

SHARING OUR HOPE



Lent

DEVOTIONALS | 2021

INTRODUCTION

The season of Lent is a 40-day spiritual journey culminating in the Easter Joy of Resurrection. The 40 days mirror the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness, before they entered the Promised Land. It also parallels the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, preparing for His public ministry. We are challenged to use these next 40 days to reflect on our own spiritual health, and the gift of forgiveness Jesus gives us because of His work on the cross.

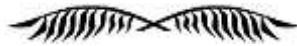
This year, our journey in the wilderness is different than years past. We are experiencing first-hand the isolation and separation from others because of the pandemic. We get a taste of the isolation and separation sin creates in our relationship with God.

May the thoughts and devotions prepared for you by your own church family, inspire you to a deeper faith, encourage you to persevere in following Jesus, and arouse the work of the Spirit in your heart.

I would like to thank Kendra Copeland for her tireless effort to prod, motivate and create this devotional. If it were not for her commitment and passion, this devotional would never come together.

May the time you invest in reading this devotion, and the moments you spend in prayer, sharpen your focus so you can encounter God in fresh ways that will enhance your relationship with Him.

Jeff Raymond



ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 17

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

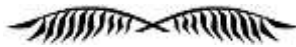
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When reading the scriptures for today, the idea of “perfection” ran through my mind. Perfection is something that I personally struggle with on a daily basis. The battle of striving for perfection and wanting to be perfect in all aspects of my life, in contrast with the knowledge that God does not need us to be perfect, has been one of the hardest things I have come across in my spiritual journey. What does God consider to be too much perfection? What if working towards perfection makes me feel better? Does perfection even matter to Him? All of these questions started running through my head, which made me really start to process the message from this scripture.

Being that I am someone who gets joy from organization and structure, it makes sense that trying to strive for perfection is something in which I sometimes get caught. Where this becomes an issue is when I get anxious or upset when things are not in order or aren't just the way I like it. This can become toxic for not only my mental health but also my spiritual health. We need to take a step back and know that God doesn't ask us to be perfect. He doesn't need every box to be put away or every piece of clothing to be perfectly folded. What He does need is trust and faith in Him to know that He is there guiding us and supporting us no matter how crazy things can get.

Again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to strive for perfection, but it is the obsession or the facade of a perfect life that can be destructive. I think about how I always want my house to look nice and clean and everything just so. A lot of times, I feel guilty and apologize to guests when they come over if something is out of place. Reflecting, I can see how that is so silly! Everyone has a messy house sometimes! That is what makes us human! God loves us for who we are, imperfections and all! Family and friends want to see that they are not alone in having imperfections and that God still loves us no matter what. When we have opened our mind, body and soul to Him, He will support and guide us through all aspects of our life, perfect and imperfect!

Kayleigh L. Dehr



FEBRUARY 18

Psalm 25:1-10

Daniel 9:1-14

1 John 1:3-10

The Gospel According to Wiley

Meda and I have vacationed at the same sheep farm for 26 years. Wiley has been the farmhand and shepherd for all of that time. It's easy to see how much he loves the sheep and how the sheep love him. They know the sound of his voice, or at least the sound of his ATV, so when he passes by the field where they're grazing, they often run after him until they either get to the fence or he's out of sight. And he cares for the sheep even when he's out of sight by trying to keep them safe from eagles and

coyotes. (Yes, eagles will snatch a lamb of certain size.) By contrast, the sheep run in the other direction when I walk by.

A question I had for years was “What makes Christianity so special?” I don’t know of any religion that teaches anything other than kindness and charity. Some of the most generous and thoughtful people I know are atheist or agnostic. If kindness, charity, and loving others are the only reason for spreading the gospel, then why bother if other religions teach the same?

On a sunny summer morning I watched a flock sprint as one toward Wiley. They knew him. He was there when each of them was born. And each one was special in Wiley’s eyes, and in their eyes, Wiley was everything. The answer to my question is that it is Jesus that makes Christianity so special, and not my actions. My kindness, charity, and love are to be the result of following Jesus. It is not the end-all of my faith.

Ed Sterrett



FEBRUARY 19

Psalms 25:1-10

Daniel 9:15-25a

2 Timothy 4:1-5

Lent 2021. It is hard to believe how much has transpired in our world since the 2020 observance of Lent. Every year as we approach these days on the liturgical calendar, I contemplate what those weeks leading to Christ’s death and resurrection were like for him. We all, on some level, probably look back at the events of this last year and bemoan how difficult life has been for us or perhaps for someone we know. Lives, jobs,

and relationships may have been lost. Hardships seem to surround us, and we long for better days. I wonder if when we are feeling stressed by life, if it would benefit us to remember the burden that Christ carried in His final days on Earth. The weight of my sins and yours as well as the rest of the world's rested on his shoulders. Whatever burden we may carry, Christ is there to share it and to lift us up. His promise to love us and forgive us is constant. In an ever-changing world, when we don't know what the coming days will bring, Christ is always there. Praise be to God.
Psalm 25:4-10

Rick Ivey



FEBRUARY 20

Psalm 25:1-10

Psalm 32

Matthew 9:2-13

God Uses Ordinary People for Extraordinary Purposes.

"And Jesus said to Matthew, 'Follow me.'" If you were the CEO of a Global ministry and were choosing your Board of Directors, it is highly unlikely you would choose Matthew, the hated Roman tax collector, to be one of your members. Tax collectors took money from the Jews, skimmed off the top for a nice living for themselves, and gave the rest to Rome. After Jesus selected Matthew, he was invited to Matthew's house for a meal. In that day, if you invited someone to your house for a meal and you went, each considered the other to be family. And so, it was when the citizens saw Jesus go to the house of the hated Roman tax collector, they said "This man talks with sinners and he eats with them, too." Not only did Matthew,

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the hated Roman tax collector, become a valuable disciple, he then wrote a very complete book on the ministry of Jesus.

God uses ordinary people for extraordinary purposes.

Neil Steverson



FEBRUARY 21

Repentance

During Lent, we reflect on our sins and the meaning of repentance.

Repentance is our response to God's boundless grace.

We look for clear direction and firm guidance from God.

Repentance is turning from darkness and walking in the light.

We strive to become people who are more loving, and less self-serving.

Repentance is taking responsibility for our actions.

We seek forgiveness and place our faith in God's mercy.

Repentance is trusting God's eternal grace and steadfast love.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you, both in our deeds and in our inaction. We have forgotten your teachings and have loved ourselves more than our neighbor. Through your Holy Spirit, come and work repentance into our hearts. Open us to change and growth. Give to us an experience of grace that lifts our burdens from us and enables us to live rich, joyful lives for the good of others, and for your kingdom.

Amen.

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FEBRUARY 22

Psalm 77

Job 4:1-21

Ephesians 2:1-10

Why to Return to Normal

One word that has been used and almost overused over the last 12 months, especially during a pandemic, is “normal” or the lack of. What is normal? What does that even mean? Normal can be different for each person and with each situation. In fact, normal doesn’t even contemplate “good”. When normal was still filled with stress, pain and grief why are we in such a rush to return to it?

Recently I was asked to contribute to a trade publication about how my business was affected by Covid and how we adapted. I took some time to first reflect on how things used to be, where we are now, and what needed to change to adapt to new expectations in our business environment. It didn’t take long for me to consider that we had become somewhat complacent in what we did and how we went about it. As we go about the transition out of this pandemic, let us use this opportunity to reevaluate our relationship with God. What was our “normal” walk with Jesus? Have we become too complacent and focused more on “me” than the community of faith and believers that form the true congregation of Christ?

Psalm 77 says “Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen”, God’s steady hands will see us through troubled times. Our charge is not to return to normal

but be better and closer to God from this experience. I will close this devotion with the same thought as I closed the article. I once heard that "change is inevitable, but growth is optional", let us find comfort in Christ Jesus and enjoy a deeper and transformational relationship with him.

Gerald Hemphill



FEBRUARY 23

Psalm 77

Job 5:8-27

1 Peter 3:8-18a

Words Spoken in Love

This passage jumps from the pages of my Bible and seems to speak loudly and clearly to Christians in this troubled world of ours. Are we at Derbyshire heeding the words of 1 Peter 3? Verse 9 suggests that we should not demonize another with whom we disagree on what is right or good. As Lincoln well said, "We are not enemies; we can disagree as friends. We are not enemies." Today I feel that many are so angry about events in our country that those who express opposing viewpoints to our own must be seen as evil or as our enemy. Verse 8 charges us to "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart, and a humble mind." None of this is possible when we take on an attack mode every time someone expresses an opinion contrary to our own. Bernard Baruch said, "Every man has a right to his opinion, but no man has a right to be wrong about the facts."

