

# **From Ashes to Alleluias**

## **Meditations and Musings for the Lenten Journey**

**Year A: 2020**

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## Prologue

We who follow the way of Jesus the Christ would probably look exceedingly strange to an alien anthropologist. After all, we worship a Savior who is both divine and human at the same time. The Son of God and Son of Man who accomplished cosmic salvation by dying in the most horrific way ancient human beings could conceive and execute. Our most ancient traditions venerate the broken and bleeding body of the Jesus, and we remind ourselves of his resurrection and eternal life by contemplating the cross that was the instrument of his suffering and death. All the while accompanying those images with the most glorious music our sacred imaginations can create.

Those of us who keep the “liturgical” traditions have incorporated them into our calendar. We have divided the liturgical/church year into Seasons, that we might mark the passage of time by remembering the life and ministry of Jesus and his church. Our celebration of Easter marks the highlight of the Christian year, and the Season of Lent provides us the time and space to prepare to “re-member” the broken and crucified body of Jesus once again. Like Jesus, once again we turn our faces toward Jerusalem and force our steps toward the place where God’s prophets – and finally God’s Son – faced mortal danger.

The Season of Lent calls us to embark on our annual pilgrimage. Our feet may not walk through the dust of ancient Judea over these next few weeks, but our minds and our imaginations will transport us to follow the steps of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem...all the way to Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the grave. Along the way, we will share – somehow – in his sufferings. And find peace and rest in the presence of God’s Spirit.

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!

Marietta, Georgia  
Epiphany 2020  
SMS

***Ash Wednesday***  
**February 26, 2020**  
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 (Joel 2:12-13).

“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).

These words from Joel and Jesus make me wonder if we should provide a basin at the back of the church on Ash Wednesday to wash the ashen cross off of our foreheads before we return to the world. For it's always a fine distinction between piety for its own sake and piety on public display. And even more so when one is trained to lead worship, to be pious in public....

I can already see that this may be a topic for exploration this year as our Lenten road takes us right up to the foot of the cross and beyond. As we journey to witness the emphatically public sacrifice and death of Jesus *and* his resurrection and ascension hidden in relative obscurity. As we join in our annual pilgrimage that asks us to contemplate our mortal lives and native sinfulness, in the presence of Jesus' painfully eternal sacrifice and in such stark contrast to his eternal gift of grace.

And there's a big part of me that would like to go around in torn garments of sackcloth and covered in sacred ashes. Perhaps with the hope that, like the method actor, my immersion in the character of the holy pilgrim, the holy penitent, would somehow make my humble piety more real. That I could integrate piety more fully in my inner spirituality by displaying such spirituality externally. And I have to be honest. Is that just the extrovert in me talking and wishing? Or is it a symptom of a shallow personality, a deep spiritual insecurity that never quite integrates being and doing.

I may have to dig very deeply in the coming weeks to take the prophet's words to heart. To find the balance between the public and private pilgrimage. And to bear the brand of Jesus' cross not just on my forehead but on my very being.

Now and forever more....

**Thursday, February 27, 2020**

**Psalm 51**

**Jonah 3:1-10**

**Romans 1:1-7**

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit (Psalm 51:11-12).

I had the considerable joy some years ago to share Ash Wednesday worship with the colleagues who were serving on an on-site accreditation committee reviewing an Episcopal seminary. And we were thoroughly welcomed into the worship of the seminary's community. I fumbled a little juggling the prayerbook and psalter and hymnal, and I had far too little room to kneel comfortably. But we sang and we prayed and we heard the words of Scripture. The canvas of our foreheads welcomed the imposition of ashes, and we shared the bread and wine of communion and community.

Part of that joy was hearing a second-year student offer the homily (in what I'm sure was a situation fraught with more than the usual student-preacher angst!). Her words touched on many of the common themes of Ash Wednesday and Lent. But she brought the image of a healing scar to illustrate the Lenten journey. And she reminded me of something I often overlook during Lent, that the Season of Lent is about redemption and restoration, not just repentance. That the overwhelming grace of Easter doesn't get bracketed or softened or ignored by our Lenten pilgrimage. Our sense of grace, in fact, gets deepened by our attention to repenting from our sins and our sinfulness. Our salvation gets restored.

