



From Ashes to Alleluias

Meditations and Musings for the Lenten Journey

Year C: 2019

© 2016, 2019

Steven M. Sheeley, PhD

Prologue

Every year now, for over a decade, I have embarked on a Lenten journey. Before that, frankly, my experience with the Season of Lent had been minimal for most of my life. I knew about Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter...and I knew that some folks had a “foot-washing” service on Thursday night. I also realized that there was something about avoiding meat and eating fish on Fridays. But that – and the whole idea of giving up something for Lent – was for my more liturgical friends. My theological education left me fairly ignorant about Christian liturgical traditions.

Then a pastoral team introduced our moderate Baptist congregation to the wonders of liturgy. They picked a good congregation; we were already fairly responsive, used to participating, and open to different ideas. I was enthralled. And, as a friend remarked to me, “Once you go liturgical, you won’t go back.”

I still wasn’t too keen on the prospect of giving up something for Lent. I decided, instead, to “take on” a Lenten discipline. I found a set of daily readings to complement the Ash Wednesday, Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter readings from the Revised Common Lectionary (with tremendous thanks to the folks in the library at Vanderbilt University!) and decided to write a daily reflection related to one or more of these lectionary readings. In order to keep myself committed, I emailed a number of my friends and colleagues whom I thought might be interested enough to allow one more email in their inbox every day and asked for their permission to include them on the distribution list. That list has continued to grow and – extrovert that I am – I really appreciate having companions during the annual journey.

The volume you hold will trust your own discipline for the daily part of the journey. Its daily entries attempt to engage the words of Scripture and contemplate their meaning for our lives. In the same way, they attempt to engage with the journey of faith and faithfulness that begins with the ashes of last year’s palms and ends with cries of “alleluia” in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The shadow of the cross stretches across our entire way. But we are not alone. God is with us.

Thanks be to God!

Epiphany 2019
SMS

**Ash Wednesday
(March 6, 2019)**

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
for the LORD, your God? (Joel 2:12-14)

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:15-17).

'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven' (Matthew 6:1).

The time has come to begin another Lenten journey. To take the first steps – again – on the road that will lead us to the foot of the cross and the empty tomb and beyond. Since our journey has purpose and an ultimate destination, we can – if we wish – take the name and persona of pilgrim. If only to remind ourselves that we are not the first to walk this road.

To be candid, I've come to realize that I am anxious about starting things. That beginnings make me more nervous than middles or endings. Perhaps it is the fear of the unknown future, or maybe it's merely having to relinquish some control. Or, perhaps I am just afraid that I will show up in the wrong place, arrive a little late, wear the wrong clothes, or somehow look and feel out of place. Somehow I'll be or feel different from everyone else; I'll be "other."

Ash Wednesday is a day for being "other." Marked by cruciform ashes rendered from year-old palm fronds. Visibly and visually reminded that our Lenten journey will always take us through the valley of the shadow of death and to the foot of Golgotha before we can encounter the risen Jesus. Humbled, once again, by the reality that we are ultimately merely dust and forced to embrace our mortality.

The Lenten journey slows me down. I could easily rush past the Passion and its cross to the Hallelujah of Easter. And just focus on the celebration. Most of the time, I'd be happy to ignore the images of

pain and suffering, especially since they are echoed so vividly in our present day. But part of the Lenten pilgrimage involves becoming ever more cognizant...daily. Honing my awareness of the world in which we live and breathe and have our being. Honing my awareness of my own self. Under the shadow of the cross.

Being marked as “other” to begin Lent seems a little ironic in light of today’s readings. They warn us not to trust our spirituality to outward signs of piety and religious activity. They call us to distinguish between public and private piety, between the sackcloth and ashes that served as ancient signs of repentance and a broken and contrite heart. They drive us to look inside ourselves to begin to repair our relationship with God. So I’ll be doing my best today to let the ashen cross sink quickly through the skin and mark my heart and soul instead of just my forehead.

May the Spirit of God lead us into all truth in this Lenten Season, and open our hearts to pay attention....

First Thursday in Lent (March 7, 2019)

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Exodus 5:10-23

Acts 7:30-34

“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight; and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ‘I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt’” (Acts 7:30-34).

“How long, O Lord?” Today’s reading from Acts comes from the middle of Stephen’s recitation of the holy history of Israel’s relationship with YHWH. His discourse remembers a salient moment in the life and ministry of Moses, the first of Moses’ many personal encounters with the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The words are a not-so-comfortable reminder that God, who too often seems absent from our perspective, has once again chosen to be present in human affairs. This encounter changed Moses’ journey. But, in fact, that journey often got more difficult, and God’s call on his life was fraught with danger and apparent delay.

For the holy ground of the burning bush was the beginning, rather than the end, of Moses’ pilgrimage. YHWH called him to follow a way that led through sea and swamp and desert. He learned along the way that flashy “faith” wasn’t sufficient. That minor miracles could often be matched by magicians. He learned that the people of God often seemed unworthy of the trouble and a waste of both God’s and his efforts. And, I suspect, he finally learned patience. After all, they did “wander” in the wilderness for a generation before the children of Israel were finally able to enter God’s Promised Land.

I’m sure there are many lessons to be gleaned from today’s readings. Lessons like the realization that our temporal perspective seems often out of sync with God’s eternal vantage point. Like admitting the reality of suffering and evil in our world, including the evil intentionally perpetrated by other human beings. Like the difficulty of remaining faithful when things don’t go according to our plans. Or on our timetable. Or lie outside our ability to control.

There are days I’m content just to understand the questions. But there are also days when I wish I had more of the answers. Patience – and the sense of peace that accompanies it – is a virtue that all too often evades me. But seeking more patience seems a worthy goal for today....

May God’s Spirit be powerfully present with us this day, guiding our footsteps along the pathway that leads to peace and grace.

First Friday in Lent (March 8, 2019)

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Exodus 6:1-13

Acts 7:35-42

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.” God also spoke to Moses and said to him: ‘I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The LORD’ I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, ‘I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.’” Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his land.” But Moses spoke to the LORD, “The Israelites have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, poor speaker that I am?” Thus the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them orders regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, charging them to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt (Exodus 6:1-13).

“It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’ He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us. Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and reveled in the works of their hands” (Acts 7:35-41).

Moses rarely seems excited to speak for God. Most of the time his reluctance seems quite reasonable, because people seem just as reluctant to pay attention to what he has to say. Today’s reading from Exodus is a prime example. Moses has a clear – and timely – message for both the Israelites and the Pharaoh. YHWH has decided to intervene in current events; the relationship of the children of Israel with their Egyptian overlords is about to undergo dramatic change. And Moses is YHWH’s earthly emissary to both parties. But no one seems to be paying attention to what Moses is trying to communicate. Moses offers an explanation rooted in his poor speaking ability (either speech disorder or underwhelming rhetoric), an excuse which YHWH ignores.

In fact, not much listening is taking place. The Israelites won’t – or can’t – pay attention to the words of Moses about YHWH. Pharaoh can’t – or won’t – give much credence to the audacious request for freedom on behalf of a relatively unknown deity of a powerless and enslaved people. Fortunately for the children of Israel (and just as unfortunately for the Pharaoh), the situation has become personal for YHWH. The rhetorical force is somewhat obscured by the use of “the LORD” as a circumlocution for YHWH, but this passage from Exodus repeats the *name* of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

nine times in the space of little more than a paragraph. Much of the emphasis in this short conversation between God and Moses seems to center on the use of God's proper name, whether on the lips of the narrator or of YHWH. God's people may be temporarily captive and enslaved, but this is no powerless deity, and Pharaoh is about to pay for his lack of attentiveness in dramatic and devastating fashion.

The obvious "lesson" from these readings is easy to discern. We ignore and reject the message of God and God's servants at our own peril. And bad things happen when we fail to pay attention to God. But I hear other notes in these passages.

I don't think we can downplay the idea that God's attention to and care for humanity is intensely personal. We may struggle with our understanding and perception of God's presence in our world and in our lives, but I don't get any sense that God does. And it's nice to have the assurance that God is paying attention, even when it feels as if we are languishing far from the presence of God, strangers and slaves in a strange land.

I also don't think we can ignore our very human potential to ignore God and reject what we know to be right. Lent is certainly not the time to try to deceive ourselves into thinking more highly of ourselves than we should. If I achieve nothing else during this year's Lenten journey, I want to be sure that I acknowledge my frailties and temptations. After all, it seems all too easy to settle for "good" instead of putting in the work to reach "great."

So I'm listening today for the words from God's lips...and I'm looking for the works of God's hands. I'm praying that God's Spirit will be present in ways too powerful to ignore....

First Saturday in Lent (March 9, 2019)

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

John 12:27-36

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8).

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them (John 12:27-36).

Timing, it appears, is everything. Although I think that the words of the seer have more to do with the rhythm of life and living than they do with the actual passing of time. They do remind us, though, that minutes and hours and days flow through our lives. We swim in rivers and oceans of time. And sometimes time slows to a trickle; other times it sweeps us onward in a rushing flood.

One of the goals of my annual Lenten journey is cultivating more awareness. That includes more awareness of time as a resource. Time as a gift of God’s grace. Moments that should be captured and used well, not wished away as if my mortal moments were an unlimited resource. I’ll admit that I’m fairly accomplished at being oblivious. At rushing through life and wishing my life away. My life does have a rhythm and schedule to it, and I’m comfortable dancing along to that rhythm.

But I suspect that it isn’t always God’s rhythm. And I’m sure that I’m not often enough in tune to God and aware of God’s voice. Like the folks standing around Jesus, I’m just as likely to hear God’s voice as merely thunder. I’m far too likely to miss the disruptive moment.

There is some comfort in having read enough of the biblical stories to understand that I’m not alone. That those who were listening for and to God were often slow to grasp the message. But I don’t want to remain there. I want to be aware enough to take advantage of the time. To “redeem” the time as God’s gift. To make sure that my life moves to God’s rhythm. And hears God’s voice.

May God’s Spirit speak clearly to us and lead us into grace and truth.

First Sunday in Lent (March 10, 2019)

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time (Luke 4:1-13).

My ancestor was a wandering _____. We can all fill in the blank with some sort of personal identifier. We who call America our home are particularly characterized by wandering ancestors, and they wandered for all sorts of reasons. Journeys are part of our DNA, even if most of our journeys these days happen figuratively.

I think journeys are designed to force us out of our comfortable existence. Or, perhaps, undertaken because we found ourselves in a place – an existence – that was already less comfortable than we desired. So there is an aspect of searching to our journeys.

The journey/wandering at the forefront of today's reading from Deuteronomy had a great deal to do with searching. The children of Israel had found each other, and they had (re)found their God, but they were still searching for the land promised to that wandering Aramean ancestor. Israel's children

were searching for the sense of identity inherent in that strip of land. To be a people, they needed a place. And, probably, they needed a shared journey.

One of the dangers of our journey is that it may lack balance. Some of us like to travel alone. We're never happier than when we are alone with our thoughts and inner lives. But pilgrimages probably need multiple pilgrims. And those of us who are happy traveling alone may mistakenly assume that God is absent from our journey. Like the children of Israel living as strangers in a strange land, our journey needs to help us (re)discover the presence of a God who was never absent.

