stories of Jesus's ministry alive for me. How helpful they are for living today. Each teaches a lesson, offers hope, the gift of prayer, the rewards of kindness, and the simple idea of loving our neighbors.

Jesus was friends with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They believed and trusted in Him. It is the same today. Jesus is our friend. If we believe and trust Him we find peace and comfort.

In 2009, I had my mitral heart valve replaced with open heart surgery. I walked into the ER with shortness of breath and pain in my upper back at 4:00 pm and by 9:00 pm I was in surgery. The road to recovery had bumps and sleepless nights in the hospital. My family and friends were so present and supported me. I honestly shared with them how hard, at times, it was to pray. My daughters would read me the cards I received with prayers and quotes. I was able to say to God, I claim these prayers of others today. It was a meaningful connection with God and others.

In July of 2022, I had symptoms of my valve not working; this was a very different journey. After much testing, surgery did not take place until October. Rev. Blagg called and after I explained what "was," He asked, "what can we do for you?" The most important gift to me was prayer. I appreciate my church family and the prayers that were lifted for me. Once again, I called on them, most especially during the night. This time I had a much less invasive surgery, TMVR just perfected in the last several years for the mitral valve replacement. We are very fortunate to have a Heart and Valve team at Sentara to guide each patient through the best outcome for them.

Believe and trust. Amazing how I saw it work in my life. Not always by me but through others. I believe God surrounds us with "earth angels." We meet them every day and they pray for us, even without our knowing.

How supportive it must have been to Mary and Martha as Jesus, their friend, worked a miracle in the life of Lazarus.

Prayer: *Most gracious Father, we thank you for this Lenten season where your Son, Jesus, brings to life the stories that teach us how to live. Amen.*

Anna Steele

Saturday, April 1

[John 11:28-44](#)

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

This is the story of the strong faith of Mary & Martha and the death of their brother, Lazarus. They were mourning their loss, as were the Jews who came to comfort them. I think believers mourn a bit differently than non-believers do because we have hope, and we gain strength from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Like Mary and Martha, we Christians do mourn. We are only human, and we should mourn and cry. After all, verse 35 says, "*Jesus wept.*" He was anguished by the hurt that Mary and Martha felt. And perhaps He was thinking about his own inevitable death on the cross. After all, Jesus knew that He would raise Lazarus from the dead, yet He still wept. That gives me so much hope.

What Jesus did for Lazarus is also a promise for all who believe: not even death itself can defeat us. If we are in Christ, we will have eternal life and victory over death, no matter what we face today.

When we have times in which we are struggling, anxious, or afraid, we can look to Jesus and remember His promises of life forever with Him. Nothing is too big, and no problem is too difficult for Jesus to overcome. Not even death itself.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, I am so grateful that you are in charge of my life. Help me to draw strength from you and draw closer to you so that I can face the challenges that only You can give me the strength I need to overcome. Amen.*

Linda Jordan

Sunday, April 2

[Matthew 21:12-17](#)

If you are the type of person, and not everyone is, who appreciates a certain order to life, this scripture should speak to you. Jesus enters a familiar place and finds it being used for purposes it was not intended for. The temple was full of money changers and people buying and selling. The holy was being profaned. While it is not stated directly, Jesus' quotation of scripture alludes to those being driven out were not only selling, but cheating their customers in the process. The purchase of sacrificial offerings was not unheard of; most people did not bring their own doves to the temple but would have bought them in Jerusalem, but the practice seems to have crept a little too close for Jesus.

We find this in our world as well. Certain activities are not to be conducted close to other things. You don't smoke at hospitals. You don't raise your voice in the library. You don't sell doves and cheat customers in the temple. We know that our own lives have things we try to make incongruent as well. We try to be kind when at church, quiet when others are praying, respectful of those we meet. In the life of the church, we have often attended to how we act and dress as being respectful of the holy nature of the place we worship. While this is always contextual, it is a good reminder that acknowledging the holiness of our worship space is important. Over the years at OUMC that has often meant how we dress on Sunday, how we respond to the service, or when we sit or stand. All of this leads us not to a certain set of expected behaviors, but instead to an alignment of our heart to the nature of our location. Jesus does not find this when he visits the temple, instead he finds greed and theft. I hope that when our worship experience is observed by the divine, that our inward reverence for the holy is never found wanting.

Adam Blagg

Monday, April 3

[Philippians 3:1-14](#) (NKJV)

I often set goals in my life and then fail to meet them. I consistently fall flat even when I make small goals like losing five pounds, drinking adequate water, exercising daily, or sleeping more. These are all things that would improve my health, so why do I keep missing the mark?