I want to be careful during this Season not to allow my forays into self-reflection to become too enthralled with exploring the darkness. I need to remember the power of the saving and restoring grace of Jesus, despite my basic "dusty" existence. To remember that the "shadow of the cross" can be healing in a "dry and thirsty land."

May our penitent hearts welcome the restoring grace and love of God.

**Friday, February 28, 2020**

**Psalm 51**

**Jonah 4:1-11**

**Romans 1:8-17**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

(Psalm 51:1-4)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17).

I wonder, sometimes, if living is easier for those folks who see the world as simple. For those whose lens on the world admits no shades of gray, only black and white. I'll have to confess that I am often very conscious of the blurred boundary where what is good slips all too quickly and easily into what is evil.

And today's readings seem to underscore the complexity of our faith and faithfulness. How nice it might be to see sin and salvation as completely separate. Instead of inextricably intertwined. Were that the case, we could be certain of our salvation. We could be certain that our initial act of faith had completely driven sin and evil out of our lives, and we had irrevocably crossed over into the light of God and good. And we could live without fear and anxiety in a world that prefigured the heavenly realms.

But the world in which we live seems much messier than that to me. Even the world of the faithful. Perhaps, especially the world of the faithful. It seems to me that the journey of faith involves holding these ideas in tension. The ongoing reality of our sin, even sinfulness, in the presence of God and each other. The overwhelming power of God's gospel to bring salvation, to bring spiritual and physical healing and safety. The insistent demand for humility and righteous faithfulness. And the nagging suspicion that living in a culture where the possibility of being "ashamed" of the gospel is so remote has sapped Christian faithfulness of much-needed vitality.

The gravitational pull of the cross is strong during the Lenten journey, and the cross stands as a powerful symbol of the tensions raised by these two readings. The cross admits both powerful evil and overwhelming good. Sin and salvation coexist so expressively in the cross.

May God have mercy on us, and give us grace to be faithful....

**Saturday, February 29, 2020**

**Psalm 51**

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

**Matthew 18:1-7**

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in (Isaiah 58:3-12).

***“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”***

To say that the “word of YHWH” was with the prophet in that moment is probably a gross understatement. What a powerful reminder that faith and faithfulness has consequences beyond the cerebral spirituality that our western Christian heritage has bequeathed to us. The prophet’s words sound ancient and figurative to our modern ears, of course, but it shouldn’t take much imagination on our part to translate them into more modern action. It shouldn’t be all that difficult to discover those around us who languish in the “bonds of injustice” or bear the burdens of oppressive “yokes.”

One of the tricks, I suppose, is to make sure that we look up and around us, even on our Lenten journey. Lent can seem like a personal pilgrimage, full of introspection and preparation for the grace of Good Friday and Easter. A journey designed to prepare us to meet the risen Lord with a proper combination of humility and exultation. But the prophet’s words remind us today that part of that journey must help us hone our awareness of the needs of those who travel with us and who lie stricken along the margins of our pilgrim path.

And so, we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, as we go. And we hope, along the way, to become more aware of all those for whom he lived and died.

May God’s grace and love obliterate oppression and injustice in our world. And may God’s love show us how to do our part. Now and forevermore....

## **First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020**

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

**Psalm 32**

**Romans 5:12-19**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:1-7).

Today's readings contain a number of possible themes, and I suspect that a good many of today's sermons will explore Paul's rabbinic arguments concerning original sinfulness and redeeming sacrifice. Or focus on the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. But this passage from Genesis has always appealed to the narrative critic in me. And the reality that Milton's literary adaptation has become the dominant interpretation for so many – particularly the students in my introductory courses over the years – made a close reading of the passage(s) that much more important.

It may seem like an insignificant detail – a mere misspeaking on Eve's part. But I don't think we can ignore her addition of "nor shall you touch it" to her recalling of God's admonitions narrated in Genesis 2. And, while we're there, it's probably good to remind ourselves that these words from God were given to the man, before woman was even created. A close reading of these passages makes it clear – no matter the "literary" or "theological" arguments to the contrary – that no one escapes culpability in this story. What also seems clear to me is that the first husband and wife have been dwelling on the first "no" in the biblical narrative; their thoughts have turned often to the one place in the garden that represents prohibition and danger. For she is too easily persuaded by the "crafty" serpent, and he doesn't even need persuading by her.