Others of us can't stand to travel by ourselves. We're just not wired to go much time at all without human contact. And, if we aren't careful, we will substitute human interaction – sometimes at its most shallow level – for the life of the mind and spirit that is so important to our true pilgrimage. We aren't just moving from place to place. Finding a “place” will be fruitless without discovering who we are as individuals and as family during the journey.

The trick, I think, is figuring out how to balance the two: community and solitude. And getting out of our comfortable zone. Or, perhaps, just recalibrating....

May God's Spirit be so powerfully present with us that we cannot feel alone.

First Monday in Lent (March 11, 2019)

Psalm 17

1 Chronicles 21:1-17

1 John 2:1-6

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked (1 John 2:1-6).

Hope and reality clash a little in today's reading from John's first epistle. The epistles of John find common ground with the epistles of Peter and the books of Hebrews and James. The realities of sustaining a community of faith have become all too apparent in the last third of the First Century, as the church has watched many who came to faith in a blaze of hopeful promise choose to walk away from their commitment to Jesus and return to the worship of other gods and/or Caesar. Falling away from the faith is a real possibility for these writers, and their words are often meant to warn their faith communities and encourage them to maintain their relationship with God and with each other.

The sure sign of faith is faithfulness: paying attention to the teachings of Jesus and obeying his commandments to love others and seek righteousness. It sounds so easy, this hopeful goal of our faith journeys. The reality seems a little more difficult, since sin often seems inescapable. Since sin seems to pop up when we least expect it and when we are least prepared to avoid it. The bad news is that we will have to give account of our actions before God's judgment. The good news is that we will not stand alone to give that account; we have an advocate in Jesus the Christ.

We need to read/hear carefully when John uses words like "truth" and "word," since they are often synonyms for Jesus. The way to keep avoiding sin is to abide in the truth and have truth abide in us, individually and as a community. We "walk in the light" as Jesus did only because Jesus ("truth") continues to remain/abide in us and in our midst. It's a very "eastern" spirituality that will likely sound foreign to our "western" ears. This "abiding" and "remaining." This emphasis not just on the individual but on the communal. This sense that actions and being are inextricably bound in a circular cause and effect. We know Jesus abides in us if we are obedient. And we are obedient only if he abides in our midst.

We're probably going to be frustrated if we're looking for a place to "start." We do so like to mark clear beginnings and endings, and this Christian journey is probably going to be more like merging onto a road whose beginning and ending both lie far outside our ability to see or comprehend. Or like jumping into a river that started flowing long ago and seems to have no finishing point. In our hearts and heads we know there is both beginning and end, but those points really have little or no bearing on our now. We are merely called to step – or jump – in. To keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. That we might love God and love one another.

May God's Spirit guide us into all truth and love.

**First Tuesday in Lent
(March 12, 2019)**

Psalm 17

Zechariah 3:1-10

2 Peter 2:4-21

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words.
Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.
Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,
from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me (Psalm 17:6-9).

All three of today's readings provide a significant contrast between the behavior of the righteous and that of the wicked. And the wicked are really wicked! Their depravity is described in terrible terms, and their fate is fittingly terrible in turn. The writer of 2 Peter is particularly incensed at those who try to "entice" the righteous to turn from following the way of Jesus to indulge in all manner of licentious and untoward behavior. In fact, his description of them might go a little beyond the actual needs of the rhetoric....

The Psalmist appears to have had some difficulty with wicked folks, as well. And he is certain that his cause is on the side of justice. I'll admit that I'm not always that certain or willing to presume that much on God, and I'm very willing to admit the possibility that I might be mistaken. But I'm as certain as the Psalmist that God provides a safe haven and a guard against the wickedness of the world in which we live. That God is willing and able to protect us from those who would harm us, even our friends and ourselves.

I know it's a more prosaic position, but I'm all too aware of the wickedness that lurks within me. The tendency to harm others and myself is just too real. It's a part of my psyche, and I'm committed to being more aware of those dark places in my life and more willing to address them intentionally. I'd like to diminish their power and their emotional energy. I won't fool myself into thinking that I can get rid of them altogether, but I'm still willing to make that my ultimate goal.

In the meantime, I'm going to need God to provide a safe haven. A safe place to contemplate and pray. A redemptive community to perceive the good in me and help me cultivate it. And the grace to reject the evil and the oppressive, both inside and out.

May God's Spirit be powerfully present in our lives and give us grace.

Second Wednesday in Lent (March 13, 2019)

Psalm 17

Job 1:1-22

Luke 21:34

The Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing (Job 1:20-22).

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34).

We talk about having the *patience* of Job. Perhaps we might better talk about having the *perspective* of Job. I don't want to put words in Job's mouth, but his response seems to go beyond the fatalism he expresses. He mourns the tremendous loss of family and things, but he appears to do so in the context of understanding that all are God's gifts, and we are stewards rather than owners.

It won't be a stretch to admit that I probably have more things in my life than I need. And sometimes I struggle not to be owned by house and car and possessions. Or job. Or hobbies. Or church. Or anything in my life over which I really have little or no control. Any sense of ownership of most aspects of my life is self-delusional. Now, if I could just get all the way to a proper sense of stewardship.

God's Spirit graces us with gifts necessary and useful for building community, for feeding the hungry, for ministering to others. My Lenten introspection can't help but ask if humanity has perfected the art of hoarding God's grace, instead of channeling the gifts of God to benefit the most people, to construct the most effective body of Christ.

The Lukan text reminds us that cross and empty tomb are but mid-points in our journey. We still live and move in the context of already and not yet. We still minister in between the first and second Advents of Jesus the Christ. Our Lenten journey provides us with an opportunity to examine our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with our things. To make sure that our relationship with God is paramount and offers the contextual perspective within which we gauge all other relationships. Particularly, I think, with the things in our lives.

Perhaps – with Job – we can acknowledge that God is rightful owner and master of all creation. That God gives, and we are called to be good stewards. To live and minister in God's name and through God's Spirit. And that human life is too short to do otherwise....

May God's Spirit guide us into truth and love. And overwhelm us with grace....

Second Thursday in Lent (March 14, 2019)

Psalm 27

Genesis 13:1-7, 14-18

Philippians 3:2-12

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (Philippians 3:7-12).

I wonder how many of us read these words from Paul's letter to the Philippian congregation and gloss over what seems to be the crux of the passage: "and the sharing of his sufferings." It's like an SAT analogy, only all four of the options are included. Resurrection and suffering stand on one side of the equation, with death and resurrection mirroring them. The power of Christ's resurrection is clearly the goal of Paul's journey. But the only path that results in the power of Christ's resurrection and Paul's own resurrection beyond death charts its course through sharing in the suffering and death of Jesus. I doubt that a triumphalist Christianity will find a comfortable home on that kind of journey.

Our Lenten journey is a wonderful reminder that sharing in the suffering and death of Jesus the Christ is an integral part of our life-long journey of discipleship. "Victory" comes – paradoxically – only via apparent "defeat." Theologians can argue whether Jesus' crucifixion was always part of God's original plan for creation, but faith will always argue from the reality that it ended up being God's solution to the cosmic issues of sin, death, and forgiveness.

Triumphalist Christianity ignores too many personal and corporate and cosmic realities. We do not yet live in a world where only the evil suffer, and then only the consequences of their evil actions. Peace and justice do not yet hold sway over corruption and self-serving violence.

We are mortal, but not inherently evil. I am still enough of an optimist (and a humanist) to see the innate goodness in beings that are fearfully and wonderfully made by a creative God. To see the innate goodness in beings for whom Jesus suffered and died. But I cannot ignore the evil in the world or in myself. There is a selfishness that lurks too close to the surface and threatens to tempt and lead me away from the paths of righteousness. I am both redeemed and on the way toward redemption. Like Paul, I confess that I have not yet come anywhere close to attaining the goal(s) God has called me toward.

It is, perhaps for now, enough to pay careful attention to the path....

May God's Spirit be present with us, leading and guiding us so that our feet follow God's path laid before us. And may we be found in both Christ's suffering and resurrection....

Second Friday in Lent (March 15, 2019)

Psalm 27

Genesis 14:17-24

Philippians 3:17-20

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:17-20).

Citizenship is something we often take for granted and spend little time actually contemplating. We gladly (usually) accept the responsibilities of citizenship, and we're almost always happy to accept the various benefits that our status affords us. Frankly, I only stop and think of being a citizen when its primary responsibilities arise (elections and taxes) and when I periodically encounter US Customs and Border Patrol.

My opportunities for international travel are usually business related. Sometimes they involve navigating a language "border"; they always involve standing in at least one line. I answer a few questions, my passport gets another stamp, and I usually get some sort of card or visa that allows me to move fairly freely for a limited time in someone else's country. Being outside of the US provides any number of reminders that I am a US citizen, primarily because my US Passport is the only official ID that is worth anything. And, it's the only time I pay much attention to that document.

Citizenship, particularly Roman citizenship, was a tremendous asset in the Greco-Roman world. It was the only "credential" that allowed one to move freely throughout the territory bounded by the *pax Romana*. As even the casual student of Paul and his exploits is aware, Roman citizenship wouldn't automatically keep someone out of trouble, but its invocation opened all kinds of doors...even jailhouse doors. The residents of Philippi had been honored with Roman citizenship by Octavius/Augustus Caesar, because his ultimate victory over Brutus and Cassius took place in the area. Many Roman legionnaires chose to "retire" in the area and become residents of Philippi; their service was rewarded by the bestowal of citizenship, even though they lived far from Rome. The residents of Philippi were proud of their heritage and conscious of their honor. So Paul's words about citizenship held special significance to his Philippian readers.

Heavenly citizenship would have made great sense to them, even though it would have demanded that they switch their perspective and sense of what had the most value. Sometimes it's difficult to navigate the border between the spiritual and the physical. My US citizenship comes with a tangible credential: my Passport. My heavenly citizenship is much more difficult to comprehend or demonstrate. But no less real, and far more important.

There are times we would like to be able to present the equivalent of a Passport demonstrating our heavenly citizenship. After all, we like to have things proven with concrete evidence. But I suspect we will have to find other ways to give attention to our heavenly citizenship. And to recognize our fellow citizens along the way.

May God's Spirit guide us and give us grace. And remind us what it means to answer the call to be God's people....

Second Saturday in Lent (March 16, 2019)

Psalm 27

Psalm 118:26-29

Matthew 23:37-39

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Matthew 23:37-39).

The Lenten journey often makes its way through dark places. Today’s reading from Matthew finds us looking over Jesus’ shoulder as he contemplates what might have been. As he broods over the tattered history of Jerusalem and her people. A people called to be God’s people, whose history is all too often one of ignoring YHWH and rejecting YHWH’s messengers.

The city that “kills the prophets....”

It is a haunting scene. Jesus’ words echo/foreshadow the events to come, with the words of the crowds at his triumphal entry already ringing in Matthew’s narrative. We know Palm Sunday lies along our Lenten path. Just as we know that Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection surely follow along that very same path. There is a part of me that would like to skip past the suffering and pain. To gloss over the tortured words from the cross and the entombing of Jesus’ lifeless flesh and the weeping and wailing of his family and followers. Even to hurry past the empty tomb with its conflicting possibilities. To go from here right to the glorious end of the journey in Easter’s resurrection appearances and beyond.