Jesus said we should speak the truth but to do it in love. In verse 10 we are told that if we are to love life and see good days we should "keep our

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tongue from evil and our lips from speaking guile.” I don’t know about you, but I am more than ready to “see good days?” This passage means that we should make sure we are speaking the truth and speaking it in love. Why can’t we love the person while disagreeing with the viewpoint expressed?

Finally, in Verses 15-16 we are told that we should make sure that what we are thinking, speaking or doing is right by our conscience. Others may judge and criticize, but remember that Jesus was crucified for doing what was right. Only Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life.” Those of you who read this article may disagree with the sentiments expressed by me, but I hope that does not make you my enemy. I hope you are a friend in Christ.

Bob Turner



FEBRUARY 24

Psalm 77

Proverbs 30:1-9

Matthew 4:1-11

The Themes of 2020

All of today’s scriptures have a common theme running through them that we can all relate to as of late – hopelessness, questioning, and temptation. Does that not sound like the past twelve months?

The passage from Psalm starts out with the hopelessness and the questioning of what the Lord is doing, where he is, and what he has in store for the future.

Psalm 77:7 *"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"* We had so much taken away from us in 2020, so many of the small, simply pleasures in life that we take for granted. At the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, I was home alone (with cats, of course) and didn't see another face for weeks. Isolation like we had never seen before. What a relief it was to just go to the grocery store and see other people!

Psalm 77:19 *"Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen."* As we got into spring and summer, the uncertainty was palpable! It was easy to say, "God has a plan; just be patient", or "It's the will of God". It was another thing entirely to think it and live it when the light he shines ahead only shows you the next couple of feet along the path.

Proverbs offers us the beginnings of some hope and helps us find the answers to questions within our faith.

Proverbs 30:1b *"I am weary, God, but I can prevail."* We are but humans. Flawed and flailing our way through life, at times. And that's ok! None of us can go it alone! None of us know the outcome! But we know Who does and that he desires peace for us.

Proverbs 30:8 *"Keep falsehood and lies far from me"* As if the writer were living in 2020/2021! I've always found it difficult to trust, but man, oh man, do I need to start incorporating this verse into my prayers. Again, since we are but humans floating through space on a dying rock at light speed, we are not all-knowing and certainly not all-discerning. We need that Holy Help to maneuver through the days, and that Holy Wisdom to hold on to for future temptations.

Speaking of such, our Matthew passage is all about temptations. Very targeted temptations, I might add, between Christ and Satan.

Matthew 4:2-3 "*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* That tempter knows just what we need and want in our moments of weakness. He offered a hungry Jesus the temptation of food. He's been offering a frustrated world the temptation of relief through anger and violence.

It's now, more than ever, that we need that Holy Help, that wisdom. We need those hopeless feelings turned into something purposeful. The darkness that was 2020 can start to fade if we point a renewed and divine light at our own feet and the feet of those around us.

Natalie Thomas



FEBRUARY 25

Psalm 22:23-31

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18

Romans 3:21-31

Darkness Into Light

In the book of Psalms, we get a glimpse of the life of David - its many ups and downs, twists and turns, through light and through darkness and through torment and joy: David groaning, crying out to God, feeling forsaken, but then David filling his mind with memories of God's past faithfulness and promises, and feeling hopeful that God will bring light to his darkness.

Thinking of David's expressions of sorrow and darkness and of praise and faith reminds me of a wonderful autobiography about the life of Corrie Ten Boom. The book is entitled Tramping for the Lord. Corrie Ten Boom lived in Amsterdam during WWII where she and her family helped many Jewish families by hiding them from the invading Nazis. Corrie and her family were eventually arrested and put in a concentration camp where life was filled with extreme cruelty and persecution. It was a time of darkness and torment for Corrie, yet she, like David, always remembered God's love and faithfulness.

After her "miracle release" from the Ravensbruck concentration camp, Corrie traveled as a missionary throughout the world, sharing her story and preaching of God's love for all people. As an evangelist she had the opportunity to reach the hearts of many and in so doing, shared David's praise - "He has not hidden his face from you but hears when you cry out to him."

Corrie thought of the world as her classroom and loved sharing her philosophy of life. The following statements were shared wherever she traveled. These timeless truths were not ones she had read about. They came through her personal life experiences.

"The school of life offers some difficult courses, but it is the difficult classes that one learns the most - especially when your teacher is the Lord Jesus himself."

"The problems of life in this world should lead us to prayer and to remember the promises of God."

"Faith is like radar which sees through the fog - the reality of things at a distance that the human eye cannot see."

Lord, in the midst of difficulty help us to think of you and your promise to be with us - walking in front of us and guiding us; walking beside us and supporting and comforting us; living within us and helping us to be a mirror of the love you have for us.

Amen.

Judy Harned



FEBRUARY 26

Psalm 22:23-31

Genesis 16:1-6

Romans 4:1-12

Prayers of Thanksgiving

Let's face it. Last year when we were reading through our daily Lenten devotionals, we had no idea what was looming around the corner after March. Many of us sent home from our office work spaces left with a "See you in a few weeks" mentality. Those deemed essentials workers couldn't have imagined the long, tiring, emotion filled days that lay ahead. But, here we are in 2021, still very unsure what the next day, month or year brings.

There were many things that changed in 2020: the way we worked, the way we worshipped, the way we shopped, socialized, celebrated, and mourned and a myriad of other seemingly everyday activities. We may have been tempted to look around and feel frustrated, sad and possibly even angry at all of the ways our lives were forced to change due to an unseen super virus ravaging its way around the globe.

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But, did we stop to think about all the ways our lives changed for the better? From reading what many posted on social media, I know the answer is yes. We noticed all those seemingly everyday activities that we never really noticed before. I for one learned to love my backyard and the quiet tranquility it provides during the toughest of days. I learned that I love the neighborhood I live in no matter how many times I have taken the dog on the same walking path over the last year. I learned that I have neighbors I didn't know I had! I'm sure you can say the same for those "I never really noticed" moments.

How many times in the last year, whether through the difficult times or the moments you're noticing all the blessings around you have you stopped to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God? And how many have made those prayers of thanksgiving known to the larger "assembly" around us? In Psalm 22:22 – 31, the psalmist urges us to offer prayers of thanksgiving to God and use those prayers as testimony of God's goodness to us. It is obviously most difficult to be thankful to God during those times when we are most in despair, but what a story it tells to the world when we can see past our temporary state and see that God is good and offer up a prayer of thanksgiving – even if it's hard to know exactly what to be thankful for - God's grace, God's mercy, God's unconditional love? We have much to be thankful for.

In these coming days and months and even possibly the rest of 2021, when we can't see the end to our current state and keep asking for things to return to "normal", look past that moment and find the small blessings that abound and offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Be thankful in that moment. Not only is this God's desire for us, but it might just give

you the opportunity to see things in your life that you have been unable to see and be thankful for during the "old, normal" days.

Edwina Word



FEBRUARY 27

Psalm 22:23-31

Genesis 16:7-15

Mark 8:27-30

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 8, Jesus is with his disciples and asks, "Who do people say I am?" After the disciples answered, Jesus asks a more pointed question, "But what about you?" He asked, "Who do you say I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

As we focus on our Lenten journey, this passage struck me in that Jesus seems to want to know specifically what the disciples think about him. They have been with Jesus and experienced his ministry. How is He touching their lives?

During Lent, as we think about our lives and how we relate to God, we focus on how we have lived, what we have said, what we have done and what we have left undone. There is a passage from The Confessions of St. Augustine in which Augustine talks about how his faithful mother wept on his behalf as though he were dead because of the "darkness" in his life. He then shares a vision in his mother's dream that moves him to recognize how God cares for each person.

And now thou didst "stretch forth thy hand from above" and didst draw up my soul out of that profound darkness [of Manicheism] because my mother, thy faithful one, wept to thee on my behalf

more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children. For by the light of the faith and spirit which she received from thee, she saw that I was dead. And thou didst hear her, O Lord, thou didst hear her and despised not her tears when, pouring down, they watered the earth under her eyes in every place where she prayed. Thou didst truly hear her.