And that may be the salient issue from these readings along our Lenten journey. That we are too easily persuaded that evil is somehow good. And that our sin and sinfulness may well lie in our knowledge of the difference between good and evil, and our inability and unwillingness to choose the right instead of the wrong. Today's reading stops before things get even worse in the garden, when neither Adam nor Eve were willing to take responsibility for their prohibited action.

Matthew's account of Jesus' wilderness temptation(s) offers a further example of the insidious nature of evil. Unlike his (and our) original ancestors, though, Jesus has the knowledge and will to deflect the attractive – but destructive – choices, even though they come wrapped in quotations from Scripture. Jesus' example is an instructive one, and a powerful reminder that the boundary between evil and good may well present itself as contrasting good and better.

And the harsh reality of this day is that we no longer have the excuse of ignorance. Whatever the effects of some original sin, none of us can argue that we haven't followed them up with wrong choices, disobedience, and unwillingness to take responsibility for our own actions. Thank God for the power and grace of God's forgiveness in Jesus' restorative sacrifice!

May God bless us with hope in the knowledge of God's grace....



**Monday, March 2, 2020**

**Psalm 32**

**1 Kings 19:1-8**

**Hebrews 2:10-18**

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 2:17-18).

One of the texts from yesterday's readings was Matthew's narration of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. A number of elements of that narrative conspire to suggest a divine necessity for Jesus' wilderness experience. God's Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness, and the devils/tempter's appearance after Jesus' forty-day fasting appears to be no coincidence. But, as difficult as that is for western Christian ears to hear, the confluence of divine purpose and wilderness temptation amounts to a sort of testing for Jesus, the way one might "test" or "temper" metal in order to make it stronger.

The writer of Hebrews might have been reflecting on that very event in the life of Jesus as she spun out this early section of her argument that Jesus was/is the perfect or model "high priest." For a significant part of the argument hinges on the idea that his perfection was not a foregone conclusion. That his perfection was maintained and strengthened through the way of temptation and suffering and humility. Other writers in the New Testament will image this, perhaps, as Jesus' faithfulness, his willingness to set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross even in the sure knowledge of suffering and death.

More than that, though, the writer of Hebrews wants to make it clear that Jesus' hard-won perfection still understands our human foibles and temptations. That Jesus' life is a true example and goal for our spiritual pilgrimage, since only he can author and perfect our faith. Only he has joined the divine and human in time and in eternity.

Jesus' perfection does not excuse or cover our sins or our tendency toward failure. But his work as our model high priest gives us hope for atonement and redemption. And a goal toward which to strive.

May God's grace keep us humble and hopeful.

**Tuesday, March 3, 2020**

**Psalm 32**

**Genesis 4:1-16**

**Hebrews 4:14—5:10**

Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Genesis 4:9-12).

***“Am I my brother’s keeper?”***

There are a number of disturbing elements to this story, and YHWH’s choice of Abel over Cain has often struck me as somewhat capricious. But the primary theme of the story overwhelms all of its other elements. We are scarcely past the sin and exile of Adam and Eve before the effects of human alienation come to horrific fruition. Brother slays brother over religious differences, then issues a denial and claims to be the persecuted one.

With the possible exception of our support for sports teams, we reserve the most passion and rancor for our religious differences. There is no doubt that every set of holy writings – Christian Scripture included – offers a strong apology for the truth of its religious heritage. That is, after all, their primary purpose. And, from a faith stance, I am neither ashamed of the Christian gospel nor unwilling to argue for its truth. But human history is littered with the bodies of those who have died so that someone else might “prove” the truth of his own faith. And all too many of those doing the killing have argued that they were doing so in the name of the God who commanded us to love and serve.

All too often, I think, we would rather denounce and maim. There is something about the very existence of others whose interpretation of the truth is the slightest bit different from ours. And the hottest flame of our ire seems reserved for those who look the most like us. For those who are, without doubt, our brothers and sisters. And we will call each other “brother” or “sister” just before we offer thinly-veiled criticism or deny the validity of their interpretation of Scripture. Or even deny the reality of their relationship with Holy God.

I have a friend who speaks of the “wars of Baptist aggression.” I suppose, by now, I can claim to be a survivor of those wars. I’m certainly doing all I can to avoid the ongoing battles and conflicts related to their latest iteration. But I suspect that experience has colored my experience. I have always been able to see various sides to every situation, but now I try to be much more sensitive to the language of “right.”