But that would rob the Lenten journey of much of its purpose. That course would, in a very real way, cheapen the joy of the resurrection. It would ignore the message of salvation that comes in the loss and pain of sacrifice, rather than in the easy joy of resurrection.

My goal this day is to work on listening for the message of God in the words and deeds of God’s messengers. My hope is to avoid becoming like Jerusalem and her people, people who killed God’s prophets and stoned God’s messengers. And rejected God’s only begotten.

May God’s Spirit be present with us along our way, especially when our way leads us through the valley of the shadow. And give us peace...and grace....

Second Sunday in Lent (March 17, 2019)

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved (Philippians 3:17-4:1).

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:31-35).

Today's readings include passages that were already in the lectionary for this past week. In some sense, their repetition serves to heighten our awareness that the shadow of the cross casts a long and dark pall over the Lenten journey. We are – by the calendar – just over a week into the season, yet we have already been challenged by the specter of Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Perhaps Paul's words to the followers of Jesus in Philippi offer the best strategy for handling the weight of the cross. He encourages his readers/hearers to imitate the good examples of those around them, avoiding the temptation to join others who travel the wrong path. Others whose minds are set "on earthly things." Others who find their satisfaction in temporal, rather than eternal, rewards. The way of the cross seems neither easy nor popular.

Paul also reminds his readers/hearers to stand firm with each other. Paul's language in Philippians is often corporate, even though the plural/corporate nature of the words is often obscured by the translation into English. The way of the cross is not a journey to be undertaken alone. There is strength in cohesion. There is strength in community. Their best strategy is to place their trust in God and in each other along their journey of faith.

We are all "wired" differently; I suspect each of us will find some difficult adjustment along our journey. Some of us would prefer to journey by ourselves; we will need to learn the power of trusting in others. Others of us would prefer to move with the pack; we will need to learn the discipline of the inner life. Somehow, together, we form the miracle that is the Body of Christ. Somehow, together, we face the looming shadow of the cross and the killing hill of Jerusalem. And share in Jesus' suffering and death, so as to share – also – in Jesus' resurrection and eternity.

May God's Spirit give us faith and hope in miraculous measure. This day and every day....

Second Monday in Lent (March 18, 2019)

Psalm 105:1-15 42

Exodus 33:1-6

Romans 4:1-12

The Lord said to Moses, "Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canannites, the Amorites, and the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." When the people heard these harsh words, they mourned, and no one put on ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do to you.'" Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward (Exodus 33:1-6).

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin" (Romans 4:1-8).

Whether the writers of the Pentateuch intended their narratives to serve as cautionary tales or not, I find that the story of the often-stormy relationship between YHWH and the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel inspires in me a healthy measure of wariness. They are a reminder that we have been chosen to be children of a God whom we can neither control nor comprehend. They remind us that God's power is God's alone to manage and wield, and that only through the presence of God's might and power will we find peace and salvation.

I suspect that modern Western Christians have every bit as much trouble conceiving of a salvation that comes undeservedly through grace as Paul's Roman readers/hearers did. The concept flies in the face of almost all human interaction, so often marked by cause and effect. We would like to think that our actions are always subject to the laws of physics, that they are matched by an equal and opposite reaction. Perhaps, in that way, we can exert a small measure of control over the events of our lives. Greco-Roman society struggled with that understanding of the random and uncanny in human lives; there were even unnamed and unpersonified cosmic forces (the "fates") that controlled human lives even when the gods chose to take no active role in earthly events.

One thing is clear for the New Testament writers. Jesus' followers were called to act in an ethical and pure fashion, out of love for God and for fellow human beings. But salvation itself could not be purchased or gained by such pure and ethical activities. No one could deserve salvation. No one could achieve salvation. Only the sacrifice of God's only begotten, himself eternally sinless and spotless, could effect the salvation of the created and the creation. Only God's grace offered the gift of eternal salvation and the presence of the Spirit.

The (hi)story of God's people suggests that the journey will not always be easy or travel in a short and straight line. The history of Christianity suggests that we can claim no superiority to those whose

story is found in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. To be blunt, the history of human interaction suggests that grace will always be necessary and all too often rejected.

So there is a worthy goal for today and the days to come. To train our hearts to be aware of God's grace in our lives and learn to accept God's gift with humility and eternal gratitude. To worry less about trying to comprehend God and spend more time responding to God in relationship. And to walk in peace and love.

May God's Spirit shower God's grace and mercy on us. And find us faithful...

Second Tuesday in Lent (March 19, 2019)

Psalm 105:1-15 42

Numbers 14:10b-24

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:1-13).

Following Jesus in First Century Corinth could not have been an easy task. Even a casual reading of Paul's first letter to that faith community leaves a clear impression that the newly-baptized believers in Corinth were having a difficult time. Corinth was a religiously and culturally diverse port city, with a reputation for making the most of cultic prostitution. Sex and religion had become so intertwined that the early church struggled to draw new boundaries and live into a new definition of religious purity.

Paul's conversation with them throughout the epistle keeps coming back to their new relationship with God and God's Spirit. Corinth was a very spiritual place, and the Greco-Roman mystery religions – complete with alcohol-fueled ecstatic utterance – were well established within the Corinthian context. Christianity may just have seemed an amalgamation of different aspects of various Greco-Roman religions. In this context, the concept of being "called out" to purity and holiness was very difficult to grasp and work out in the daily life of the congregation.

Our journey as Western Christians is much less fraught with danger or beset with temptations. We live and move and have our being in a world that is dominated by expressions of Christianity. We exist in a culture pre-programmed to privilege Judeo-Christian concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, clean and unclean. We rarely have to worry about whether the meat in the grocer's freezer is part of today's sacrifice to some deity. And the person speaking in tongues is often just under the influence of alcoholic spirits, rather than the pagan kind.

In very real ways, though, our cosmos has not really changed from the one in which those first-generation Christians pioneered the faith. Too many of us still gravitate toward evil instead of good. Too many of us still give into various temptations, particularly the temptation to accept the good instead of the best. Too many of us still react out of fear and paranoia, instead of following Jesus' example of extravagant and sacrificial love. Too many of us still find the call to holiness and discipleship to be a burden rather than a privilege. We can still read Paul's conversation with the dysfunctional Corinthian congregation and too easily find ourselves in their words and their concerns.

The good news is that our burgeoning feeling of superiority to that nascent community is quickly abandoned. We fail too often and too easily ourselves. So the rest of the good news is really good news. The good news about God's care over us and God's understanding of our real ability to withstand temptation. The good news that we should be equal to the task. Equal to the calling to holiness and purity and discipleship. Equal to the journey. Accompanied by the powerful Spirit of the living God. Chosen, called, and on our way to being sanctified. By God's power and God's choice and God's calling. Not our own. Thanks be to God!

May God's Spirit abide with us in powerful ways and grant us God's overwhelming grace and love....

Third Wednesday in Lent (March 20, 2019)

Psalm 105:1-15, 42

2 Chronicles 20:1-22

Luke 13:22-31

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:22-31).

Like Jesus, we are on our way to Jerusalem. Our Lenten journey begins its third week with the sobering reminder that our path will lead us to a familiar destination. Jerusalem is where the prophets are killed, and God's messengers are stoned; the Roman preference for crucifying political prisoners on a hill outside the city walls just ensures a more prominent locale. There is much traveling and teaching left in Luke's narrative, but the shadow of the cross already looms dark and ominous.

The reign of God has broken into the midst of the ancient scene, and Jesus' words about gentiles coming to eat at the banquet table with the patriarchs and prophets – while the good and pious children of Israel find themselves locked out – will only hasten the journey to its conclusion. Ironically, Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod's murderous designs. They will play a much larger role in the unfolding drama than will Herod, as the religious leaders encourage Pilate's religio-political paranoia and desire for self-preservation. These words of Jesus are – as they say – "fightin' words." The gulf between him and the crowds will only deepen and widen as he moves ever closer to Jerusalem.

We who are spiritual and figurative children of Israel, rather than genetic descendants, take heart in the thought that the apocalyptic banquet table of God's reign is open to us. That Jesus' sacrifice is universal in its application, not limited to those who could call Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob their fathers. To be honest, we have appropriated the Hebrew (hi)story. We have drawn a straight line from the New Testament back through the Hebrew Bible, linking the entire story of God's relationship with humanity into a long, single story. And I'm glad to take advantage of the stories of being called and chosen and set apart.

At the same time, I also must be willing to accept the responsibility to be becoming children of God, called out and chosen for God's purpose(s) in the world in which I live. Membership in the family comes with responsibility. A seat at the table is a gift of grace, not earned, and it is accompanied by family expectations.

One of those expectations/responsibilities is to figure out how to remain aware of the light, even when the shadow of the cross threatens to darken our Lenten journey. To be able to listen to Jesus and hear his words, without allowing the specter of the shadow of death to make us deaf to everything else. To watch Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and follow him, even though we know that the journey will only end in death and sadness. And to be willing and patient to walk the entire journey with him, even though we would rather skip over the pain and suffering and go right to Easter morning.

May God's Spirit, present with us, give us the grace and strength to walk with Jesus. And find us faithful....

Third Thursday in Lent (March 21, 2019)

Psalm 63:1-8

Daniel 3:19-30

Revelation 2:8-11

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life: ‘I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death’” (Revelation 2:8-11).

Early Christianity often swam against the cultural tide, and sometimes believers found themselves in conflict with Greco-Roman officials. The first part of John’s Revelation contains letters to churches in Asia Minor; many of those communities faced mounting cultural and official opposition in the last third of the First Century. Whether that opposition ever blossomed into the full-blown religious persecution passionately recounted by many of our Protestant forebears is highly questionable. But the later part of the First Century was rarely a comfortable time to follow Jesus.

It’s easy to read John’s words and focus on the terrible cost of following Jesus. On the persecution that is bound to be the reaction to purity and piety. On the opposition from religious and civil authorities alike. And find some parallel to our current situation. We American Christians are particularly willing to live into the “story” of persecution, even though Christianity has held the position of cultural power for most – if not all – of the history of post-native America.

But the message in this passage really moves beyond the reality of opposition. The message is one of perseverance and resilience. “Be faithful unto death,” because the ultimate goal is a reward for the living. A reward of life. A living reward. So...pay attention. It’s a call to switch codes, to switch perspectives. To worry less about complaining about reality and spend more time focused on responding to the God’s call on their/our lives. It isn’t a call to adjust expectations; the expectation was always the reality of opposition. Any other kind of expectation was an attempt at self-delusion. After all, when one confesses faith in a crucified God, how can one expect to escape pain and suffering?

It is a call to adjust perspective, though. To refocus our attention on a more long-term goal. To keep our feet firmly planted on the way that follows Jesus, and to set our minds on more lofty things.

May God’s Spirit guide us on our Lenten journey and keep us in the center of God’s grace.

Third Friday in Lent (March 22, 2019)

Psalm 63:1-8

Daniel 12:1-4

Revelation 3:1-6

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’” (Revelation 3:1-6).