In this passage from Philippians, Paul says, "*forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" These verses challenge and encourage us to join Paul in making our mark, or our goal, the most important one: **to know Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.** Jesus loves us so much that he came, lived, died, rose, and now intercedes for us and one day will return for us. We should count everything else loss in the world to gain Christ, the greatest of all treasures. Paul's focus is to be found in Christ, finding a righteousness not based on works of the law, but on faith. Paul wants to get the

mind of Jesus, be nearer to Jesus, do the work of Jesus and put on the likeness of Christ. Using imagery of an athlete, Paul is pressing on toward that goal. He is chasing it to catch hold of it. At the end of a race, a runner stretches beyond normal movements to reach the goal. He strains toward and stretches forward to reach that finish line. As Christians, this is what we need to do. We cannot allow the past to overshadow our future potential and possibilities. Forget the past, press on toward the goal and the prize of knowing our Lord and Savior.

Back to the goals I fail to meet...no goal setting is complete until I insert God into the plan. To walk in God's will, Jesus Christ must always be the central focus. When I fail at my personal goals, I am relying on myself and not setting my eyes on Jesus. Remember the old gospel song, "Higher Ground"?

*I'm pressing on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound, "Lord plant my feet on higher ground."*

We are on a journey to eternity with Jesus. Therefore, we should think more like athletes and go towards the goal of knowing Jesus and God's word and will with all our might. During this season of Lent, may the Lord open our eyes to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ - press on!

Sandra Schaefer

Tuesday, April 4

[John 12:20-26](#)

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified."

*Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies,
it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

*If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also;
if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*

John 12:23-26

Jesus had reached a pinnacle of notoriety and was welcomed into Jerusalem with a parade of followers honoring his arrival. To celebrate, Lazarus gave a feast, where people clamored to get a glimpse of Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples knew that the authorities were planning to assassinate him, so they were trying to protect Jesus from strangers. Jesus knew that his death was near and, in this verse, he explains the meaning of his sacrifice and a reminder of his mission. He explains that we must give of ourselves in order to make the life that God wants for us.

This makes me think about the words in our prayer of confession, where we ask forgiveness for "the things we have done and the things we have left undone." This verse reminds us that to follow

the Lord we must be ready to sacrifice. We must give of ourselves and share our gifts to serve and to enrich to world around us.

I have to ask myself how many times, I have “left things undone” and missed an opportunity to help someone or to serve, even in the smallest ways. Welcoming a new neighbor, attending a funeral, writing that difficult letter or email or putting off unpleasant things are fairly passive, but they are the great undone. Especially in the harder, more difficult things, like forgiving and not judging and being patient, we are duty-bound to follow by generously giving of ourselves. We must humble ourselves and serve others in the name of Christ. How wonderful our world would be if we followed God this way? If we viewed our abilities, time and possessions as God’s tools so that he can work through us and if we do his will like Jesus did. We must remain mindful always of how our small and large sacrifices serve the world around us, if we strive to be like Jesus and serve him as he commands.

“There is within us a potential for goodness beyond our imagining; for giving which seeks no reward; for listening without judgement; for loving unconditionally.” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Prayer: *Dear God, Thank you for your unconditional love and for the sacrifice of your son Jesus Christ. Help me to remain mindful of my duty to serve those around me with love and kindness. Teach me to listen with an open heart and without judgement. Teach me to walk the path of love with a generous spirit and look for ways to serve to world around me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.*

Julie Clough

Wednesday, April 5

[Jeremiah 17:5-10, 14-17](#), [Philippians 4:1-13](#), [John 12:27-36](#)

The End is Nigh

Tomorrow night we embark on remembering the most critical and painful days of Christianity. Wednesday, according to Bible scholars, was a day of rest for Jesus. He began the week entering to praises of those who, in a couple of days, would call for his death, cleaned the Temple, and had some final debates. How would you decompress while also preparing for the final push to redeem your Father’s creation if you were Jesus? Nap? Game night with the boys?

What thoughts steeled Him for the impending crucifixion and betrayal by those who claimed they would be there until the bitter end? He would have had today’s prophetic writing that cursed anyone who trusts in man, whose heart departed from God, while blesses those who trust in God. Maybe He would have looked forward to the future, and thought of a zealot turned apostle. Forgetting the past, not dwelling on the immediate future and instead looking forward to the brighter future, did He focus on all of us He would be saving from our failed selves in a couple of days? Maybe He created the advice His Spirit would later inspire Paul with and chose to *“meditate on all things that [are] authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and*

kind (TPT), noble, just, pure, lovely and of good report." (NKJ). The reality of the coming torture and unfathomable agony might have been minimized at the beautiful thought of one daying see us face to face as He introduced another adopted child to His Father. Clearly, He mercifully chose to be cruelly disrespected and take our sins that we could never cleanse ourselves of to transfer His purity in God's eyes to us.