For the answer to Cain’s question has always been “yes.” We are responsible for each other. Hate and distrust and homicide have never been correct responses in any relationship, human or divine. And it’s far less my responsibility to try to figure out the validity of your relationship with God than it is to share my story of what God has done and is doing along my pilgrimage.

May God’s grace give us the ability to love...both the other and ourselves.

**Wednesday, March 4, 2020**

**Psalm 32**

**Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28**

**Matthew 18:10-14**

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The Lord." The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." The Lord said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel (Exodus: 34:5-9, 27).

"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost (Matthew 18:10-14).

I've always considered Moses' characterization of the children of Israel as a "stiff-necked people" to be aptly descriptive. And, to be quite truthful, I'm not sure those who follow the way of Jesus and worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have managed to escape the characteristics that prompted such a description. We still all too often consider our own sense of direction and purpose to be the right one. And I know that I certainly spend too little time listening for the voice of God.

So today's readings bring a welcome word of hope and hopefulness. Moses presumes on the grace of YHWH, as only a prophet can. And Jesus' cautionary words about the way the "little ones" should be treated offers hope for us, particularly if we manage to follow his injunction to become like "little ones" ourselves. Jesus describes a caring God who actively seeks those who are lost and have strayed from the paths of righteousness. Good news for those of us whose progress along the pilgrim journey may sometimes find us closer to the pit of despair or slough of despond than on the middle of the high road!

It seems to me that these readings call us in two ways this day. On the one hand, we are still covenant people, with the covenant God made with Israel's children having been renewed and strengthened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And, as covenant people, we should probably spend more time looking toward Jesus than staring at the ground and shuffling along as we make our way on the pilgrims' path. We are a hopeful people, which we should probably not forget as easily.

And the word of covenant responsibility is every bit as strong. If God is actively caring and seeking, we who claim to be faithful ought also to be actively caring and seeking. So our upheld heads offer us the opportunity to see not only the one who is the author and finisher of our faithfulness, but also those who have become belittled.

May God's grace be active and obvious in our lives, today and every day....

**Thursday, March 5, 2020**

**Psalm 121**

**Isaiah 51:1-3**

**2 Timothy 1:3-7**

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song (Isaiah 51:1-3).

For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

With today's readings we pause slightly. We take a quick "breather" from our Lenten journey before we plunge headlong into its second week. And the readings encourage us to look back for just a minute and gather strength and courage for the road ahead. The prophet's words remind the children of Israel that the "rock from which" they were "hewn" and the "quarry from which" they were "dug" was no ordinary beginning. Their history has been marked by God's choosing and miraculous blessing from its conception. And, just as God gave these first ancestors "comfort" and "gladness," the same kind of "joy" and "thanksgiving" and "song" will be found in the future for the children of Abraham and Sarah.

Paul's words to Timothy are similarly encouraging. The spiritual journey is marked by God's calling and God's gifting. And the gift of God's spirit is not "cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." We drink deeply of the living water and breathe deeply of the spirit of grace, as we – once again – set one foot in front of the other on our Lenten journey.

Perhaps one of the purposes of our annual journey toward and beyond Jesus' cross is to help us learn how to balance the twin calls to humility and powerful faithfulness. To give us time to ponder the seeming contradictions in the life and words of Jesus and somehow learn how to follow his call most effectively. We will, I suspect, return to more introspective and contemplative moments along the Lenten journey. But, for today, we step out boldly in the blessed reality of God's presence.

May God's Spirit give us joy and strength along our journey, now and forevermore....

**Friday, March 6, 2020**

**Psalm 121**

**Micah 7:18-20**

**Romans 3:21-31**

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old (Micah 7:18-20).

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Paul's letter to the Romans has always been an important document, particularly for those of us who find our ecclesiastical roots in the Protestant tradition. It's a masterful piece of persuasive rhetoric, and we can postulate that it served its purpose to persuade the Roman Christians to support Paul as he moved his base of missionary operations from Asia Minor to Rome. It served as his theological and ministerial résumé and cover letter, introducing Paul to the brothers and sisters he had never met.

For that reason, much of the letter makes a fairly linear, cogent, and very rabbinic argument that the life and teachings of Jesus complete the law and the prophets of Holy Scripture. That Christianity is the logical heir to the covenant between YHWH and the children of Israel. Western Christianity – more than willing to privilege logic and the mind over all other ways of knowing – has almost adopted Romans as its only faith manifesto. And, at the same time, we have read its words through the lenses of rugged individuality.