The congregation of believers in Sardis are the focus of today’s reading from the Revelation of John. As is often the case, the call is to vibrant faith amidst the realities of ancient Greco-Roman culture. It appears clear that merely counting on the grace and mercy of God for one’s salvation isn’t enough. Resting on the promise of one salvation (baptismal?) event won’t ensure perseverance. It seems as if Jesus really did mean to include the word “daily” when he called on his disciples to take up their own cross and follow. The Christian journey is an ongoing and all-encompassing call.

None of these words to the seven churches is an easy word. The word to the church at Sardis is as disturbing as any of them. This word opens a picture into a community that seems to have lost its way and its reason for existing. It’s a community that seems more interested in playing the role of disciples than actually doing the work of disciples. Or the work of discipleship.

This reading offers another reminder that the journey is as important as either its beginning or its conclusion. A reminder that it wouldn’t be good to skip to the end...even if we could.

May God’s Spirit keep the rivers of living water flowing from deep within and among us. And find us faithful....

Third Saturday in Lent (March 23, 2019)

Psalm 63:1-8

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 6:43-45

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry (Isaiah 5:1-7)!

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43-45).

Today’s reading from Luke contains the familiar theme of personal integrity. It’s not an easy concept for the modern Western mind, this idea that actions and being are integrated without much way to determine cause and effect. Why do people “produce evil/good?” Because they have evil/good at their core. Why do they have evil/good at their core? Because they do evil/good.

Part of what that says to me is that I have to pay attention to both the external and the internal things. It will also entice me away from a mechanistic view of the cosmos, from an unsophisticated sense that one approach can solve problems. I need to “do” and “be,” all at the same time and with a balance of intensity on both ends of the spectrum. Actually, along the entire spectrum.

I am struck by the last phrase in this passage from Luke: “for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” Since it follows thoughts about both good and evil, I have to conclude that the abundance of one’s heart can overflow into words either good or evil – or both. I’ll confess that sometimes along the journey I’m not sure I have any abundance left. Sometimes the day seems to use up every last bit of everything I have. I am intrigued by the thought that I need to pay more attention to storing up “good treasure” in my inner life. So that the abundance of my heart that pours forth speech ends up producing “good.”

That sounds like it will take some work on my part. Some intentionality and planning. And working on not just what I do but who I am...all the time. I know how easy it is to store up “evil treasure.” It happens almost without me being aware. I suspect that’s part of the issue, being more aware, more intentional, more conscious.

May God’s Spirit, powerfully present in our lives, shower grace and mercy on us. That we might store up good treasure, rather than evil. And that the abundance of our hearts might pour forth good and grace and love.

Third Sunday in Lent (March 24, 2019)

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:1-9).

Today's good news along the journey is God's willingness to forgive and redeem. We sing of a "wideness in God's mercy," and we are exceedingly glad for the breadth and depth of God's loving kindness. The alternative is too scary to contemplate.

Isaiah's words call God's people to return to a state of joy as they remember their choosing. To return constantly to YHWH in repentance. And to count on the blessing of God's mercy and pardon. It probably didn't make any more logical sense to them than it does to us. We are never quite comfortable receiving gifts, and the gifts of God's mercy and pardon go far beyond anything that we could earn or deserve. Even though they appear to be God's response to our repentance and obedience, I suspect that our repentance and obedience has more to do with cultivating our faithfulness than it does with receiving God's grace and mercy. Our faithfulness is, rather, our response to God's overwhelming and undeserved gift of grace. Poured out in abundance. Flowing over and around and through our lives.

The word of YHWH which came to Isaiah reminds us that God's ways and thoughts are higher than those of God's human creation. No matter how brilliant our insights or lofty our thoughts, they still pale in relationship to the eternal plans of God. So I am thankful that the Word of God which has come to redeem the cosmos "speaks" of a loving and merciful and faithful God. Full of grace and pardon.

These are good words to hear and good gifts to celebrate on this Sabbath day in our Lenten journey. They remind us that we are not alone. That God is with us. Thanks be to God.

May God's Spirit speak to us and give us ears to listen. And find us faithful.

Third Monday in Lent (March 25, 2019)

Psalm 39

Jeremiah 11:1-17

Romans 2:1-11

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality (Romans 2:1-11).

Paul's words to the Roman congregation systematically address one of the persistent difficulties of discipleship. How do we strike the proper balance between holiness and humility? Too often we move to one or the other extreme, and it's far too easy to see our lives as better (or worse) than they really are.

Paul offers some key reminders with words like repentance and judgment. Reminders that life's actions come with built-in consequences. Reminders that God's calling does not eliminate God's judgment, and that salvation is an ongoing journey.

The journey motif is a useful construct for maintaining balance. We are often impatient, and we want to reach the goal now. We make no time for contemplation, for slow and steady growth. And holiness – sanctification – appears to require time to grow and mature. In God's timing, rather than ours. With the sure "transforming" of mind, body, and soul. Repentance and a penitent heart.

God's kindness and grace without our repentance is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap" grace. The idea that we could receive the mercy and sacrifice of Jesus' incarnation without taking up our own cross to follow Jesus along the journey was unthinkable to the New Testament writers. God help us. We are so like the father of the epileptic child in the story following the Transfiguration. We are certainly on the road to believing, but we are still so aware of the times when our faith is lacking. So we pray for faith, for mind-renewing faith.

May God's Spirit guide us into all truth...and find us faithful.

Third Tuesday in Lent (March 26, 2019)

Psalm 39

Ezekiel 17:1-10

Romans 2:12-16

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Romans 2:12-16).

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome is different from the rest of the correspondence preserved in the New Testament. All of the other Pauline letters were written out of a deep relationship already established between Paul and his correspondents. They are full of references to the community, the geographical area, and shared experiences during Paul's sojourn in their midst.

The letter to Rome is more of an introduction of Paul to the congregation(s) there. Paul's base of operations was changing; Paul was planning to move west and spend less time in Asia Minor and Judea. The Gospel is on the move. Rome will be both a destination and a beginning. For that reason, Paul's letter to the Romans employs a careful logic to lay out his particular theology of Jesus the Christ. This is probably why the book of Romans has proven to be so fruitful for evangelists and preachers; the road from perdition to heaven has been systematically laid out in its early chapters.

Chapter two – in context – finds Paul building up to the statement in Chapter three that all have fallen short of God's glory and expectations. No one is able to escape judgment. Even if the Gentiles do the right and ethical thing, it only results in their conscience accusing them before God's justice.

Even though today's reading offers just a piece of Paul's more expansive argument concerning the innate goodness (or, rather just the opposite) of humanity, his words offer a useful reminder that we rarely find ourselves practicing consistent discipleship. We too often find ourselves in the midst of thought or behavior that doesn't quite measure up. And we need no external accuser. We do a good enough job of that ourselves.

May God's Spirit be powerfully present with us and guide us into all truth...and find us faithful.

Fourth Wednesday in Lent (March 27, 2019)

Psalm 39

Numbers 13:17-27

Luke 13:18-21

Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, near Lebo-hamath. They went up into the Negeb, and came to Hebron; and Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the Anakites, were there. (Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) And they came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs. That place was called the Wadi Eshcol, because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down from there. At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.

And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit (Numbers 13:17-27).

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (Luke 13:18-21).

One of the questions I've been asking is whether I actually perceive what's real or just what I expect to see. I'm more aware of my presuppositions and pre-dispositions than I used to be, and that has me trying to question assumptions. It's all part of trying to be(come) more aware of the world around and within me.

Today's readings raise the same questions for me. It seems fairly clear in the passages that follow today's reading from Numbers that the children of Israel saw and heard what they thought was true and ignored the evidence of their own senses. They certainly ignored the testimony of the "spies" who had entered Canaan on their behalf. They rejected the call of their leaders – and God – to step out of their comfortable zone in order to enter the Promised Land. Forty years earlier, as it turns out. Were they scared and nervous? I suspect so. Did they have difficulty placing their faith in Moses and YHWH? Definitely. And it kept them from acting faithfully. It kept them from becoming the people whom God had called them to be(come).

Jesus' similes compare the reign of God to common – and unassuming – elements of life. What we see when we look at mustard seeds and grains of yeast are minuscule parts of the world in which we live. We don't expect much from them, yet experience suggests that they produce an effect far greater than anyone has a right to expect. Their size fools us; it lulls us into a false perception.

Our life's journey often takes place among the familiar and along well-worn paths. Most of us are uncertain and usually unwilling to step out into uncharted spaces. Even when our Lenten journey leads us inexorably toward and through the valley overshadowed by Jesus' cross, we feel comforted

by its familiarity. I just hope I don't get fooled. I don't want to give in to complacent comfort. I want to let God's Spirit lead me along new paths and into new lands, if that's the way my journey is supposed to go. And I don't ever want to underestimate the power of the living God....

May God's Spirit lead us and grant us grace and mercy. And find us faithful in our following.

Fourth Thursday in Lent (March 28, 2019)

Psalm 32

Joshua 4:1-13

2 Corinthians 4:16

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

The priests who bore the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people crossed over in haste. As soon as all the people had finished crossing over, the ark of the LORD, and the priests, crossed over in front of the people. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the Israelites, as Moses had ordered them. About forty thousand armed for war crossed over before the LORD to the plains of Jericho for battle (Joshua 4:1-13).

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

I usually refrain from mentioning places my work takes me. But I spent a week a few years ago visiting a Jesuit university. I was intrigued by the intentional emphasis on spiritual journey, social justice, and discernment that characterizes the best of Jesuit education. We were based in the Library, moving from there to interviews and meetings around the inviting campus. Every day we walked across the campus and into the Library. Engraved into the sidewalk leading into the Library (a gift from the Class of 2002 – I think) are the defining characteristics of Jesuit education.

Since I made that walk two or three times on that visit, I was struck by the importance of places along our journey. The (often physical) spots that are connected with important moments along our life's pathway. Then, I looked at today's lectionary readings, particularly the narrative from Joshua. Here, early in Joshua's time leading the children of Israel, the narrative recounts the process of crossing into the Promised Land. A generation of Israelites has wandered to extinction in the wilderness, and Moses has finally died and been buried by YHWH. Now Joshua has been called to lead descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of the Exodus and into their cultural inheritance.

It was an overwhelmingly transitional moment in the life of the people. So they were called to carry large stones into the (parted and dry, with all of the echoes of the Red Sea) riverbed. To place those stones as constant memorials to the calling and promise of YHWH. To use them to inform the generations to follow about the faithfulness of YHWH, even in the face of the faithlessness of God's

chosen people. To create a special place powerfully connected with the beginning moments of their national history.

I've found another thought to go along with my commitment to become more aware through this Lenten journey. I've decided I also need to become more intentional about placing "stones" to mark the important points along this journey. I need to be more intentional about making powerful connections between places (whether the "geography" be external or internal) and moments. To be more aware of the "thin" places along the journey, where the distance between God and myself seems to shrink almost to nothing.

May God's Spirit awaken (in) us and give us peace. May we receive the necessary strength for the living of these days and the grace to be ever more aware.

**Fourth Friday in Lent
(March 29, 2019)**

Psalm 32

Joshua 4:14-24

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.

We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Corinthians 5:6-15).