The ways of God are mysterious and like Father, like Son, but I bet there was more smiling than sighing on His last day off that side of the Crucifixion. How are we going to focus our minds in these last few days of Holy Week, the rest of our Christian walk? Will we have a good thought report to present to God or be rejoicing for all eternity that He sees only the glory of Jesus when He sees us? Are we going to continue fooling ourselves that our stand-alone efforts could ever hold a candle to His Holy Flame? Hopefully we will open our minds and hearts to His power that allows goodness to flow and leave futile works and vain insanity of self-salvation at the foot of His Cross and get ready to celebrate seeing Him on the flip side of the tomb's stone on Easter morning.

Prayer: *Heavenly Daddy, Help us to rest properly before walking through the remembrance of our Savior's costly gift. Keep our minds "pure and holy, tried and true and prepare [us] to be a living sanctuary for you." In His Precious Name, Amen.*

Tara Eckenroad

Thursday, April 6

[John 17:1-26](#)

"I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

John 17:9-11 (NIV)

Today's setting is the Last Supper. In chapters 13 -17 of John, Jesus prepared the disciples for his departure in a threefold manner. **FIRST**, he gave them an example when he washed their feet. **SECOND**, he taught them and counseled them. **THIRD** and finally, now in chapter 17, he prays for them.

This prayer is a prayer without equal. It is the summation of what Jesus had done, is doing, and will do. This is the summary of his reconciling work.

We should read this prayer in light of Jesus' announcement in John 16:33 — *"But be encouraged! I have conquered the world."* This was the prayer of a Savior who knew he would suffer, die, and rise

again to be glorified. It was the prayer of a Son who had full confidence in the Father to whom he prayed.

When reading these verses in John 17, consider how special it is to hear a prayer between two persons of the Trinity. The communion of the Trinity is wrapped in mystery, but in this text, we are listening in on what God says to God!

Jesus had been revealing God's "name" in his ministry in that he had been revealing God's character. Jesus hoped that the faith community would mirror the unity of God and Jesus. From this point forward, Jesus was trusting the Christian community's life to the Father.

Jesus has begun his homeward journey. Because his destination is set and he is on course, he is really no longer of this world. BUT the disciples must remain.

Notice that Jesus did not say his disciples did not belong IN this world, but rather that they did not belong TO this world (vs. 16). We belong to God!! While we live in the world, our focus is on the Lord.

We live in the world to build up the church of Christ, to grow in maturity in our faith and to scatter and nourish seeds of faith so that others will grow to know and accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.

We need to step away from the expectations of the world and adopted the values and vision of the kingdom of God. No longer can we use the benchmarks of success that the world uses.

Jesus' prayer for the community modeled how the community was supposed to understand itself. Jesus did not give the disciples 10 steps to being a vital church OR 5 keys to life. Rather, the church was to observe how the Son and the Father are one and THEN to imitate what they saw.

The future of the church does NOT depend on the church's own work.

Rather, it depends on how faithful the church is to God's nature and work the world.

Based on "Adult Bible Studies" for January 15, 2023

Prayer: *Faithful God, give us the strength and courage as we go out into the world to witness to your love. Let us live our lives in a way that shows the world we are one with you. Amen.*

Linda Conrad

Friday, April 7

[Genesis 22:1-14](#)

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

Genesis 22:2 (NIV)

Isaac was not Abraham's only son. He had fathered a son, Ishmael, with Hagar, his wife's maidservant. Because of the circumstances, God promised to make Ishmael a great nation, but God had made Abraham the father of the Jewish nation by giving him and his wife, Sarah, a son in their old age and Isaac was the one God had promised to establish His covenant through. God promised He would give Abraham many descendants and one of the descendants would be the Messiah. Abraham's promise to God was that he and his descendants would not take their relationship with God lightly and that all males would be circumcised as a sign of their commitment. God didn't really want Isaac to die. He was only testing Abraham in his heart to see if he loved God more than his long-awaited, beloved son.

God is trying to tell us that when we give to Him what he asks, He will return to us far more than we could imagine. Everything we have is a gift from God and when we hold on to it, we are loving the gift more than the Giver. Isaac was a gift from God.