Plus – and let's be honest – Romans provides really helpful proof texts for a step-by-step (and often door-to-door) evangelistic argument.

With that as background musings, I think it's important today to hear/read what Paul actually wrote/said in Romans 3. Because we have had a tendency to read these verses in not only a linear fashion but assuming a linear temporality. In other words, we have assumed that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” describes a time before – and without – grace's salvation. I would argue that Paul's words have much more in common with Micah's than we would like to admit. That both writers call us to hold sin and forgiveness, transgression and compassion, in tension. That we are always both sinners and saved. That sanctification is a journey, not an event.

May God's righteousness find us faithful along our pilgrim journey...and may God's Spirit give us the grace to become the faithful people we have been called to be....

**Saturday, March 7, 2020**

**Psalm 121**

**Isaiah 51:4-8**

**Luke 7:1-10**

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended. Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but my deliverance will be forever, and my salvation to all generations (Isaiah 51:4-8).

I like to watch familiar movies, sometimes over and over. My wife will tell you that I will watch some movies whenever I happen to chance on them while flipping channels. One of my favorites (and you may begin the mocking whenever you feel like it, if you feel you must) is *Sister Act II*. In fact, I'll stay with it if I run across it, if for no other reason than to hear their rendition of Beethoven's *Hymn to Joy*. If you know the movie as well as I do (and you know who you are), you'll remember that Whoopie Goldberg, faced with inattentive students to say the least, gets them going by admonishing them to "wake up and pay attention."

I'm convinced that the world in which we live and work makes too much noise. We are surrounded by auditory and visual "noise," and it's often all we can do to block out enough stimuli to be able to pay careful attention. Much of it is our fault; we do, after all, carry around a primary distraction on our hip or in a pocket. We're so connected and wired (wireless?) that we've made paying attention almost impossible.

So I'm taking the Lenten opportunity to try to slow down some and pay more careful attention. To listen to God and pay God's words heed. To listen for the voice of God in unlikely or unfamiliar places. To use the journey, the pilgrimage, as an opportunity for sacred space and holy peace.

May God's grace give us eyes to see and ears to hear....

## **Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2020**

**Genesis 12:1-4a**

**Psalm 121**

**Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**

**John 3:1-17**

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran (Genesis 12:1-4a).

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. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:3-5, 13).

The “righteousness of faith.” Most of the time we consider the two concepts to have a linear relationship, some type of cause and effect. Either righteousness is the result of faith or faith is engendered by righteousness. But today’s readings suggest that the two walk hand in hand without one being the proximate cause of the other. Righteousness and faith(fullness) characterize the faithful righteous.

And, once again, we are reminded that Christianity is an Eastern religion. Our Western, protestant, and logical/linear ways of thinking/knowing aren’t always the best vehicle for applying the insights of Scripture.

But in this case, I’m intrigued by the example of Abraham. For the most part – and certainly as Genesis 12 begins – Abraham’s relationship with YHWH is marked by Abraham’s unquestioning obedience. And often in the face of what appear to be capricious requests or commands, at best. This particular obedient response is presented in the narrative context of YHWH’s great promise to Abraham and his descendants. But it also comes in the narrative context of Abraham’s advancing age and his aging wife’s apparent barrenness. No matter Paul later used Abraham as an example of the kind of faithful obedience that was “credited” as righteousness.

That is not to say that the pages of Scripture are empty of faithful righteous who have and ask critical and important questions. But I think it does suggest that the questions come in the context of a tendency to trust and obey. To be faithful people on a journey toward faithfulness and righteousness. And to know in their deepest beings that they are not alone. That God is with them on their pilgrim journey. And that God is faithful.

May God’s grace find us faithful along the journey....

**Monday, March 9, 2020**

**Psalm 128**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

**Hebrews 3:1-6**

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.  
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.  
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.  
Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.  
The Lord bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.  
May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!  
(Psalm 128)

The “fear of the Lord.” For the writers in Hebrew Scripture, it’s another way of referencing true worship. There is, for the writers of Scripture, always an element of fear and the unknown that permeates the worship of God. And sometimes we have forgotten that.