This year's Lenten Journey is well underway, and every now and then I sense that the journey is helping me to be(come) *present* in the present. Every now and then I manage to leave the past in the past and put off the worries about the future in order to increase my awareness of where I am "walking" at that time. I don't know that it's easy for any of us to do; our lives have become so noisy, and tomorrow almost always intrudes on today.

Paul's aphorism from today's reading provides a nice reminder. When he said that we walked "by faith and not by sight" he was reflecting an increasing awareness of his own mortality in the midst of God's timing. By the time of this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul was considering the very real possibility that he would not live to see Jesus' return. That realization, I think, gave his writing a more mature sense of urgency.

It was accompanied by the realization that he could not plan or predict the future. We often fool ourselves into thinking that we can "walk" by sight. That we can lift our eyes up from the section of the road we are presently traveling to predict where the road will take us tomorrow or next week or next year. We take pride in our ability to dismiss the present and focus on the future. Paul, I think, was learning how to focus on the present and its gifts of hope and grace.

Therefore, my goal for today (and I'll try to worry about a goal for tomorrow later), is to find the hope and grace present in today's journey. To be compelled and propelled by the love of Christ for me and my love for him. To be energized by the presence of God along my journey's way. And to walk by and in and through faith.

May God's Spirit walk with us this day and shower grace and mercy on our lives. And find us faithful....

Fourth Saturday in Lent (March 30, 2019)

Psalm 32

Exodus 32:7-14

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:1-10).

These first two parables in Luke 15 provide a backdrop for the much more familiar story of the Prodigal (lost) Son. They are essentially the same story with the same punchline, and they make use of everyday – yet very important – aspects in the lives of ancient Mediterranean people. We don’t usually get too worried about misplacing or losing things. Most of us have enough “stuff.” But it’s easy to empathize with both the shepherd and the woman; their anxiety and relief at losing and finding resonates with us.

Luke’s narrator places these stories/parables in a very specific narrative context. The crowds around Jesus were getting larger and more restless. And they included folks who were often considered less than desirable traveling and dining companions. There may actually have been tax collectors in their numbers, but “tax collectors and sinners” is something of a catch-all phrase that represents the disdain that the religious leaders had for those members of society who didn’t strictly adhere to the purity laws of Judaism. The tax collectors and sinners were on the margins of ancient Palestinian society, and they were certainly no fit audience for one who was a Jewish holy man and teacher.

Against that backdrop, the stories immediately remind us that human beings are not so easily dismissed or devalued in the reign of God. It’s a powerful statement and still a powerful reminder. Our society still insists on labeling and stratifying, our way of making sure that we know our place and that of everyone else around us. The activity is important to our ability to navigate social situations, but Jesus’ words are a powerful reminder that everyone matters. They are especially penetrating during a Season which began by reminding us all that we were “dust.”

Just as powerful to me is the idea that God actively seeks those who have become “lost” and exist on the margins. God’s love and mercy cast a wide and inclusive net, valuing every created one and feeling loss on a cosmic level. The party we have when someone – including ourselves – becomes “found” is merely an echo of the heavenly rejoicing.

As is so often the case with Jesus’ teachings and parables, the ones in this broader narrative who are really “lost” are those who consider themselves to be at the center of the social structure. That message wasn’t lost on the religious leaders who found themselves standing around the fringes of

Jesus' attentive crowd. But, in fact, we may have a more difficult time hearing that message. If we aren't careful, these parables will "flip" on us still. We will find that we have become more like the religious leaders, more worried about being "correct" than being "right." More concerned with process and procedure than with worship and truth. And, most ironically, willing to settle for correctly interpreting Scripture as a substitute for a relationship with Jesus the Christ.

May God's Spirit gift us with grace and mercy.

Fourth Sunday in Lent (March 31, 2019)

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found!’” (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32).

Today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel – the Parable of the Prodigal (lost) Son – caps off the three parables that Jesus told in response to the grumbling of the religious leaders. They were very unhappy that he treated tax collectors and “sinners” as worthy of fellowship, instead of condemning them and pushing them even further toward the margins of the social structure. The first two parables, regarding a lost sheep and lost coin, are quick statements without much in the way of character development or plot. The Prodigal Son is what we often think of when we think of Jesus’ parables...a well-developed

story with beginning, middle, and end that includes a pointed question to tie it back to the Gospel's narrative context.

The journey motif seems to make more sense to me during the Seasons of Lent and Advent. I shouldn't be surprised; after all, those are the Seasons of the church year that I am most concerned with the idea of pilgrimage and journey. I have to confess, though, that this is the first time I remember reading this parable in the context of pilgrimage. The narrative itself sets up a reading toward contemplating what it means to be "lost" and "found" in relationship to the community of God. It's easy to read this parable as an allegory, and find ourselves identifying with one of the two brothers (or both, at some points), with the father standing in for God. And we have much to gain from understanding that we don't want to fall into the trap illustrated by either brother.

But it occurs to me that the younger brother – unlike the sheep and coin in the previous parables – intended to be "lost." He made a conscious decision to reject his family and dishonor his father by the outlandish request for his part of the inheritance. And then he set out on a journey to a "distant country." A journey toward the "other." Or, more likely, a journey away from home and family. One could certainly assume that his "dissolute living" was an attempt to find a "fictive family." To make friends and find "home" in that "distant country." Instead – and deeply ironically – he finds his only "home" in the company of pigs.

Then, he (re)turns for home. Finally, the younger brother is on a pilgrimage/journey with a destination that is "toward," rather than "away from." He has found himself on the margins of the social structure, through his own actions and his own volition. But now, he has come "to himself." And he won't ask to be reinstated to his rightful place in the family hierarchy; he's willing to return as a lowly day worker, just for the privilege of being "home." The action of his father actually changes the younger son's status from "lost" to "found."

There is a subtle difference between moving toward and moving away from. But I think it is an important difference. Any kind of journey will always involve that binary opposition, since the journey – by definition – has some destination. The sense of direction, though, lies in the pilgrim's intention. And the pilgrim's perspective. God has, and is, moving in our direction. The act of "reconciliation" has, and is, already taken/taking place. I just need to remember that I'm (re)turning.

May God's Spirit pour out grace and mercy and love on us. And keep our feet moving faithfully toward reconciliation with God and God's creation.

Fourth Monday in Lent (April 1, 2019)

Psalm 53

Leviticus 23:26-41

Revelation 19:1-8

Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good.

God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?

There they shall be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly; they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad (Psalm 53).

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants." Once more they said, "Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!"

And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great." Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints (Revelation 19:1-8).

When the vision(s) came to John on the island of Patmos, Christian communities were facing an uncertain future. The first generation – apostles and early converts – were beginning to die, and Jesus had yet to return. They found themselves estranged from the Synagogues. Greco-Roman civil religion, especially the Emperor cult, made life in the Roman Empire ever more uncomfortable. Perhaps these followers of Christ's way felt abandoned and adrift at the end of the First Century. They turned their attention to the heavenly realms, which had to be better than the world in which they lived.

So the word of the Lord came to John in a vision. Angels with trumpets and swords revealed a vision of doom and destruction poured out on a corrupt and dissolute world by a just and angry God. And visions of a world grown ever more dangerous under the sway of terrible dictators and evil empires. Visions of blood and famine and plagues and death. Each set of visions revealed another set even more terrible. Until we readers/hearers cry aloud to God for salvation.

Until Jesus rides on to victory.

With a word, he defeats the forces aligned against God, God's creation, and God's people. With a word he sends the great tempter and his minions into fiery eternity.

And all the residents of Heaven cry “Hallelujah!” And “Amen.” And praise God so loudly that their voices are like peals of thunder. It is a vision of overwhelming and eternal salvation. The blood of the slain and risen Lamb has won. Forever and ever. Amen.

We are little more than halfway on our Lenten journey. Our pathway will soon bring us into the valley of the shadow of the Cross and Death. We will hear the cries of crowds and religious leaders and Roman officials. We will watch at the foot of Jesus’ cross as he suffers and cries aloud in death.

But the end of the story has not changed. It will not be changed. Its ending lies within the power and glory of the God who was, and is, and will be. It lies in the faithfulness of Jesus in death and resurrection and life. The story is our story. And we, too, will cry “Hallelujah!”

May God’s Spirit be powerfully present with us. Reminding us of the Resurrection, even in the midst of our Lenten journey. Reminding us that we have been called to sing and shout and lift our voices in praise to God. And find us faithful.

Fourth Tuesday in Lent (April 2, 2019)

Psalm 53

Leviticus 25:1-19

Revelation 19:9-10

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God." Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:9-10).

The churches in ancient Asia Minor seem to have had some difficulty with the transition from Greco-Roman worship to Christianity. The tendency to consider angels to be worthy of worship is a theme that surfaces in many of the New Testament books addressed to churches in the area. They seemed often in need of the corrective offered to John by the angel in today's passage.

It's a question of Christology. Where does Jesus fit into the cosmic order? Perhaps we have become so used to orthodox theological concepts that we forget what a problem it must have been to consider the nature of someone who is both God and human. Someone who was born and died, yet maintained eternal being throughout the process. God become flesh and sojourning with us temporarily.

It's possible, also, that our modern emphasis on scientific explanations and technological sophistication has damaged our sense of wonder. Has abridged our ability to recognize the presence of heavenly beings and reduced us to fantasies about extra-terrestrial aliens. I suspect – and I worry – that we would be unaware of any angelic messenger, not just the ones making a concerted effort to remain incognito. And I wonder what that says about our ability to be(come) aware of the presence of God and alert to the voice of God's Spirit.

Which leads to the ever-present danger that we would resort to worshipping the creation rather than its Creator. The danger that – unable or unwilling to experience the presence of God – we would find other persons/things to worship in order to fill our need for the divine presence in our lives. The danger that our search for righteousness and right-ness would lead us to substitute theological tenets or Scripture for God. To convince ourselves that we were worshipping God, even though we were really just worshipping the things of God.

Our Lenten journey gives us the time and space to breathe. To contemplate the nature of God and our relationship with God. To listen for God's voice and seek the guidance of God's Spirit. And, thus, to remember/realize that we don't have to settle for divine-like beings or things. That God is with us. And we are not alone.

May God's Spirit speak powerfully in our lives. And find us faithful and alert.

Fifth Wednesday in Lent (April 3, 2019)

Psalm 53
2 Kings 4:1-7
Luke 9:10-17

On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured. The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish – unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each." They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces (Luke 9:10-17).

As we begin the fifth week of Lent, our journey bids us stop for a few moments and observe a familiar sight in the life and ministry of Jesus. He and his disciples had withdrawn to a fairly private place for some reflection and teaching, but they could not escape the crowds. So Jesus has spent the day speaking about the incipient reign of God and healing the sick and infirm. Such scenes are common in the Gospel narratives; they often end with Jesus working until he runs out of daylight. That is the case here. His closest disciples are actually paying attention to the time. The teachable moment isn't over, however, and Jesus challenges them to find the food to feed this throng of men, women, and children.

Somebody among the twelve has packed a light dinner. Five small loaves and two fishes won't make much of a meal for anyone, much less the crowds that have expectantly agreed to divide into groups of fifty and take a seat. Something miraculous happens, which Luke doesn't bother to explain...or spend much time narrating. The important result is that everyone eats their fill, and they have considerably more food left over than they started with.