For what other source was there for that dream by which thou didst console her, so that she permitted me to live with her, to have my meals in the same house at the table which she had begun to avoid, even while she hated and detested the blasphemies of my error? In her dream she saw herself standing on a sort of wooden rule, and saw a bright youth approaching her, joyous and smiling at her, while she was grieving and bowed down with sorrow. But when he inquired of her the cause of her sorrow and daily weeping (not to learn from her, but to teach her, as is customary in visions), and when she answered that it was my soul's doom she was lamenting, he bade her rest content and told her to look and see that where she was there I was also. And when she looked, she saw me standing near her on the same rule.

Whence came this vision unless it was that thy ears were inclined toward her heart? O thou Omnipotent Good, thou carest for every one of us as if thou didst care for him only, and so for all as if they were but one! (Confessions, Book III, Chap. XI, 19, Trans. by Dr. Albert Outler)

The last sentence of this passage which I have underlined has been paraphrased to produce a quotation attributed to Augustine by various

sources. This quotation sums up how God thinks about His relationship with each of us: "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love by which you sent your Son, Jesus, into the world not to condemn us but to save each one of us. Thank you for your care for each individual person and our relationship with you. May we love you and love one another as you have loved us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Paul Haynes



FEBRUARY 28

Humility

During Lent, we reflect on the meaning of humility.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less.

The Son of Man came not to gain, but to give up all He had.

Humility is forsaking selfish ambition, and seeking unity with others.

The Son of Man came not to be loved, but to love.

Humility is trusting that God will meet our needs if we seek His righteousness.

The Son of Man became poor so that we could become rich.

Merciful God, we confess that our constant striving for approval leaves us empty and unfulfilled. We ask that you humble our hearts and replenish us with gifts of the spirit. Help us serve as Jesus served and love as Jesus loved. Deliver us from pride, ambition and jealousy, and fill us with mercy, willing to serve one another in humility and love. Amen.



MARCH 1

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Genesis 21:1-7

Hebrews 1:8-12

Give Thanks, For We Received the Greatest Gift

As I reflect on the scriptures above, I was reminded of a prayer I had read in a publication that made me chuckle but also re-invigorated me to strive to always show an "attitude of gratitude" as my wife always says.

"So far today I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, I haven't lost my temper, I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent. I'm very thankful for that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help. Amen" – Author Unknown (someone wittier than I)

Psalm 105:1-11 reminds us to "give praise to the Lord, remember the wonders he has done, his miracles" such as the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 21. I have found, this year specifically, it is much easier to complain about life's happenings rather than learning to be grateful. So for this Lenten season trust in the Lord and allow the fruit of the Spirit living inside us all to continue to guide us daily for God gave everything He had His Son to set us free and so a day without gratitude is a day without true love, joy and peace. Amen.

Brandon Dunkum



MARCH 2

Psalms 105:1-11, 37-45

Genesis 22:1-19

Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

Be a Hero of Faith

How can we be like Abraham and Sarah, ordinary people who believed that God would do what he promised? Despite their occasional failures, they believed God, and God honored their faith. The true “Heroes” of faith.

We live in their shadows, which is somewhat intimidating. We feel or seem unsuccessful in our Faith compared to them. Sometimes I think to myself, “I am just a mother, grandmother struggling daily with getting older. How can I, who is not escaping death, building an Ark, or becoming the Father of Nations, also be a Hero of Faith?”

The answer is simple, but not always easy: By having faith. By believing that God loves us and wants the best for us in all things. By being absolutely sure that he will always provide all we need. And knowing that God is at the center of all seen and unseen.

My Father, My God, open my eyes, not to see the world more clearly, but to see You. Open my eyes to see you working around me and in me. Nothing happens by accident. You plan every day of my life. Allow me to see your hand in the commonplace and the fantastic. Help me to trust in what I cannot see, and believe in Your invisible presence. Amen.

Marian Copeland



MARCH 3

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Jeremiah 30:12-22

John 12:36-43

God Always Keeps His Promises

This past year has been filled with fear, uncertainty, isolation and hopelessness. We have been separated from our loved ones and friends, we have not been able to worship in our church or socially gather for the celebration of our Savior's birth.

Some days I could let my mind ask where is God, and why is He allowing this Pandemic. I especially think this when I read Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you. And not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

I know this is not a promise to immediately rescue us from this pandemic, but it is a promise that regardless of what we are going through He can work in our lives to always give us hope, comfort and peace.

So, this Lenten season I am going to focus on giving thanks to Jesus in all things, calling on His name, and telling of His wonderful acts.

Ann Key



MARCH 4

Psalm 19

Exodus 19:1-9a

1 Peter 2:4-10

Marching Toward the Beginning

I got up Saturday morning for my quiet time, which is rarely quiet thanks to Wilson and Peanut. I picked up a book that I was close to finishing called *Agents of Babylon* by David Jeremiah. It's taken me a year and a half to finish it, but by no coincidence I finished today. I say no coincidence because it spoke to me directly regarding a difficult visit I had with a dear friend the night before as well as this past, difficult year.

The book is all about Daniel's prophesies and how they've come to pass - up to a point. The last part of the prophesy has not happened yet as it leads up to what we call the "end times." All in all, it is a very dark, somewhat disturbing book as it describes in detail the unimaginable cruelty of Babylonian kings as well as the horrors that will be experienced during the end times. The very last few pages, however, take a turn and change the term "end times" to "marching toward the beginning." I love it when someone changes my perspective and gives me a new way of looking at things. While "end times" is a horrible time and will be the end of earthly history as we know it, it also marks the beginning of Christ's reign for eternity. Herein lies my hope and turns the whole dark period to light. I wish he could have done that a little earlier in the book, but it was a wonderful note to end on.

This quote from the book reminded me of times that I have been through and come through with the help and hope of Jesus Christ: "Though it may not seem so when evil seems to engulf our lives, God is indeed in control. Not a sparrow falls without His knowing it." This is not to say we should not feel our pain, our grief, our anger, or at times even despair. We *must* walk through this fire, and in the process, we will be honed and sharpened and purified. God promises to be with us and not to allow the fire to set us ablaze. (Isaiah 43:2)

After finishing the book, I looked down at my phone and the verse of the day was Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Again, feel everything you need to feel, cry every tear you need to cry, scream at the top of your lungs – even at God – He can take it! But keep all this in your back pocket and know that you will emerge victorious!

Susan Butler



MARCH 5

Psalm 19

Exodus 19:9b-15

Acts 7:30-40

³⁰ "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'^[a] Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

³³ "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'^[b]

Have you ever felt that you could not escape your past? When I was a graduate student in Kentucky, I had a classmate whose last name was Hatfield – yes, he was a decedent of those famous feuding families the Hatfields and the McCoys. As we spent time together, he explained that whenever people learned of his last name, he was asked who started the feud and will it ever end; or was told that they would be on the lookout for a member of the McCoy family. He said after he finished high school, he wanted to move far away from Western Kentucky to attend college in Washington State where the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys was forgotten. He wanted to put his past behind him.

He then would explain, that while in college in a place that no one brought up the feud with the McCoys, he found himself in the role of mediator or peacekeeper. His roommate was described as a hot head and appeared to others as seeking conflict to get what he wanted. He said he found himself being the one who had to smooth things over with the guys in the dorm. He had to get the "feuding" people together to find what the root cause was and come up with a way to get people on the same page and bring about peace. He said he tried to escape the once famous family feud and become the peacemaker in the dorm.

Like Moses, he was trying to run away from his past and escape from the spotlight by living in a place where he was unknown. But God was able to use both positive experiences and negative experiences to help mold us and provide us with the tools to serve as His ministers.

Prayer: O Lord, you call us in love; you call us to life and service. Help us to listen, and to see opportunities of service and obey to share your blessing with others. Amen.

Carl Brown



MARCH 6

Psalm 19

Exodus 19:16-25

Mark 9:2-8

Psalm 19: 1-6

1. The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.
3. They have no speech; they use no words; no sound is heard from them.
4. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
5. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
6. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

During the COVID pandemic, we have all been forced to 'hunker down' and avoid unnecessary travel. This has been tough for me because I love to travel and experience new places and cultures. But, when I read the first six verses of Psalm 19, I say a special prayer of thanksgiving for God's creation and the beautiful places that I have had a chance to live. While each place was different and had its own beauty, I always felt God's presence.