Part of our “forgetfulness,” I think, may be wrapped up in our insistence that Jesus is our “friend” and our heavenly Parent is best modeled by the mature gentlemen in red suits and white beards that show up in the bleak midwinter. Another part of it is that we have been equally insistent on making sure that worship is easy, relevant, and “meets us where we are,” whatever that’s supposed to mean. I’ll admit that Jesus came out to meet the folks “where they were,” but I don’t remember many of those narratives making the encounter out to be non-threatening or without challenge.

So we do well, this day, to remind ourselves that our worship of Holy God is – and should be – tinged with a healthy fear.

We also do well to pay attention to the Psalmist’s words about what happens to people who “fear the Lord.” And, I think, there is not only emphasis on the element of worship that recognizes its danger. There is as much emphasis on the object of our worship. Again, if we’re not careful, we read these ancient words through modern – and particularly Western Christian – eyes. We read these words in a context where to “fear the Lord” has only one meaning. And where we are convinced that monotheism is the only option. The Psalmist, and his initial audience, were all too well aware that those who wanted to engage in worship had many options for the object of that obeisance.

And just because we have convinced ourselves that our options are very limited, doesn’t make it true. We actually demonstrate each day how many options there are when we choose to worship. How many ideas and things vie for the portion of our attention and devotion reserved for worshiping the divine. So this is the point where I pause and give thanks for the journey of pilgrimage. For the safe space to remind myself that devotion needs but one object, that worship needs but one Lord.

May the grace and love of God find us faithful on the journey.



**Tuesday, March 10, 2020**

**Psalm 128**

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

**Romans 4:6-13**

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord (Isaiah 65:17-25).

Today's readings offer another example that our Lenten pilgrimage is not all sackcloth and ashes. Part of our preparation to follow the crucified and risen Jesus is supposed to ready us for something new. Life beyond the cross shouldn't just be life as usual. And – with the exception of the serpent – things would appear to return to the Edenic.

Radical change is a radical concept. And it's one I struggle with. Because it doesn't take much reflection on my part to be reminded that I grow comfortable in the well-worn paths. And I get nervous on the new road (or on the freeway when I can't see around the car/truck in front of me). I want to know where I'm going, and I'd prefer to see things well into the distant future.

The prophet's words offer a glimpse into the divine future, but they are prophetic and could be taken as figurative. As a blueprint for any action on my part, they don't quite offer a clear enough direction. They do, however, offer us on this Lenten waypoint, a sense of hope. A hope that sustains us and keeps our feet moving forward on the path. There is radical change in the air, a consequence of God's faithful cosmic care. A consequence of Jesus' unthinkable faithfulness. A gift of divine grace.

May God give us the strength for the living of these days!

**Wednesday, March 11, 2020**

**Psalm 128**

**Ezekiel 36:22-32**

**John 7:53-8:11**

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezekiel 26:25-28).

Here, it seems to me, is the prophetic answer to the plaintive cries of Psalm 51. Where the Psalmist begs for mercy and cleansing, the prophet's words portray a God more than willing to sprinkle and cleanse. More than that, the gift of God's Spirit removes the "heart of stone" and renews it with redeemed humanity. Then, that same Spirit comes to inhabit, inform, and inspire.

I suspect that such a powerful indwelling and inspiring of God's Spirit is the only way I'm ever going to be clean at that deep and abiding level. And it's encouraging to hear the divine answer to the dusty and ashy supplications of Ash Wednesday as the third week of our Lenten journey commences. It's comforting to be reminded that our pilgrim journey is on the right path, that our own feet have not caused us to stray too far from the appointed way.

Sometimes I worry that stony-heartedness might be the natural consequence of my cynical and jaded approach to life's realities. This is particularly true when I come to piety, religious expression, and worship. I have strong opinions – partly innate, but mostly the result of training and experience – often supported by what I would consider to be careful, reasoned, and Scriptural arguments. But I can sense the potential arrogance of the professionally pious in my reluctance to bracket my critical self and participate fully.

So I'm looking to be sprinkled and cleansed to the point where I am a fitting vehicle for a fully human heart and for the Spirit of God.

May the grace and love of God make it so for us all, this day and forevermore....

**Thursday, March 12, 2020**

**Psalm 95**

**Exodus 16:1-8**

**Colossians 1:15-23**

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him – provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel (Colossians 1:19-23).