Some modern thinker will always try to come up with an explanation for the event. We are so good at filling in narrative gaps that Luke's narrative silence about the cause of the abundance seems too good to let get away. Theories abound. Most of the explanations I have heard sound something like the folk tale of the "stone soup," where the only thing approaching a miracle is that willingness of the people to share their hidden produce and food.

The narrative doesn't really ask us to explain the "miracle." In fact, the narrative expects us to make the not-too-difficult logical leap from the presence of Jesus the Messiah to the abundance of food by the sea in a wilderness-like locale. The narratives of the Hebrew Bible are replete with stories of miraculous abundance, as the story from 2 Kings reminds us. It may play havoc with our modern, Western need to find a non-mystical explanation for everything, but that's our problem, not Luke's.

It's my problem when I commit to listening for the presence of God but insist on maintaining tight control over the narrative and the story and the words. It's my problem when I commit to the journey but insist on mapping out the entire route before I take the first step. It's my problem when I proclaim

the divinity of Jesus but insist on finding human motivations and ascribing human limitations to his actions encompassed by the narratives of the Evangelists. And it's my problem when I expect the Holy Spirit to explain everything as we go along, so that I can register my understanding and my approval.

Most of the time I need to allow the miracle to be a miracle. And be reminded that the Spirit of God is uncontrollable and uncanny. By definition....

May God's Spirit give us grace and mercy and faithfulness....

Fifth Thursday in Lent (April 4, 2019)

Psalm 126

Isaiah 43:1-7

Philippians 2:19-24

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isaiah 43:1-7).

Through water and fire. Baptized and cleansed, but only through the presence and power of God. It's an obvious paradox that the forces which cleanse us do so only under controlled circumstances. We've seen enough floods and wildfires to remember that we are often only barely in control of those natural forces. Rivers sustain us in many ways, but the destructive power of water is almost unmatched. Fire warms us and enables us to cook the deadly bacteria out of our food, but it can blaze out of control in an instant.

Isaiah's words expect his hearers/readers to be passing through water and fire. Trial and difficulty is a normal part of life. Safety is the anomaly, not danger. But the word of YHWH came to Isaiah to remind God's people that their safety, their salvation, lies in the comforting and faithful presence of the living God. They do not walk through the water alone. God is with them. They do not tread the burning coals alone. God walks beside them.

It's a message we would do well to heed, since the valley of the shadow of death lies just around the corner of our Lenten journey. Once again, the time to walk in the terrible shadow of the Cross is at hand. We would avoid it if we could, singing songs about Jesus' triumphant victory over sin and death and proclaiming our eternal security and safety at the top of our lungs. Hoping, somehow to escape the normal reality of all human existence. Hoping, somehow, to skip past the suffering and pain of Jesus' passion and lurk around the empty tomb for a glimpse or a touch of the risen Savior.

But we know that our salvation lies in Jesus' sacrifice, rather than in the Resurrection. We remember that the climactic moment of Jesus' life and ministry, of his short sojourn among us, comes as he takes on the sins of the world in order to take away the sins of the world.

And we know that the cosmos still groans, as we do, for the story of salvation to be finished. We know that sin and evil still bedevil us and those on our journey. That we need to come through the water and the fire – and the valley – each day as we take up our cross to follow Jesus faithfully.

May God's Spirit be powerfully present with us to remind us that we are not alone. That God is with us. And find us faithful.

**Fifth Friday in Lent
(April 5, 2019)**

Psalm 126

Isaiah 43:8-15

Philippians 2:25

Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus – my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need (Philippians 2:25).

The story of Epaphroditus is a good reminder that things don't always work out as we have planned. He was chosen by the church in Philippi to go to help Paul, but he appears to have gotten very ill during his time with Paul. So ill, in fact, that everyone concerned thought it better for Epaphroditus to return to Philippi. Paul's words reflect some concern that the Christian community would consider Epaphroditus to be an abject failure, since he was ultimately unable to complete his mission. Paul praises Epaphroditus with names of honor, and holds him blameless for the unavoidable circumstances that have derailed everyone's plans.

I like to think of such moments as being "redemptive." Obviously, there is only one "event" that we consider to be "redemption," but Jesus' sacrificial action ought to ripple throughout every day of our lives. And be mirrored in the way we treat each other and ourselves. Things happen, and life is not fair. We cannot control every circumstance. We cannot carry out every plan. And sometimes our plans turn out to send us in the wrong direction, through no one's fault. Reality just is.

The story of Epaphroditus is the story of those moments. Those moments when life gets in the way of living. Those moments when we need to hear words of encouragement rather than words of scorn or condemnation. When we need to minister to each other out of the abundance of God's grace and love. And allow God's Spirit to continue to redeem us all.

May God's Spirit shower us with the love and mercy of overwhelming grace. And find us faithful.

Fifth Saturday in Lent (April 6, 2019)

Psalm 126

Exodus 12:21-27

John 11:45-57

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him (John 11:45-57).

We have reached the point in our Lenten journey where the shadow of death is impossible to ignore any longer. The resurrection of Lazarus seems to be the turning point in John's Gospel. Jesus has gotten too important; his movement has come too close to Jerusalem's seat of power. The religious leaders have started plotting his arrest and death. This news, among other things, pushes Jesus and the disciples into the shadows for a brief moment in the Gospel's narrative.

Of course, his retreat will not last very long. Our journey through Lent will soon find us lining the road to watch Jesus enter Jerusalem in triumph. All too quickly his triumphal entry will be followed by arrest and crucifixion. The Cross casts a long pall over the Lenten journey from its beginning, but its shadow has begun to take clear shape and definition.

They aren't my favorite moments of the gospel narratives, these sometimes surreal glimpses into the last few days of Jesus' life. But I know why they are narrated; I know why the gospels find their climactic narrative moments in Jesus' suffering and death. And I'm eternally thankful.

I'm also eternally saddened that human beings manage to fall so short of the ideal for which we were created. That we need redemption still. That evil still lurks so close to the surface for all of us, and too many of us give expression to the evil in us far easier than we express our goodness.

The shadow of the Cross threatens to darken these last few days of our Lenten journey with loneliness and fear. Now may be the time to start remembering that Jesus has not abandoned us, that the Spirit of God is present in our midst to comfort and lead us. Even when our road takes us through the dark valley.

May God's Spirit be with us in power and light our way with grace.

Fifth Sunday in Lent (April 7, 2019)

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise (Isaiah 43:16-21).

...even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:4b-14).

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:1-8).

We love "new things." As long as they aren't too new. Or too innovative. Or take us too far out of our comfort zone. I have to admit that I like being in a rut sometimes. I like the fact that the pathway which lies in front of me has some definition and offers some direction. Of course, the worn paths may just as easily mislead as lead.

Old and new, both are fraught with their own dangers. Perhaps the trick is to be able to perceive when a new thing is God's new thing. When the past and its traditions are better jettisoned for the energy being offered by God's Spirit blowing with abandon in our lives and in the cosmos. If we aren't careful, these readings suggest, we'll follow the well-trod paths of religious and cultural tradition...straight into destruction.

Part of training ourselves in the correct perception is remembering that the path of Jesus is often the difficult path of suffering. We have been called to a life of paradox, where suffering and death are

usual, and the world has been turned upside down. If there is no other message I want to take from this Lenten journey and remember for the rest of the Christian year, it is that one. That we have been called and chosen to follow a Savior whose salvation was accomplished through the ultimate personal sacrifice. And that we have been called to minister to the margins as well as to the center. To be aware and perceptive, so as not to miss the message that God's Spirit is whispering in our ears. To have ears to hear and eyes to see. So that we might listen. And press on to the prize at the end of the marathon. Leaving the past and its paralyzing fears behind.

We have to keep focused on the ruts to follow them. And that means keeping our heads down much of the time. It's going to be difficult to follow Jesus with our heads down....

May God's Spirit anoint us with grace and mercy. And find us focused on Jesus....

Fifth Monday in Lent (April 8, 2019)

Psalm 20

Exodus 40:1-15

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:19-25).

There are times when I wonder if I shouldn't just let the words of Scripture linger on their own. When I'm relatively sure that anything I have to say may just detract from the power and clarity of what the writer has already expressed. This is one of those passages.

Some parts of Hebrews are, admittedly, dense and difficult to follow. The argument for the superiority of Jesus over Moses and the other Jewish prophets is comprehensive and meticulously laid out. But it can be labor intensive, at times, to read/hear. By Chapter 10, though, the supporting material has been provided, and the author can proclaim "therefore." And it's a great set of "therefores."

Today's "therefore" empowers us to approach the throne of God with a confidence we may not always feel. A confidence born, not out of any worthiness of our own, but out of the self-sacrifice of a crucified and resurrected Jesus. Who has become the only high priest, the only mediator we will need in the heavenly realms. We have, as the writer notes, been sprinkled and washed; we can now approach God through Jesus with hope and faith.

Because God is faithful.

Jesus' faithfulness is a concept I need to use as a mantra. Our faithfulness and our faith and our hope are the direct results of Jesus' faithful willingness to see his life and ministry completed in crucifixion and death. So, we are admonished to "hold fast." And to figure out ways to "provoke" each other to love and good deeds. It's a wonderful turn of phrase, and a good one to meditate on this day. So I'll be looking for ways to provoke and be provoked. With love and good deeds being the result of that provocation.

May the presence of God's Spirit in our lives spur us on to love extravagantly. And find us faithful and hopeful.

Fifth Tuesday in Lent (April 9, 2019)

Psalm 20

Judges 9:7-15

1 John 2:18-28

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming (1 John 2:18-28).

Like many of the other New Testament books from the last third of the First Century, John's epistles address a significant problem in the early church. The first generation of believers is passing away, and questions about the timing of Jesus' return continue to loom very large. Greco-Roman society appears to have been uncomfortable with "strange" religions, and the Christians just don't worship enough deities. Judaism has permeated the Mediterranean world, while at the same time the synagogues have turned inward to protect doctrinal and ethnic purity. All of these forces have combined to encourage many who had joined the nascent church to rethink their commitment to the way of Jesus. They have left the ranks of the believers.

John's message to his readers/hearers is both encouragement and warning. He leaves no question about the somewhat harsh realities they face; "antichrists" are already present in the world, and they likely emerged from the midst of the early church. Opposition is a given. Some suffering is to be expected. And they will grieve the loss of friends and loved ones who seemed to be believers...but turned out not to be.

The key is stamina. And confidence in God's loving presence in their midst. They must "abide." It's such a simple word, and we could be persuaded that abiding is a primarily-passive process. We are; we abide. But it's more than a state of being. It's a state of active belonging. Abiding in the love and care of God's Spirit requires active commitment and awareness. Staying in the right pathway, even when we are at once tempted by what seems to be a better way and daunted by the difficulties that seem to lie ahead. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is both beginner and ender of our journey. Moving inexorably toward the cross, even though we well know it is the way of suffering and death.

Only then will we be faithful in our journey.

May God's Spirit guide us toward and into the truth. And give us enough mercy and grace and love and strength for the living of these days.

Sixth Wednesday in Lent (April 10, 2019)

Psalm 20

Habakkuk 3:2-15

Luke 18:31-34

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said (Luke 18:31-34).