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When I looked at the beautiful flowers and smelled the fragrant aromas in Hawaii, how could I doubt God's artistry. How could I doubt his presence when I looked at the morning fog covering the Smokey Mountains with the mountain tops peeking out, and not know that God painted this picturesque view personally? How could I have admired the mighty Saguaro Cactus in the Arizona desert at sunset, and not see the perfect design and intricacies of the desert life that God put in place. Each summer when I go to the beach, how can I not recognize his calm and serene presence when strolling along a quiet beach in the late afternoon with the gentle trade winds blowing, and doubt God's presence next to me. All of my memories make me understand Genesis 1:31 "And God looked upon all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good."

I love the **Footprints in the Sand** poem by Carolyn Joyce Carty, that reminds me that through all my travels and adventures to places far and near around the globe, God has been, and will continue to be with me. He provides for me, so I need to stop worrying. He has a plan for my life, so I need to be patient and allow his handiwork to show through me. During the challenges and tough times, he gives me strength, sometimes walking side-by-side with me, other times carrying and cradling me until I can stand on my feet again. Through it all, God is my constant companion and strength.

God has planned the days of this earth from beginning until the end of time. **Let's all rejoice daily for God's majesty and might.** He is our God; He is the one we serve!

Hugh Kitts



MARCH 7

Suffering

During Lent, we reflect on the meaning of suffering.

Through suffering, we become aware of God's presence.

All around us we see sorrow, brokenness and pain.

Through suffering, we become aware of God's power.

We struggle with our own trials and search in vain for answers.

Through suffering, we learn to trust God's promises.

We think of the magnitude of Christ's suffering on the cross.

Through suffering, we deepen our faith.

We cry out helplessly when our burdens seem unbearable.

Through suffering, we learn to comfort others.

Merciful God, grant us strength and courage to face the trials in our lives, and keep us grateful for all the joys. Cheer us in our sorrow and sustain us through our suffering. Keep us aware of our weakness and dependent upon your strength. Remind us of Christ's suffering on the cross, and renew us by your Holy Spirit that we may follow your commands and proclaim your love to a suffering world.

Amen.



MARCH 8

Psalm 84

1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

My Cross?

Jesus said, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24-26)

What does that really mean? Does that mean I wear a gold cross around my neck for the world to see? It would be one way of letting people know that I am a believer in Jesus Christ, or it could just be a popular piece of jewelry.

Simeon was picked out of the crowd to follow Jesus carrying the physically heavy wooden cross on which Jesus would be executed. People in those times were used to seeing the dregs of society hanging on crosses that lined the roadways. What were the crimes they committed that led to such an excruciating public death, and what was the crime that put Jesus on that cross?

Simeon was the father of two well-known Christian brothers, Alexander and Rufus. What their father did literally, his sons did spiritually. Galatians 2:20 says "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

(Luke 9:23) "Anyone who wants to follow me must put aside his own desires and conveniences and carry his cross with him every day, and keep

close to me.” What in my everyday way of life do I need to crucify in order to follow Jesus and stay close to him?

Carolyn Hardison



MARCH 9

Psalm 84

2 Corinthians 29:1-11, 16-19

Hebrews 9:23-28

Psalm 84

1. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!
2. My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
3. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—a place near your altar. Lord Almighty,
my King and my God.
4. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.
5. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
6. As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
7. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in
Zion.
8. Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob.
9. Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.
10. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
11. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and
honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is
blameless.
12. Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

In this Lenten season, we find a strange connection with the words of this psalm penned over twenty-five hundred years ago. The writer, a Levitical musician, expresses his desire to be in God’s presence in the

Jerusalem Temple, a place about the size of Derbyshire's chapel. Some commentators even believe that the psalmist was barred from access to God's house-perhaps when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, was ravaging Judah (c.f. 2 Kings 18: 13 – 16).

While for many who read this know that God is omnipresent (i.e. "every place, everywhere, and every when") and can be found in nature, the smile of a child, or the words of a song, Derbyshire Baptist Church is our Ebenezer Stone and place where we have not only sought, but found God. We miss the sense of community, of celebrating, of mourning, and of worship.

The psalmist pens his "sermon for life" from his journey. What can we do in this Lenten season as we pen our sermons and prepare to go back into "God's house?" We can pray, reflect, serve, find comfort and purpose in Christian fellowship, be assured that God is still in control, and that He cares for the crowning event of His creation-mankind.

Quite frankly, we too can give. The ministries of the Kingdom of God from the outpost at Derbyshire continue despite the pandemic. People are still hungry-perhaps hungrier than ever-and need the strength and warmth that the Gospel brings.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "There is no remedy for love but to love more." O God, as we wait, prepare, and long to be together again in your house, help us to love more!

Ron Hall



MARCH 10

Psalm 84

Ezra 6:1-16

Mark 11:15-19

This past year during the pandemic, we have not been able to worship in our new sanctuary. It wasn't until later in the year that for a few Sundays that some chose to come and worship with many restrictions. It was very frustrating. I miss singing and seeing our church friends.

As time passed, I noticed that God's gift of nature was so beautiful. Maybe I had missed the meaning of what God's gift of sanctuary was all about. I watched as families spent more time together and were creative with family gatherings. We haven't had a physical building this past year but what we have had is family relationships being enjoyed and shared, everyone working together to reach out to others, and helping our neighbors and friends.

God has given us so much this past year, not worshiping in a building with a wonderful new organ and refurbishings, but nature for us to enjoy built to God's specifications – our world of wonder and beauty, sacred places to feel God's presence.

These scriptures speak to us of beautiful building and spaces for worship. In Mark 11, Jesus cleared out the money changers to bring back the peace that should be in our houses of worship.

This past year, God has given us so much more. The beauty of God's hand to create our world, a time to slow down and enjoy what we have and not what we think we want.

A difficult year, yes, but a year to provide reflection on how we live, a calmness to value those around us and a peace that surpasses all understanding. As we approach Lent, a time for reflection, let us remember during these 40 days, we are grateful for all God has given us. Let us think about the Spiritual gifts that God gives us, not the monetary or physical possessions that we have come to acquire.

May you find your peace during these coming days, for the beauty of the earth, the skies, for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies. We raise our voices in thanksgiving for our God who gave us God's only Son, to save us. Thank you, God, for all these gifts and for your love that you give us. Let us be grateful. Amen.

Mary Ann Johnson



MARCH 11

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Genesis 9:8-17

Ephesians 1:3-6

These verses speak of giving thanks to God for his love and faithfulness. During recent months it has been difficult to be thankful on a daily basis because of everything going on in our lives, community, state, nation and world. The pandemic, civil unrest, job losses, and financial and mental health concerns have touched all of our lives. Listening to the news can be daunting and distressing. Being separated from the ones we love because of the pandemic has made life even more challenging. But at the same time society is looking for glimmers of hope. We're grasping for the stories that encourage us. I've actually never been one to watch the news on a

regular basis. I've started watching the local and national news more during the pandemic to stay current on what's happening in the world. I always love the Today Show and their "morning boost" piece. They highlight encouraging stories and tales of resilience. Lester Holt shares segments to "Inspire America." These are the parts of the news that I savor. Granted I've needed to rearrange my thoughts and focus my mind during these times. I've become obsessive and focused on worries and concerns. Having faith in God, doing Bible study and talking to friends and family have helped to center my thoughts. I've also remembered all the reasons I'm grateful. Stopping and taking the time to recount everything we have to be grateful for helps us to praise God and give thanks for his many blessings. As the song, "Count your Blessings" goes: "When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed, when you are discouraged thinking all is lost, count your many blessing, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." Thank you God for blessing my life!

Catherine Brawley



MARCH 12

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Daniel 12:5-13

Ephesians 1:7-14

Isolation

I have never thought about what that word really means until this past year. Surprisingly that word has shown up often in my daily reading of the Bible and my devotionals. It has always been there I just never noticed it before. I have spent this past year not only thinking about it but journaling

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about it a lot. I realized that I was more familiar with it than I originally thought. Don't we isolate in some way or another when we are dealing with difficulties in our life...struggling with a health issue...difficult decisions...mourning a loss of a loved one...coping with changes in our life...and this list goes on?! We may feel isolated from the world around us but never are we isolated from Jesus. I never feel closer to God than during these times that I cry out to Him for an answer, healing, forgiveness and His guidance and protection. I read a statement in one of my devotionals this year "...for no one ever comes into the full realization of the best things of God in his spiritual life without learning to walk alone with Him."