“The blood of his cross” is an interesting image. Particularly since crucifixion – while a gruesome, horrifically painful, and socially unacceptable way to die – usually doesn’t involve much bloodletting until the very end (if at all). In other words, there really isn’t enough blood in the Gospel’s narratives to support the idea that we should interpret the idea of Jesus’ blood all that literally. And certainly not as graphically as Mel Gibson did in his movie version of Jesus’ passion.

But there’s no doubt that the image of “blood” was vitally important to Jesus and his early followers. And in a culture where red wine was so ubiquitous, how easy and brilliant was it for Jesus to transform the wine into a powerful and expanding symbol of his sacrificial death, a “stand-in” for the blood and a memorial to his suffering.

These words of Paul to the believers in Asia Minor are interesting ones. It won’t be difficult to grasp, as we read further in this letter and in the other apostolic correspondence with the Christians of Asia Minor, that there are deep theological and cultural challenges to the place of Jesus in the cosmic order. They would, in fact, just as soon worship angels and demi-gods. So Paul begins with a clear word that the “fullness of God” found pleasure in dwelling in Jesus, with a view toward reconciliation, redemption, and cosmic spiritual “peace.”

And all of that grace and peace becomes available to those who follow Jesus’ way...as long as they remain faithful. For the other issue with these communities appears to be a demonstrated problem hanging on to the basics of the gospel. Especially Paul’s “gospel” of access to Christianity that didn’t first require conversion to Judaism and circumcision. Colossians does a good job of arguing for a full mixture of Jesus’ divinity and humanity, his divinity melded with the human “flesh.” It’s an ode to the bodily death, resurrection, and ascension. To the eternalizing of bodily existence.

Is there power in the blood? Only because there is power in the cross and all it symbolizes for those who follow Jesus. Only because Jesus took his mortal flesh to the cross and translated it to immortality through his resurrection and ascension. Only because Jesus took the cup “on the night he was betrayed” and transformed its contents into an eternal memory of his pain, suffering, and sacrifice on Golgotha’s cross.

So his “curse” frees us from ours. And we – now given the potential to be reconciled to a holy God – have the hope of his resurrection.

May we drink deeply, refreshed by God's upwelling Spirit. And may we walk faithfully and steadfastly along the pilgrim journey, buoyed by hope. And graced by God's presence. This day and every day...now and forevermore!

**Friday, March 13, 2020**

**Psalm 95**

**Exodus 16:9-21**

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted (Exodus 16:15-21).

"Give us this day our daily bread." Every time we repeat/recite Jesus' model prayer, we remember the wandering Children of Israel, hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. And I'm afraid that we sometimes do more than remember their insatiable appetite for complaining. Or their marvelous ability to get things wrong.

If I ever slow down enough, I realize that it's so easy for me to forget how much I am blessed. And so many of those blessings occur daily. Their regularity may contribute to my forgetfulness; I have probably come to expect them as part of the fabric of my living. But they are blessings, nonetheless. As marvelous and miraculous as quail and manna falling from the heavens, meted out to meet my daily needs, but not to be hoarded or used for commerce.

And not to be stockpiled, either, as if God might be unable or unwilling to continue to sustain us. It was the faithfulness of YHWH that they questioned, and they did so from the time they left Egypt. Nothing was good enough for this group of folks; they had become more comfortable being captive victims. They had become resigned to their life of captivity, and the prospect of the journey and a new life seemed more to terrify than excite them. Or, perhaps, they became so used to God's daily provision that they lost sight of the miracle encapsulated by the ordinary. That they came to expect the blessing to be the baseline, leaving them wanting something – anything – more.

With God's grace, our Lenten journey will give us the time and space to contemplate the overwhelming gift of daily blessings. Of God's consistent presence. To remind ourselves that our God is faithful and will sustain us. And we will remember that our "daily bread" is the good gift of a loving God...and be truly grateful.

May God's love and grace be showered on and in our lives. This day and every day.

**Saturday, March 14, 2020**

**Psalm 95**

**Exodus 16:27-35**

**John 4:1-6**

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” – although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized – he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph (John 4:1-5).

“But he had to go through Samaria.” It has been termed the “divine necessity.” Because the normal route between Judea and Galilee went far out of its way to avoid Samaria. To avoid any unnecessary contact with the region’s inhabitants, who were tainted forever in the minds of the children of Israel by their ancestral impurity. They were the “lost” tribes of Israel. Not because they had wandered off on some quest or journey from which they had never returned. But because they had been forced to intermarry with their eighth-century (BCE) conquerors.