All four of the Evangelists structure their narratives to place the narrator and reader/hearer at a different knowledge level than the characters in the story. At its most basic, this narrative tactic allows the possibility of irony and makes the reader feel somewhat special. There are times in the Gospels where we readers find humor in the ineptitude and misunderstanding of the disciples. By the end of the story – and today's reading – humor has given way to pathos.

On the one hand, we have difficulty understanding the disciples and their unerring ability to misunderstand...particularly by this point in their time with Jesus. On the other, we have begun to grasp for ourselves how difficult a concept this Messianic sacrificial death must have been for a group of young men without our post-resurrection perspective. We began with the knowledge that the story will have a happy ending. We began with the understanding that this is the story of Jesus the Christ, the son of the living God. And there has been nothing in our reading/hearing experience to challenge that conclusion.

So we can, just barely, comprehend what is about to take place in the Gospel narrative. We have begun to wrap our minds around the annual pilgrimage to the foot of the cross and the empty grave. Because there has never been a time in our lives when Jesus hasn't been crucified and raised from the dead on the third day. There has never been a time when the task was "finished" and Jesus' spirit commended to the loving and caring and living hands of almighty God.

I think, by now, Luke's narrator has begun to take pity on the disciples and their misunderstanding. The meaning and truth of Jesus' words has been "hidden" from them; we cannot dare even to hope that they will understand at this point. We can, however, jump forward and re-member the narrative of the disciples along the Emmaus road. And find, there, some sense that these young disciples will be all right in the end; their story will have a happy ending, too.

We are careful not to take a sense of superior knowledge into these last few days of our Lenten journey. The story of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denials will always strike too close to home. The picture of Jesus hanging, abandoned by almost all his friends, family, and followers, will always remind us that we have too often abandoned Jesus and each other along the way. Our facile superiority has turned, by now, to empathy. We will find the events of Jesus' triumph and passion still a little too difficult to endure once again in the last days of this year's journey.

Even though we know what is about to happen, we will also turn our eyes and feet toward Jerusalem. And walk through the darkness. And live into the darkness. And name the darkness in ourselves and

in our world. As the light of the cosmos flickers and dies. Even though we still can't believe our eyes.
Even though our hearts are broken.

So, somehow, to participate in the resurrection....

May God's Spirit be powerfully present in our lives, guiding us into Truth. And find us faithful....

**Sixth Thursday in Lent
(April 11, 2019)**

Psalm 31:9-16

Isaiah 53:10-12

Hebrews 2:1-9

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (Hebrews 2:1-9).

Today's reading starts with another good reminder for me, in my attempt to be(come) more attentive and more aware of the movement of God's Spirit in the world around me. The writer of Hebrews is stressing some of the same themes we hear in John's epistle and in Revelation. The second-generation church of the late First Century was dealing with people leaving the faith and others insisting on worshiping angels, in addition to or instead of Jesus.

With clear logic, the writer of Hebrews reminds her readers that the truth of the gospel message transcends the nature of its messenger. God's truth is valid, and God's message continues to be reinforced through the Spirit's gifts. And we make a grave mistake if we "neglect so great a salvation."

This passage is another one of those biblical passages that doesn't seem to need much unpacking. The progression of its logic stands on its own. So, I'll meditate today on becoming a better listener. Hoping to be one of those people with ears to hear....

May God's Spirit guide us into God's Truth. And find us faithful.

Sixth Friday in Lent (April 12, 2019)

Psalm 31:9-16

Isaiah 54:9-10

Hebrews 2:10-18

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me."

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2:10-18).

One of the results of two millennia of Christian theology and worship is that we have gotten comfortable with the idea of sacrificial salvation in the abstract. The first readers/hearers of the words of Hebrews lived in a religious context that understood sacrifice in a very concrete way. Any salvation, any forgiveness, any redemption could only be accomplished through the intentional destruction of life. Blood was necessary.

We may be so used to thinking about Jesus' sacrificial death that it's easy for us to accept the concept without any sensory or visceral connection to the act anymore. On a cerebral and inspirational level, we know that Jesus was crucified, and we understand the cosmic implications of his sinless sacrifice. In that sense, the writer of Hebrews – among other writers – offered a successfully persuasive argument that Jesus' death fulfilled the demands for sacrifice found in the Hebrew Bible and its resulting theological constructs. "It is finished/completed/fulfilled." We get it.

In another sense, our faith, our discipleship risks losing a part of the tapestry of faithful living. We risk substituting an intellectual assent for something far more real. I'm not suggesting that we should return to the practice of crucifixion so that we modern Christians can experience the full impact of Jesus' sacrifice and horrific death. I do think, though, that I ought to be a little less glib. A little slower to gloss over the narrative descriptions in favor of an intellectual understanding. Perhaps I ought to sing about it more than I talk about it. And I'm sure I need to slow down.

I'm ever more convinced that our journey of faith cannot be modeled on the fast pace of modern society. That it's less about information and more about relationship. That the quick fix will all too often get us to the wrong answer, and quicker. That I need to spend more time in quiet contemplation. Listening....

May God's Spirit give us ears to hear and slow us down so we can listen. And always find us faithful....

Sixth Saturday in Lent (April 13, 2019)

Psalm 31:9-16

Leviticus 23:1-8

Luke 22:1-13

Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" "Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal (Luke 22:1-13).

Judas Iscariot is an interesting character in the Gospels. He actually doesn't appear very often, and we know very little about him. Other than one damning act. He betrayed Jesus.

The Evangelists don't explore Judas' motivation in any kind of depth. They certainly don't provide the kind of characterization we have become accustomed to through modern literature. So we don't know exactly why Judas entered into conversations with the religious leaders. And we don't know why he decided to take their money. All we know is that he agreed to help them find a time to arrest Jesus away from the press of the Passover crowds. He agreed to identify Jesus with an intimate's greeting.

Judas' action is important to the Gospel's plot. As much, I think, for the intimacy of the greeting and the irony of such an overtly friendly action being subverted to such a dastardly purpose. But also because the plot will not move forward to the arrest and trial and crucifixion and resurrection (all, we would agree, vital parts of the story) without Judas' betraying identification for the religious and civil authorities.

Today's reading juxtaposes the two sets of preparations that are moving us ever closer to Jesus' Passion. Passover is the season of preparation. It's a festival about blood and death. And leaving. Where the participants dress for traveling and remember the Exodus with unleavened bread and a sacrificial lamb.

The bread is in the oven, and the table is being prepared. The lambs are being led to the slaughter.

And our Lenten journey is drawing to its conclusion. Or...just beginning.

May God's Spirit guide us into all Truth and shower mercy and grace upon us.

Sixth Sunday in Lent (April 14, 2019)

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:28-40).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

It's going to be a week for shouting. Because "Hosanna" is going to sound suspiciously like "Crucify him" by the end of the week. The Gospels will tell us of two parades this week. The first looks like a fairly typical Greco-Roman "triumph," the parade that welcomes the conquering hero back home or into the conquered city. Jesus has made the symbolic choice to enter the city on a colt, rather than a war horse, a clear sign that he enters in peace and humility. Not that the symbolism will make any difference to a Roman official later in the week, faced with a mob of people intent on disturbing the peace. The second "parade" will flow the opposite way, out of the city. Jeers and curses will have replaced cheers and blessings by now. If the stones "cry out," their cry will be the tears of a long, slow lament.

In the topsy-turvy world of the Gospels, the second parade is the real "triumph." The way of suffering and pain culminates on the hill where curse is transformed into blessing. Where jeer is transformed into acclamation. And where mortality becomes the key to unlock eternity.

Death is a strong theme this week, and the shadow of the cross has already stretched its darkness over the story. Even in the midst of Jesus' triumphal entry, the words of the "adoring" crowds have sealed his fate. Their cries have proclaimed him "king" and Messiah, the one identifier certain to attract the attention of Roman authorities. Jerusalem will be no kinder to him than to the prophets of old.

We will be tempted this week to try to hold on to "Hosanna" to help us make it past the stories of pain and loss all the way to "Hallelujah." To try, somehow, to excise the stories of Jesus' "passion" from the Gospel narratives. To forget that eternal salvation is intertwined with sacrifice and death.

May God's Spirit give us the strength and courage for the living of these days. And find us faithful.

Monday of Holy Week (April 15, 2019)

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 36:5-11

Hebrews 9:11-15

John 12:1-11

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant (Hebrews 9:11-15).

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus (John 12:1-11).

The shadow of death looms over "Holy Week." Jesus long ago "turned his face" toward Jerusalem, and the outcome of the story has never been in doubt since that decision was made and acted upon. The "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday are fleeting and soon forgotten, and the acclaiming crowds will soon become disenchanted with another "Messiah" who doesn't quickly set about evicting the Roman occupiers from the Holy City of Jerusalem and restoring the kingdom of David and Solomon. They will quickly turn away from just another wise and holy man. They were expecting action.

Particularly from one whose reputation for miracle and wisdom has preceded him into the collective psyche of those who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the preeminent festival of freedom from oppression – Passover. Particularly from one who has raised the dead and healed the sick and fed the hungry and poor. Particularly from one who has had such provocative things to say about the impending reign of God and the Day of the LORD. They will all be disappointed, especially his disciples.

Judas is given credit for expressing righteous indignation – complete with a narratorial slap down – but I wonder if there weren't quite a few others of Jesus' inner circle who had the same thoughts and kept quiet. A pound of pure nard was expensive stuff. And Mary's actions were a little too intimate for even a quiet family gathering. In fact, everything about the scene is unsettled and unsettling. The smell of the perfume must remind everyone that Lazarus is just now recovering from being dead and

resurrected. And I'm sure they don't want to be reminded that Jesus insists on talking about his own death. This isn't just hospitality; this is extravagant and familial.

It would be foreshadowing if we didn't already know the end of the story, and if we weren't already so close to the final events of John's narrative. If we weren't just waiting to hear Jesus say that his "hour" had finally come. That it was time to move from a relatively safe ministry in Galilee to deadly dangerous days in Jerusalem. If Bethany didn't lead to Gethsemane and Golgotha.

But it does, and everyone – Jesus, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Judas, onlookers, and readers/hearers – knows it. Life as they have known it is coming to an end. Nothing will ever be the same again. And Jesus just keeps speaking in riddles and parables.

We have finally set our feet on the pathway that we know leads to Golgotha. We know all of the steps, all of the scenes, along the way. We would like to avoid them and run to the empty tomb, but we have days to go before we get there. Our journey has led us here again, as it does each year. And we have to fight the urge to gloss over the familiar. We need to linger here a moment and smell the perfume that smells like death. We have to linger here and hear the anger in Judas' voice. We need to listen for what neither Mary nor Martha will say as both prepare their friend whom they love like family for his road to the Cross. We cannot change the way the story unfolds. But we can choose to be mindful and aware as we listen, hoping to hear something we've never quite heard before.

May God's Spirit give us eyes to see and ears to hear. And give us peace.

Tuesday of Holy Week (April 16, 2019)

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalms 71:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them (John 12:20-36).