God had promised that He would be the father of nations and here He was commanding Isaac to be slain before he had children to carry out the promise. How could this be? For this reason, Abraham believed that somehow God would bring Isaac back to life (Hebrews 11:19) and so by faith he began to carry out God's command. Isaac was bound and placed on the altar to be sacrificed as a burnt offering. Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his beloved son, but then he was stopped by an angel and Isaac's life was spared.

In today's scripture, you will find the resemblances in the Old Testament to the sacrificing of God's only beloved son, Jesus Christ, in the New Testament. The three-day journey from Beersheba to the land of Moriah in which Abraham anguished over the sacrificing of his son. The two servants waiting with the donkey while Abraham and Isaac went to worship and the disciples waiting while Jesus went into the Garden to pray. Isaac carried the wood and Jesus carried the cross. The third day Isaac's life was miraculously spared and the third day Jesus arose from the dead. The temple was built in the area of Moriah and it is questionable as to whether both events happened on the same hill.

On this Good Friday, let us remember that it was faith that helped build our nations and it is faith that will help to heal our nations today.

Words from the Bach Chorale:

*Therefore I thank my God, and joy to do His will;
I know, whate'er befalls, His love doth lead me still.
So like a little child, who clasps his father's hand,
serene I take my way; in faith untroubled stand.*

Wilma Mitchell

Saturday, April 8

[Job 19:21-27a](#)

"But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives..."

Job 19:25a TLB

Our key verse of Job 19:25a makes a striking declarative statement: I know that my Redeemer lives. There are several hymns and religious songs based upon this statement. They range from the more classical "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" from the Easter portion of Handel's Messiah to the contemporary "My Redeemer Lives" sung by Nicole Mullen. Another related example is the hymn "He Lives." It is easy to find several renditions of these and others by searching the Internet.

Last year I ordered a Lenten devotion book entitled *Unrevealed Until Its Season* by James Howell and read through the devotions during Lent. This author's approach to daily devotions is to focus on a phrase or multiple phrases in familiar hymns. One example is that for Ash Wednesday he writes about "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and he paints a word picture of the gnarled wooden cross, as well as the suffering Jesus endured on it. One phrase in this particular hymn that strikes a chord with me is "all the vain things that charm me most." It always makes me pause and think.

So, in preparation for writing this devotional I've spent some time recently reviewing hymn texts, especially those related to Lent and Easter. I picked "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" for reflection. This hymn contains several phrases and ideas that interest me. It is also enlightening to do a little research on the writers of hymns to better understand context. Will you consider using hymn texts/phrases as part of your personal worship time? You may find it enhances your experience of Lent this year. Blessings to you in your journey.

Judy Richardson

Sunday, April 9

[Luke 24:13-35](#)

The referenced scripture passage is referred to and even named in some Bibles as *The Walk to Emmaus*. The story is Luke's expanded version of the glorious resurrection of Jesus. It can serve as a reminder to us that often, unaware, we discover that the Risen Jesus has been with us or among us and hopefully we cannot contain ourselves until we are able to tell others of what happened.

The story begins with 'two of them' making the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were 'talking with each other about all the things that had happened.' (*To find out about those 'things' read Luke 22:1-24:12*). In conversation with an *unknown* stranger one of them, Cleopas said "**We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel**" (24:21). They had heard rumors but they knew what happened

on Friday. On Friday the forces of evil had won. On Friday politics and religion were a united front in condemning and executing Jesus. On Friday Jesus died and he was sealed up, silenced, and finally, FINALLY out of their business. Done. On Friday the fearful disciples had fled away and hidden themselves. On Friday their hopes were obliterated. On Friday it was 'as things have been so shall they ever be.' On Friday people might say the church is irrelevant and the Holy Spirit dare not venture outside of the church doors. Friday – end of story! **Not so fast! ...it is now the third day since these (Friday) things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that indeed they had seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive (24:21-23).** That is Sunday, Lord's Day news. That kind of news is still astounding. That kind of news is no mere rumor. Because of Friday AND Sunday, now our primary citizenship is in in God's realm, according to God's rule and reign as shown to us and taught to us by Jesus. Because of Friday AND Sunday, we can be and are transformed by the Holy Spirit to live God's will today. Because of Friday AND Sunday our sin is forgiven, we are now free to be the very people God has intended us to be from the very beginning – chosen, beloved children, sisters, and brothers who have received an astounding inheritance with the Risen Jesus. Alleluia! He is risen!

Jim Wingert