Isolation. A word that sounded so lonely to me before this year...isolation draws us to God and there is no better place to be.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the peace you give us when we bring our troubled lives to You. Amen.

Elaine Duffy



MARCH 13

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Numbers 20:22-29

John 3:1-13

The Creator and Rescuer

How are we supposed to respond when bad things are happening all around us? Psalm 107 gives us the answers: "O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious, and his mercy endures forever". The question then

becomes, how do I give thanks when bad stuff is happening, whatever that bad stuff is? When we find ourselves in misery, we often think we're the only ones who ever felt this badly.

You may be reeling from things beyond your control. Are you sinking in frustration, anxiety, fear, depression, or anger? Whatever your trouble, call upon the comforter, the Holy Spirit, who will bring the presence and peace of Jesus to your anxious, fearful, and frantic circumstance.

Psalm 107 reminds us that God is both creator and rescuer. There is a pattern, things are going badly wrong - wandering in the desert, people in darkness, sick and dying, tossed about on the wild ocean. Then....they cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. And after that, these words: Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. The pattern is repeated again and again.

This Psalm covers it all - situations we might see on the news, things that we legitimately have no control over, at work, in our family, but also sometimes due to our own choices - we find ourselves in desperate need of rescue. We need a rescuer and a Rescuer is exactly Who we find. But when we're struggling as a result of our own choices, we don't think we deserve to be rescued. This particular section, verses 17-22, says that God sent out His word and healed them. Oh, how we need the Word of God, the Savior in our lives. He is the healer, who heals not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally - drawing us to Himself.

This is good news during COVID-19. We have more distress than normal. But where do we turn? Will God answer? Will he deliver? Well, this Psalm shows the way of our gracious God. He hears and delivers. So, we have

reason to praise him for “his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!”

In these recent days and weeks, we have become keenly aware of our lack of control and our utter dependence on our Savior. May we take today to remember that He is our Rescuer, our Redeemer, and let us think about all of His loving deeds for us.

Valerie Williamson



MARCH 14

Lament

During the season of Lent, we ponder the frail, fallen condition of our world.

The Lord is near the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. We feel a deep sorrow and awareness that something is not right.

The Lord is near the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. We wonder if God’s hand has been removed from our lives.

The Lord is near the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. We recall the words of Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The Lord is near the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

Merciful God, we are bewildered by the chaos of our world. We sometimes wonder where you are, and how you could allow so much pain and sorrow. Draw near us, Lord, and grant us a sense of your steadfast love. Restore us through your grace. We bring our anxieties to you, and trust in your Holy Spirit’s guidance. Amen.



MARCH 15

Psalm 107:1-16

Exodus 15:22-27

Hebrews 3:1-6

Are We Ever Really Settled?

I have heard many parents (including my own) say, if I had a nickel for every time I said blank, I would be rich. As a parent now to young children, I find myself thinking the same thing. My go to saying is, "settle down." I find myself telling my children to "settle down" multiple times throughout the day. The kids like to chase each other around in circles, play tag, and hide and seek indoors, and I find myself trying to stay calm and telling them to "settle down before someone falls and gets hurt." At the dinner table, they get to carrying on and I will say "settle down and eat your dinner." As we prepare for bedtime, they think it is a good time to run down the hall and scream at each other, and again I am repeating myself and telling them to "settle down, it is time for bed."

So, what does "settle down" really mean? There are so many definitions of the word settle. Buying a house and putting down roots is considered "settling" down. Settling a debt that is owed, watching rocks settle to the bottom of a fish tank, and my favorite way to think about settling down is finding a good book in a comfy chair with a warm cozy blanket.

As we look back on 2020, I think we can all agree that we all took to "settling" down in our own ways. I definitely got comfortable with sleeping in later and working from home. Some days not showering until after work or not even at all. Spending more time with the kids and together as a

family. There were hard times, slow times, boring times, angry times, times of loss, but we all seemed to “settle” into the new “normal”.

As I read Psalm 107, I began to wonder about the wanderers in this passage. Who were they? The restless ones who wandered from place to place and with nowhere to settle. Were they looking for something or for specific answers? I began to realize, that I too have been just like these wanderers. Restless, uncertain of what was to come and even looking for answers. Just like the Bible says, I must remember that when the wanderers cried out for help, the Lord led these wanderers to a city where they could settle. He answered them and led them gradually the straight way. These wanderers eventually trusted and felt secure in the Lords direction. For as the first verse in Psalm 107 states, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good: his love endures forever”. I remember that if I am ever wandering, the Lord is there to lead me the straight way.

Dear Lord, thank you for hearing my cries and for rescuing me from the restless wandering and leading me the straight way to a place where I can settle. Amen.

Kendra Copeland



MARCH 16

Psalm 107:1-16

Numbers 20:1-13

1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

These verses are ones of deliverance. In the psalm, the people are thanking God for their return from exile. They are singing to Him for delivering them from the trackless desert and imprisonment. There are two refrains, one in verse six and one in verse thirteen:

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble
and He delivered them from their distress.*

I would love to have heard their singing.

As we look further back in the Old Testament in Numbers, we see God again delivering His people by providing water from a rock when they are in the wilderness. This time there is not a song of thanksgiving, and in fact, Moses and Aaron are chastised for not trusting in the Lord.

Now we turn to the New Testament to 1 Corinthians and read a warning from Paul to the people in the church at Corinth to not risk God's wrath by doing sinful things but also assuring them that

*God is faithful, and He will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
but with testing He will provide the way out so that you may be able to
endure it.*

Studying these passages made me feel better about our lives today. It is a challenging time with civil unrest and the pandemic. However, God has promised us He is faithful and will lead us through our wilderness

experiences and our exile. Words from a hymn written in 1923, not too long after the 1918 Pandemic, reassure us yet again.

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;
As Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.*

Thomas O. Chisholm

I have lived many years, and I too attest to my God's faithfulness.

Carol Turner



MARCH 17

Psalm 107:1-16

Isaiah 60:15-22

John 8:12-20

On Looking Up

We all know what a cesspool last year was. We all know, because we all lived through it, we all had our own challenges, and we all were affected by it. To say it was a stressful year is a gross understatement.

Last year I prayed more fervently and with more emotion than I have in a long, long time. But even as much as I prayed, it seemed as if the list of people to pray for and the issues over which to pray just got longer and longer, including our own families, which were both hit with some rather

serious medical issues. It was like no matter how much time I spent in prayer it wasn't enough because a new prayer need would always pop up.

One morning, when I was especially distressed over the state of things, I decided to go out on our deck to pray. As I prayed, I looked up, and when I did what really jumped out at me was the vastness of the sky. For me it was the Father reminding me that He is everywhere, He is the Creator, and that He is constant. And I immediately felt peace. From that moment on I have made it a point to look up. I look up at 6:00 in the morning and see Him in the Little Dipper. I look up during the day and see Him in the blueness and sheer vastness of the sky and the clouds. I go outside at night and see Him in the stars. And the peace that it brings when I do that has stayed with me.

For me it's a reminder that all the "stuff" we are enduring are worldly things. But what we need to focus on – what we see when we "look up" – is the reminder of what matters, the reminder of the One that will get us through.

On a lighter note, recently one morning as I was getting ready for the day, I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror. I glanced at my bed-head hair and the cowlick that was split in two like a peace sign and sticking straight up, looking like it was ready for takeoff, and I started brushing my teeth. I was feeling stressed and started talking to God. As I was praying – with toothbrush in hand – He told me to "look up". When I did, my eyes immediately landed on the cowlick. I literally laughed out loud and thanked the good Lord for the moment of levity. (I always did suspect that He has a sense of humor.)

In addition to the above-assigned verses, given the topic about which I chose to write I would also like to share one more verse:

"I lift my eyes to the hills. My strength comes from the Lord."

Psalm 121:1, 2

So, look up. You'll be glad you did.