Since we have known from the very beginning of John's Gospel that Jesus will be crucified, raised, and return to heavenly glory, this interlude of Holy Week isn't a complete surprise. And, the narrator will make sure that the readers are privileged not only to hear the voice of God but to understand the words. We won't unknowingly just hear thunder or interpret the voice as merely angelic. We are one of the likely audiences for Jesus' words; the voice has come for our sake.

Even if we have been trying to be more mindful and pay better attention along our Lenten journey, the time has come to be(come) our most attentive. Jesus' words about glory and light are a large part of the Johannine glossary. They hold the key to discipleship. We are reminded that Jesus' time on earth is intentionally temporary. Returning to the right hand of the heavenly Parent was always the plan. Everything that follows this week – arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection – has been part of the plan from the beginning. And Jesus will be in control.

I think that is John's great contribution to the Passion of Jesus. That sense of divine necessity and control of the events. The Synoptic Passion narrative swirls around Jesus and rushes to Golgotha. Jesus seems almost caught up in the religious and political maelstrom. John's Gospel presents Jesus as completely in control of events, facilitating his arrest and dominating the conversations with Pilate. His demeanor on the cross is far more calm and precise, for the cross is just one more piece in his plan to return to heavenly glory.

Frankly, this is the picture I'm likely to return to these days. My self is a little bit battered by thinking about the state of our world, and I am comforted by the reminder that God is always more powerful

than I can imagine. And more interested in human beings than I have remembered. And more loving than I have admitted.

May God's Spirit be powerfully with us and give us the gift of God's grace and mercy. And find us faithful. This day and every day.

Wednesday of Holy Week (April 17, 2019)

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 70

Hebrews 12:1-3

John 13:21-32

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once (John 13:21-32).

I am not a runner. At most, I walk fast when I exercise. But I think we all understand the concept of a marathon and the difference between running for distance and sprinting. Upon reflection, I think there are too many times in my life that I tend to want to "sprint" when I should be settling into the steady and consistent rhythm of the marathon runner.

I have become less and less competent at waiting. I hesitate to defer anything. I find myself wanting to skip logical steps along the journey, just to try to reach the journey's end a little quicker. Sometimes I forget that the journey is important in and of itself, not just the destination. I forget that both means and ends are important.

We have come to the tipping point of Holy Week. To the point of no return. Judas has left the last meal, and events have been set in motion. Even now, though, there will be no "sprint" to the finish for Jesus. Events will unfold almost in slow motion, as he finishes his "race."

In the process, he will author our faith. He will set the course and give us a glimpse of the finish line. Every now and then, we will remember that we are not the first to run this race of faith and faithfulness. We will slow down enough to pay attention to those who have gone before us. To those who bear witness to the joy and glory of Jesus. And run our own race with endurance and strength.

May God's Spirit keep our feet securely on the paths of righteousness. And give us the grace and mercy we need to be faithful...

Maundy Thursday (April 18, 2019)

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

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 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 13:1-17, 31b-35).

Maundy Thursday is the deep breath before we plunge into the depths of Good Friday. With death's dark shadows looming over everything, we remind ourselves that Jesus paused to practice extravagant hospitality. To play both host and servant, master and slave.

We remember because we have been commanded to remember. We drink the blood-red wine from the cup that holds and symbolizes a new covenant between God and human beings. A covenant "cut" in the body and blood of Jesus.

Are the bread and wine symbols? Do they magically morph into the literal body and blood of Jesus the Christ when the words of institution are intoned? Do they operate as sacrament or memorial? Such questions have captivated – or plagued – theologians and congregations throughout Christian history. But they are somehow less important on this Maundy Thursday and in the face of tomorrow's

Good Friday. Somehow we have tried to make logical sense of an obviously illogical act of humility and sacrifice. For some reason we have tried to understand the mind and intentions of the Divine.

The command was to re-member. To revive – in our minds and hearts and lives – the body and blood of Jesus' sacrifice through the power of memory. To share Holy Communion with God and with each other. And to proclaim the saving faithfulness of Jesus the Christ in life, death, and resurrection. Until the Second Advent.

In the final analysis, the power of communion comes from the presence of God with us. And the grace to re-member the humble glory of the Lamb of God.

May God's Spirit pour out grace and mercy upon us. And give us strength and courage to live faithfully. This day and every day....

**Good Friday
(April 19, 2019)**

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

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

John 18:1-19:42

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9).

It's a fairly straightforward and familiar story in the Fourth Gospel. Things move in a relatively linear fashion from arrest to trial to crucifixion to death to burial. The twilight of the Garden becomes the evening of the courtyard as betrayal gives way to denial. The rooster crows to signal the dawn, but little light will illumine this day. Pilate shuttles back and forth between interrogating Jesus and interrogating the crowds and religious leaders; he seems almost as trapped by the circumstances as Jesus himself. In fact, John leaves little doubt in the readers' minds that Jesus is the one in control of circumstances and destiny. Greco-Roman religious and political power is exposed as illusory in the face of God's cosmic power and plan.

We might pause at this point to give Pilate more credit than he usually receives. He appears to be good at handling the dangerous Passover crowds and their leaders. He turns the tables on them by offering up Barrabas and by repeatedly asking them if Jesus is really their king. Jesus' answers ascribe any messianic aspirations to his onlookers and detractors. His reign will be cosmic and all-encompassing; aspiring to rule Judea or Rome would limit him far too much. So Pilate puts the crowds on the spot. Messianic uprisings were something of a staple for Jewish holidays in Jerusalem, and Passover offered a wonderful opportunity to incite rebellion. Pilate leaves the leaders and crowds with few options; they end up confessing their "faith" in and pledging their loyalty to Caesar. It's a truly strange turn of events. His decision to mark Jesus' cross with the charge of being "king of the Jews" is designed to mock the crowds and religious leaders as much as it is to humiliate Jesus, and the leaders' response indicates that they were well aware that Pilate was shaming them, too. Only John and his readers/hearers hear the irony in the inscription, understanding its penetrating truth.

Darkness never really dissipates during the day. Shadows have given way to deep gloom as the cosmic light of God come to be the light of the world fades slowly to death. In control to the end, Jesus checks off tasks from the cross, providing for his mother and fulfilling scripture. Then, he dies before they can defile his body any further. In darkness, "secret" disciples claim his body and place it in a temporary tomb until they can return after the Sabbath and make more permanent arrangements. The light has died away; the world lies in darkness.

Our annual Lenten journey is almost finished. Every day's news brings us new reminders that the world still struggles with shadows and darkness. Violence and hatred still motivate human beings to

demonize and ostracize the “other.” Fear still characterizes far too much of what passes for religious dogma and even worship. If we aren’t very careful, no lives really matter.

We know the end of the story, so hope has not deserted us. And hopelessness is always premature in the reality of the presence of God. But today is a day for acknowledging the shadows, for naming the darkness within and among and around us. For choosing to stay with Jesus throughout his sacrificial dying, rather than betraying or denying or running away.

May God’s Spirit give us strength and courage for the living of these days. And find us faithful. This day and every day....

Holy Saturday (April 20, 2019)

Job 14:1-14

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

1 Peter 4:1-8

Matthew 27:57-66

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.

They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:1-8).

At some point during a Good Friday service, Dr. James Lamkin referred to the “hollowness” of this Holy Saturday. It is as if the Lenten journey gave a huge sigh – mirroring Jesus’ last breaths – and fell into silent introspection. We have been Lenten pilgrims for many days, and our pathway has demanded constant movement. After the frantic/frenetic activity of Holy Week, Holy Saturday seems to slam on the brakes. We exist in something of a Lenten limbo.

The early church must have felt something of that hollowness, since Peter’s first epistle makes multiple (thought highly cryptic) references to Jesus’ spiritual activity during his entombment. Somehow, in the spirit/Spirit, he spends the time while his body is in the grave preaching to the spirits of those who lived on earth before Jesus’ arrival. Preaching to those who did not have the opportunity to hear the gospel and come to faith in Jesus and his salvation. The Roman Catholic Church has long based its doctrinal and creedal statement of Jesus’ “harrowing” of Hell on this passage, interpreting Peter’s words to mean that Jesus descended into Hell in between crucifixion and resurrection.

We can only speculate as to what Jesus might have been up to during the time his body lay in the tomb. But it seems a shame to ask him to do anything other than rest. To do anything other than observe a true Sabbath in the presence of God. Perhaps we, like some in the early church, cannot really rest ourselves. So we can’t fathom Jesus taking any time “off,” even though he had certainly earned it. As we often do, we want to rush to fill the void. The void of silence. The void of loss. The void of absence.

But we know that this hollowness is merely the result of one long cosmic exhalation. We have had the breath knocked out of us by the crucifixion, but we have one advantage over those who actually stood at the foot of the cross. Over those who reluctantly went back to their homes, beating their breasts and weeping. We know the end of the story. We know that the cosmos will suddenly and gloriously inhale the breath of God’s Spirit with the next dawn.

There will be work to do. Not the least of which will be the work of constant love. We should probably spend some time pondering and re-membering.

May God's Spirit be powerfully with us on this Holy Saturday, so that the hollow absence of Jesus may be a powerful memory rather than a present reality.

Resurrection of the Lord (April 21, 2019)

Acts 10:34-43

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her (John 20:1-8).

Of all the Evangelists, John pays the most attention to the binary opposites of darkness and light. This is probably not surprising, since one of his primary themes is Jesus as the light of the world. From the Gospel's Prologue we have heard/seen Jesus as the true light coming into the world to conquer and dispel the darkness. The events of Good Friday have plunged the world back into darkness with the dying of the Light.

John's resurrection narrative begins "while it was still dark." Mary Magdalene has no hope of finding anything other than a dead body in need of being prepared and moved to a more permanent resting place. Now that the Sabbath is over, the real work of burying Jesus needs to take place; a borrowed tomb is no place to spend eternity. Neither she nor the two disciples are thinking of the possibility of resurrection when they consider the empty tomb. The disciple "whom Jesus loved" comes closest to "seeing the light" and coming to faith, but they are all still wandering around in the pre-dawn gloom. We readers get a glimpse of the coming dawn from the narrator's aside concerning the correct understanding of the scriptures about Jesus rising from the dead.

Mary shows the persistence that Peter and the other disciple don't yet have. Again, they return to their homes; they run away. She, on the other hand, insists on finding Jesus' body. Through her tears, she converses with two angels in the no-longer-empty tomb. And she encounters the risen Jesus. Finally, the light dawns in the presence and speech of the risen Lord. Finally, John's narrative has

moved us from darkness to light. And Mary is sent to testify to the resurrection. To announce that she has “seen the Lord.”

Our Lenten journey has brought us through the shadow of the cross and the darkness of evil. Like Advent, it has left us in an already/not yet state. The light has won, but darkness will not be totally dispelled until Jesus returns. We live and walk in the light, shunning the temptations of the darkness that lurks all around us. And, perhaps, spending too much time worrying about trying to avoid the darkness instead of keeping our heads up and our eyes focused on the true Light of the cosmos. Spending too much time and energy trying to find the truth about Jesus instead of seeking communion with the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And making our discipleship far more complicated than the simple call to testify that we have “seen the Lord.”

May God’s Spirit give us joy in the message of grace and love and resurrection. And guide us into faithful living. This day and every day. World without end....

Amen.