Meda Sterrett



MARCH 18

Psalm 51:1-12

Isaiah 30:15-18

Hebrews 4:1-13

As we continue through Lent in preparation for Easter, our tradition includes repentance and awareness of sins as part of our preparation. As I read through this passage in Isaiah and some related commentary, I see God calling God's people out for seeking an alliance with Egypt against adversaries rather than turning to God. Perhaps many of us can relate to not turning to God while in distress but instead turning to things like unhealthy relationships and/or overreliance on healthy relationships (to the exclusion of God), online content, our own understanding, etc. I know that in times of fear (e.g., over finances, the future of our country, physical safety and health), I can certainly turn to things like reading one more redundant online article about politics or thinking more about how I need money more than how God would have me use what I have. During this time of Lent, I can think of plenty other ways that I sin, but I am grateful to

see God extend compassion (a word mentioned in the second line of verse 18 in some translations, at least) toward the end of this selection.

In my own life and in my work as a psychologist, I have seen the importance of compassion for myself and for others. At times, I have lacked compassion for myself and gone beyond acknowledging my sins and repenting to God to harshly criticizing myself for such behavior. Compassion does not preclude acknowledgement of and guilt for our sin, just as God calls out sin here, but it can help us move away from unhelpful levels of self-criticism. Perhaps harsh self-criticism is some sort of conscious or unconscious effort to not sin again, but it often leaves me in shame and feeling incapable of change and/or unfit to be better. As I have learned in my field and from experience, it can help to be more curious about our behavior instead and remind ourselves that while God wants us to change, God also sees us with love, compassion, and forgiveness. For instance, some of my clients with substance abuse issues harp on themselves so harshly that they end up feeling unworthy of recovery. For many of those folks, it can be a relief to look at their behavior with curiosity. They can see for themselves, and/or finally have validated by someone else, that their substance use, while still needing to change, may have served a purpose such as medicating anxiety, trauma, etc., which they can learn to address in healthier ways. While such change can be hard, it can help to see ourselves in a more compassionate light.

David Guion



MARCH 19

Psalm 51:1-12

Exodus 30:1-10

Hebrews 4:14, 5:4

You Taught Me Wisdom in that Secret Place

(Ps. 51:6b)

♩ = 80 (3 note meditation)



Daniel Clarke

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MARCH 20

Psalm 51:1-12

Habakkuk 3:2-13

John 12:1-11

Priorities

I often hear my family and friends who work in a more typical office setting talk about the stress of having multiple tasks assigned to them at the same time with similar deadlines. Their stress comes from wondering "how should I prioritize this?" Which tasks have greater consequences for not being completed? Where do I even start? It seems that there are always things that demand our immediate attention, time, and effort. Throw in a pandemic and a continued state of unrest and it becomes even more difficult to sort through what takes priority. In John 12, Jesus is anointed with perfume which he tells those gathered is in anticipation of his burial. Judas has his priorities wrong though and asks why Mary should use such extravagant perfume when it could be sold to give money to the poor. John then goes on to say that Judas has this objection not out of concern for the poor but because he was more interested in helping himself to those funds as a "keeper of the money bag." Judas' ill intent aside, Jesus' response strikes me when he says, "you'll always have the poor, you won't always have me." My thoughts immediately turned to Matthew 6:34, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

I have a slightly different perspective on priorities as I work in hospice. The priorities in the last months, weeks, days, hours, minutes of life are quite

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different than those when a life is not about to end. These priorities usually include the following: Are my affairs in order? Are my wishes known? Are those I love able to be with me as I make this journey? Is it okay to be scared? Who will help me? Will it hurt? Jesus knows his life is about to end. At first, I thought his rebuke of Judas stating that the poor will always be there is a call to action, an uphill battle. A stark reminder that despite our best efforts, there will always be those who need help. But I think that is where I get distracted and have my own priorities out of order. Jesus' point is not about the poor, it is about the fact that his presence on Earth is limited. "You won't always have me." The time before a life ends is precious, sacred, and so special. I cannot even imagine being part of Jesus' time before death. When we know a death is coming, we have time to engage in that special time. Sudden deaths do not allow for this. Even though Jesus knew what was coming, his disciples did not, despite Jesus constantly reminding them. They were left with the hurt, trauma, and confusion that follow brutal, sudden death.

So where does that leave us? Treat every day like it could be our last? Perhaps, but that is a lot of pressure to put on ourselves. I think Psalm 51 is a good place to start. "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place" (Verse 6). Psalm 51 is also the text to a choral piece I sang in church in my formative years. "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me" (Verse 12). This seems such a simple plea but requires such intention and effort. So maybe the place to start is not putting such immense pressure on ourselves to be our best selves all the time. Maybe the place to start is to embrace being the clay and letting the Potter mold us into the version of ourselves that the Potter designed us to be. Rather than striving, and usually failing miserably, for

perfection, the way forward for a clean heart and truth in our innermost parts is adaptability, malleability, and trust in the hands that shape ourselves and our situation.

Katherine Bell



MARCH 21

Sacrifice

During the season of Lent, we look at the cost of our redemption.

Through the sacrifice of Christ, we are reconciled with God.

We acknowledge that our money, our bodies, and our time belong to God.

Through the sacrifice of Christ, we are reconciled with God.

We relinquish our desire to cover up our own unrighteousness.

Through the sacrifice of Christ, we are reconciled with God.

We humbly and joyfully claim God's promise of eternal life.

Through the sacrifice of Christ, we are reconciled with God.

Merciful God, we thank you for your supreme sacrifice, and for welcoming us into the fellowship of believers. We bow in gratitude, awed by the magnitude of your love and grace. Teach us to give back to you all that we are and all that we have, that we may praise you with our whole lives, and that we may become living sacrifices to you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

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MARCH 22

Psalm 119:9-16

Isaiah 43:8-13

2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Hope

Dropped by Costco to pick up a prescription. It is my habit to read the name tag and address people by name when I can. For some reason, I waited to the last moment to glance at the tag-- "Hope." Hope was her name. I chuckled and said, "great name for the times we live in," thanked her and walked away. The more I thought about it, the power of that word worked on me. A story came to mind. My cousin Sammy was cooking breakfast at the deer camp and my brother John was visiting with him while he cooked. Sammy was cooking the full cholesterol-bomb country breakfast and John was drinking black coffee and munching on half a whole-wheat english muffin with a smear of organic peanut butter. Sammy said, "Man, I wish I had the will power you do, John." John didn't miss a beat. He said, "You do, Sammy, you just don't use it." What about Hope. We have great cause to Hope. The Lenten season points toward the ultimate Hope. So, many of us have Hope. The question is, do we put it to good use? What will you do with the Hope that is within you? Hope is a great thing for the times we live in, but only if we live-- in Hope...

Van Payne



MARCH 23

Psalm 119:9-16

Isaiah 44:1-8

Acts 2:14-24

Lentiest Lent, How Long, Oh, Lord?

Last spring 2020 I chuckled when I read a meme on Facebook, "This is the Lentiest Lent I Ever Lented." At the time I thought *you just got to love Facebook and some of the humorous things you see*. Of course I had no idea that the six-week season of Lent of 2020 would last until the start of Lent, 2021 with no definitive end in sight! Who would have thought a pandemic would create a long-term season of sacrifice, self-denial, forcing us to let go of so many worldly things that we love and cherish? Doesn't seem so funny anymore; matter of fact, not amusing at all.

Aren't we all asking, "***How long, Lord? How much longer will we be in this waiting pattern to get back to normalcy?***" Haven't we all given up enough? For many months we did not see our in town children and grandchildren in person; my good shopping buddies Pam Paciocco, Carolyn Leary and Pat Heflin and I had to forgo our multiple girls weekends in Williamsburg to shop, laugh and chat and it caused me to lay awake at night worrying how in the world will Chico's and Talbot's possibly be able to stay in business without our patronage; giving up our coveted Alaskan Cruise with dear friends was a little too much to relinquish especially since we were making a side trip to see our youngest daughter Emily and her hubby Sas who live in Portland, Oregon. We all could go on and on with the things we've given up.

We know from studying God's word that many characters in the bible asked that same question. Surely Noah would have been asking **how much longer** do I have to work on this ark and **how much longer** do I have to stay on this boat with all these stinky animals, right? Abraham had to wonder after 25 years **how much longer** he would have to wait to receive the child God had promised him. Goodness knows Job wanted to know **how much longer** till his suffering would end. In the Psalms David cried in anguish as he asked God four times: "**How long?**" He never paused because he was overcome with sorrow and grief. "**How long, O Lord?** Will you forget me forever?" The prophet Isaiah was given the difficult task of preaching to a people whose hearts were hard against truth. They were stubborn and would not listen. Isaiah was willing to be God's messenger and said, "I'll go, Lord." He longed to see the people repent. When God told Isaiah that the people would turn away and not listen, the cry of his heart was "**How long, O Lord?**" He wanted the darkness and coldness of men's hearts to end. Many before us have asked our Father, **how long** do I have to endure this situation? Most of us are asking that question each and every day as we anxiously await the end of this life-altering pandemic. God's words reveals His true character, and He is a compassionate Father who will make us wait no longer than absolutely necessary to attain his purposes. He promises that, and we can take that to the bank.

If the purpose of Lent is to separate us from worldly things that keep our hearts from experiencing God more fully, then we've had a full year in quarantine to reflect, evaluate and examine our hearts. What is the condition of our hearts? As we try to find meaning in our sacrifices may

our focus not be with material things but be reminded that truth, honor, gentleness, a pure love of Christ is our true calling. Self-denial is a season of penitence as we prepare our souls for Easter and this season is meant to prepare us for the joy of the resurrection as we enter into the sorrow and pain that came first, as our Lord was crucified for us. God is asking us to willingly give up so much more than sweets or twitter. I pray that our gracious God will grant in everything that happens each day that we will carry with us the remembrance of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ our Lord, for his readiness to suffer for us and for the redemptive passion that filled his heart. May we praise and bless His holy name.

O God, give me grace to live this day in such a way that whatever else I lose, I will not lose my soul, my very life in you.

So be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. He is able to do what he has promised. Psalm 31:24.

Janice Adams



MARCH 24

Psalm 119:9-16

Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23

John 12:34-50

Sunrise Service

Since moving to Richmond in 1957, my parents had *wanted* us to attend the community-wide Easter Sunrise Service amid the splendor of the colorful azaleas at Bryan Park. However, the daunting task of getting two young boys out of our warm beds, having all of us dressed in our Sunday best, out to the car, and making the 20-minute drive in time to find a

NOTES:

parking space, proved too much to contemplate. So, we slept in. Year after year. But not this year.

This year, we were determined to make it happen. We laid out our clothes on Saturday night and climbed into bed early. We set our alarm clocks and settled into our pillows. Dad and Mom went to sleep, confident that we would soon be joining to welcome the rising sun, proud of our determination to worship the risen Savior in the beautiful outdoor setting.

Our shining faces turned toward the east, we would soon celebrate with the Pastor as he declared, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!" (*1 Peter 1:3*). Our voices would lift as one across the rolling hills, singing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "He Lives! He Lives! Christ Jesus Lives Today!" and "Up From the Grave He Arose!"

The alarms rang out, we slid from under our covers, got dressed in the dark and came downstairs for a quick breakfast. We were right on time and knew that this would be the year we *actually made it* to Sunrise Service ... until we opened the front door. A solid sheet of torrential rain greeted us and forced us back inside. As it turns out, we never did make it to Sunrise Service during my childhood. But I'll never forget that year when we came so close.

Heavenly Father, our own plans, even when well-intentioned, sometimes go awry. During this Lenten season, help us remember to worship you in Spirit and in truth, regardless of any impediments placed in our way. The sacrifice you made on the cross for us requires nothing less.

Randy Davis



MARCH 25

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Deuteronomy 16:1-8

Philippians 2:1-11

How Do You Do Lent?

The ash for the forehead cross should come from burned palm leaves.

Lent lasts for 40 days.

It's fully understood, that in 2021, Lent begins February 17th, ends on March 3rd, and expects a time of reflection, self-denial, fasting, and none of something(s) dear to one's heart.

Is that it? Is it merely a time for religious resolutions reminiscent of those already quickly discarded from the start of this New Year?

If not, what is the reality of Lent? How must it be approached? Can it really be expected to make a noticeable difference in one's life?

Yes, to everything. We know when it starts and ends, reflection is expected, fasting (maybe), and chocolate disappears for forty days.

And that's it, right? Not so much.

Well, what are the goals during these forty days of Lent?

Have you considered:

Preparation by the believer through prayer - Christ's temptation by Satan

Penance - seek forgiveness

Self-reflection - personal improvement

Self-denial - give up _ _ _ _ _ (something important to you)

Giving - helping those in need

Lent is a time to celebrate and anticipate. These verses are offered as your encouragement during the 40 days of Lent.

Blessings and Amen

Jim Young



MARCH 26

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Jeremiah 33:1-9

Philippians 2:12-18

God's Love is Eternal

As I reflect on this past year, I reflect on the COVID pandemic as well as the isolation from family and friends, yet I always knew that God was there for me, as long as I kept him close to me by reading the Bible.

In my times with God, I remember growing up Catholic in New Jersey, and that we had Good Friday off from school. But what stuck out in my mind, was that my dad took the day off from work, something he rarely did. My friends in the neighborhood were out playing, but we were inside. My dad said we needed to be inside, that we must be quiet and reflect on what Christ did for us. Christ was mocked, beaten, and crucified on this day so that we could have Eternal Life. God loved his son and us so much that he allowed this to occur according to scripture, and he continues to love us as we go out into the world to shine his love to others.

As a nurse, I worked through the pandemic, praying daily for the health and safety of myself, my family, friends, co-workers, and patients. There were days I was frightened, but I knew God was with me, loving me,

encouraging me, and keeping me grounded in his presence, filling me with calmness in the mist of the storm. I could not have made it through this past year and many before without Him.

During this Lenten season, may we remember that God loves us, and he wants us to share his love with others. Be a light in the world so that all may have the promise of Eternal Life. Amen.

Georgie Fielden



MARCH 27

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Jeremiah 33:10-16

Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

God's Plan

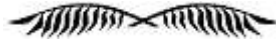
I lived at home in college, and when I would go to school, I liked to stay after class and hang out with my friends some days. It was a challenging time for me. I was trying to work hard, but I really liked hanging with my friends, and there was not enough time in each day for both. I remember one instance in particular when I had a rough day and my mom telling me, "It is okay son; God has a plan for you." Oh boy, that is not what I wanted to hear at the moment. I wanted to scream. He may have a plan, but what about *my* plan, *my* goals, *my* dreams? Does God even care or listen to MY wants and needs?

Maybe you are like me, and sometimes the future looks dark, and hearing the famous words, "God has a plan" is like rubbing salt in an open wound. If you are, the good news is that the Bible is full of people like us. Just

think about David, Daniel, and Jesus himself. I am sure these men questioned whether God really had a plan for them. The truth is, He does. We may not know what tomorrow brings, but we do know that God knows what he is doing and has a plan for us.

Dear God, thank you for always knowing what is best for me before I do.
Amen.

Rob Copeland



MARCH 28

Death

During the final week of Lent, we look to the cross and contemplate death.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

We see death and are reminded that life is frail and fleeting.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

We rejoice that because of the cross, death has forever lost its power.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

For it is through death that we enter into eternal life.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

*Merciful God, it is through pain and death that you provided the path for us to joy and life. You plunged yourself into darkness so that we may live in the light. Be with us as we journey through the darkness of Good Friday in order to arrive at the light of Easter. All glory, honor, and thanks be to God who gives us victory over death through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*



MARCH 29

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalms 36:5-11

Hebrews 9:11-15

John 12:1-11

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 8, Jesus is with his disciples, and He asks, "Who do people say I am?" After the disciples answered, Jesus asks a more pointed question: "But what about you?" He asked, "Who do *you* say I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

As we focus on our Lenten journey, this passage struck me in that Jesus seems to want to know specifically what the disciples think about him. They have been with Jesus and experienced his ministry. How is He touching their lives?

During Lent, as we think about our lives and how we relate to God, we focus on how we have lived, what we have said, what we have done, and what we have left undone. There is a passage from The Confessions of St. Augustine in which Augustine talks about how his faithful mother wept on his behalf as though he were dead because of the "darkness" in his life. He then shares a vision in his mother's dream that moves him to recognize how God cares for each person.

And now thou didst "stretch forth thy hand from above" and didst draw up my soul out of that profound darkness [of Manicheism] because my mother, thy faithful one, wept to thee on my behalf more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children. For by the light of the faith and spirit which she received from thee, she saw that I was dead. And thou didst hear her, O Lord; thou didst hear her and despised not

her tears when, pouring down. They watered the earth under her eyes in every place where she prayed. Thou didst truly hear her.

For what other source was there for that dream by which thou didst console her, so that she permitted me to live with her, to have my meals in the same house at the table which she had begun to avoid, even while she hated and detested the blasphemies of my error? In her dream she saw herself standing on a sort of wooden rule, and saw a bright youth approaching her, joyous and smiling at her, while she was grieving and bowed down with sorrow. But when he inquired of her the cause of her sorrow and daily weeping (not to learn from her, but to teach her, as is customary in visions), and when she answered that it was my soul's doom she was lamenting, he bade her rest content and told her to look and see that where she was, there I was also. And when she looked, she saw me standing near her on the same rule.

Whence came this vision unless it was that thy ears were inclined toward her heart? O thou Omnipotent Good, thou carest for every one of us as if thou didst care for him only, and so for all as if they were but one! (Confessions, Book III, Chap. XI, 19, Trans. by Dr. Albert Outler)

The last sentence of this passage, which I have underlined, has been paraphrased to produce a quotation attributed to Augustine by various sources. This quotation sums up how God thinks about His relationship with each of us: "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love by which you sent your Son, Jesus, into the world not to condemn us but to save each one of us. Thank you for your care for each individual person and our relationship with you. May we love you and love one another as you have loved us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Jen Payne



MARCH 30

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalms 71:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 12:20-36

I noticed a trend on social media at the end of last year where my Christian friends were choosing a “word for the year” for 2021. The idea is that you will focus on this word in your daily walk, learning more about yourself and your relationship with God in the process. I thought, “Why not? Let’s give it a try.”

I chose the word “embrace.” I would like to tell you that I arrived at this word through divine revelation and after a time of deep spiritual discernment. I didn’t. I chose it from a list on Facebook because it appealed to me for some reason.

Maybe it appealed to me because of how much I have missed embracing all of you in the past year. I am a hugger, and I didn’t realize until now how much that feeds me emotionally.

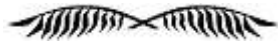
But I also think it appealed to me as a challenge to embrace some *things* or some *ideas* in 2021. For example, I have tried to be open to embracing change and flexibility (new ways of teaching, new ways of doing church, new ways of making connections). I am trying to embrace new hobbies. And just last month, I embraced a new decade and all that it will hold. This pandemic has forced me out of my comfort zone, as I suspect it has done to you, as well. Maybe -just maybe – that’s where God needs us to be in order to teach us.

Here's the tough part I am discovering, though. I can't embrace something new if my hands are already occupied clinging tightly to something else. *Embracing* requires *releasing*. So I've had to let go of my Type-A need for scheduling and timelines and absolute answers. To stop focusing on and worrying about the "what ifs" that are out of my control.

We have reached Holy Week in our Lenten journey. Jesus himself recognized during this week that to embrace his mission as the Messiah and Crucified Christ, He first had to release his life. Matthew 26:39 says that while Jesus was in Gethsemane, he prayed to God, ³⁹ "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me. But I want your will, not mine." He willingly released in order to embrace.

What is it for you? What will you embrace in the remainder of 2021? And what does that require you to release? Beginning with this week, let's embrace the *mystery* of Holy Week.

LeJeanna Raymond



MARCH 31

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 70

Hebrews 12:1-3

John 13:21-32

Thy Will

I hopped in the car to run some errands and turned on the radio. The song "Thy Will" by Hillary Scott immediately came on. It focuses on trusting God and His plan, even when it doesn't feel good, when it's confusing, and when it hurts. It's a powerful message that is based on her loss of a child due to miscarriage. Millions of people have heard this song

and can relate to it in some way. For many, it is also the loss of a child that is hard to understand. For others, it could be a job loss, a breakup, or a betrayal of some kind.

Speaking of betrayals, Jesus faced the ultimate one in John 13. One of Jesus' best friends was about to make a deal to end his life. How heartbreaking that must have felt! Of course, Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. He even told Judas, "What you are about to do, do quickly." Jesus was following God's plan even though it didn't feel good, even though it was confusing, and even though it hurt. Thy will be done.

When hard things are happening in our lives, let's think about God's powerful plan for us! Part of that plan was Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead so we could have eternal life. It was one of the darkest times of all, but it produced the best, most beautiful gift ever! We will also face dark times in our lives. Trust that God has a plan for you even when it's hard to understand. As Hillary sings, "Sometimes I gotta stop, remember that you're God and I am not, so ... Thy will be done!"

Elizabeth Tuck



APRIL 1

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” -John 13:34-35

NOTES:

This passage comes on the heels of a memorable scene: Jesus has shared a meal with his disciples and upon finishing dinner, he stands up and literally knocks everyone's socks off when he kneels before each one of them, taking their feet into his hands, and washing them clean.

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

And this all took place on the night that he was to be betrayed by his dear friend, tried, beaten and crucified. And he did all of this for *us*. Not to satisfy our debts against a blood-thirsty God, but to show us just how much God loves us. All of us.

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

It seems that to love as Jesus loved encompasses a lot of different things. For to love as Jesus loved sometimes means serving one another in menial and mundane tasks. And to love as Jesus loved sometimes means doing heroic acts for others that risk great personal loss. And loving as Jesus loved encompasses every kind of self-giving act in between.

This is how everyone will know that I am a disciple of Christ - not by my theology, or even by my church attendance. They will know that I am a disciple of Christ when I choose to engage in selfless acts of love, big and small.

God, open my eyes to see the opportunities before me today to love in big ways and small ones. Give me the humility to do what feels mundane and the courage to do what feels risky, that I might love as you taught me to love. Amen.

Alice Cates Clarke



APRIL 2

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalms 22

Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9

John 18:1-19, 42

A Man Called Norman

About 30 years ago now, a friend gave me a cassette recording of a radio broadcast that he thought I would enjoy. For those of you who don't know what a cassette is, ask your parents ☺ The recording was a heartwarming tale of an unlikely friendship that developed between neighbors. The narrator, Mike Adkins, recounts growing up in a small town and hearing stories about a spooky old home in the area that was inhabited by a scary hermit whom all of the children feared.

The story then jumps forward in time to Mike being married and purchasing a home that happens to be right across the street from the haunted house belonging to the hermit. Mike is a Christian and can't believe that God would have allowed him to buy a house right across the street from the spooky house and its inhabitant. But as the account unfolds, it is obvious that God knew exactly what he was doing. You see, the man, who we find out is named Norman, lives alone and has no family or friends. The people of the small town shun and avoid him because he is different. He wears old, unkempt clothes and has thick eyeglasses that are dirty. If you close your eyes, you can probably paint a pretty good picture of what Norman looked like.

Perhaps you've known someone just like Norman. What began as a small gesture with Mike offering to help Norman with his lawnmower, turned

into a friendship that lasted until Norman was called home to heaven. Mike constantly fought the nudging of God to help Norman because he worried about what others would think.

Maybe we've all done the same thing at some point. After all, there are lots of Normans out there, aren't there? "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40, 45, NIV). Norman was certainly an example of the "least of these" that Jesus was referring to. I won't spoil the story for you, as it's available in audio and video on YouTube, and I encourage you to take a listen. Next time the opportunity presents itself and you meet someone who's different or needs help, remember Norman.

Johnny Butler



APRIL 3

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

Psalms 31:1-4, 15-16

Peter 4:1-8

John 19:38-42

Hebrews 4:14

Learning to Wait

We all have times when we are praying for a breakthrough or a change in circumstances and don't immediately get an answer. During these times it is crucial that we choose a proper way to wait. We have to believe that God is at work. Therefore, we should commit ourselves to prayer, worship, and seeking the Lord's guidance. Waiting on the Lord doesn't mean sitting around hoping that everything will somehow fall into place without us doing something. We should let Him use times of waiting to prepare and

equip us for whatever is ahead. We must learn to wait for God to answer our prayers, confidently anticipating that His answers will be far greater than we would ask or even imagine. We tend to want immediate answers, and when they don't come, we tend to get frustrated, lose heart, or even stop praying about the issue.

We have to remember that God's timing is perfect. He knows the end and the beginning, and He knows what is best for us. We should not question or dictate to God. Instead, we are to trust Him-the one who designed the perfect plan for us before we were born.

Lord, the year 2020 and into 2021 has been an unprecedented challenge worldwide with the COVID virus affecting so many people. Indeed, a time to continue praying, worshiping, and asking You to strengthen and direct us according to your plan. Enable us to wait patiently and to hold firmly to the faith we profess as you guide us to rise above the natural circumstances of this world as we focus on you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Peggy Edmondson