And Samaria had become an alien land.

And the simple statement at the introduction of this story now calls us to pay careful attention. If Jesus had other – better traveled – roads to make this journey, why feel compelled to deviate from the normal route to risk the road through Samaria. He and his disciples were bound to have contact with unclean Samaritans; they could hardly avoid all human interaction on their journey. But, perhaps, the “necessity” had everything to do with just that probability.

I have argued elsewhere that the story to follow (tomorrow’s reading) offers a call to bring the good news to the “mission field(s)” in our midst. That, perhaps, Jesus’ “divine necessity” was to bring him and his message in contact with those who were most dangerous to the Jewish population *because* they were the nearest and the most similar in appearance and culture. And that since our “missionary” gaze most often turns to the exotic and different, we are in danger of missing the opportunities for ministering love and grace that God places in our midst and on our pathway each day.

Each day is both a stage along our journey and a journey in and of itself. And that journey winds through many “places.” Sometimes we may feel compelled to alter our path; other times we find ourselves following familiar footsteps and lanes. But I suspect there are always opportunities for giving grace as well as receiving it. And I want to make sure I’m paying attention; I’d hate to miss either opportunity!

May God’s grace and love overflow our lives and into the lives of those around us...

### **Third Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2020**

**Exodus 17:1-7**

**Psalm 95**

**Romans 5:1-11**

**John 4:5-42**

The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:5-7)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water" (John 4:10-15).

I take so many things for granted each day. And clean, potable water that flows from the tap is one of those things. It's such a part of our lives as Americans that we don't even think about it. Unless we don't have it, which immediately constitutes an emergency situation.

For so much of human history – and, still, in many places around the world – getting water determines the rhythm of the day. No flick of the faucet for those folks; their water comes with pump handles or buckets or jars. And it probably hasn't been subjected to sanitation procedures that would even approach our standards. We clean, we cook, we drink.

The Samaritan woman who came to the well in the middle of the day in John's story was trapped by the need for water and the rhythm of the day. We don't have to read very far into the story to understand that she had probably timed her arrival at the well in an attempt to avoid social interaction. Meeting someone, especially a lone man, was not going to make her comfortable. Basic decency demanded that she honor his request for water, although her surprise at his request is genuine. In fact, that surprise probably began with wonder that a Jewish man was sitting beside a well in Samaria at all, much less that he was willing to drink from the same vessel as a Samaritan woman.

Her misunderstanding is also genuine. We translate Jesus' offer into "living" water, but the word could just as easily be translated as "running" water. Hence her request for indoor plumbing and no more need to make the daily trek to the well with all of its attendant social danger.

As so often happens in John's Gospel, the words of Jesus threaten to transform the mundane into the special and the holy. In this case, the "living" water – particularly for those of us privy to all of the story and the narrator's commentary – is far more than just the vital combination of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. It is the offer and the challenge to live on another plane. To allow our relationship with Jesus to elevate our existence. To accept the gift of God's Spirit, as vital to our spiritual existence

as water is to our human one. And to see Jesus with clarity, the divine dwelling temporarily in our midst.

May God's grace give us the courage to drink deeply....



**Monday, March 16, 2020**

**Psalm 81**

**Genesis 24:1-27**

**2 John 1-13**

The man bowed his head and worshiped the Lord and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin" (Genesis 24:26-27).

So begins the rather bizarre "courtship" of Rebekah, as the (hi)story of the children of Israel makes a transition from Abraham to Isaac. Isaac will be the passive patriarch – unlike either his father or his son – with things done for and to him. And Rebekah will be Isaac's salvation in many ways, particularly when it comes to Jacob.

In some ways, we should have read this passage before yesterday's reading from John 4, since the Genesis passage lays a narrative foundation for many similar meetings to come. The ancient well was not only a central location in the life of any "community," it becomes the setting for courtship encounters throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Jacob will meet Rachel at a well. Tamar, disguised, will await Judah by the well. And others will meet and secure their mate with the well's scenic aid. And, if we think it through at all, we'll realize why the disciples should never have left Jesus alone by the well near Sychar – and "Jacob's well" at that!

Here, the father has sent his oldest and most trusted servant to the land of Abraham's kin...to find a wife for Isaac. No doubt Isaac will be fine with whatever woman returns with the servant; the narrator will, in fact, note later that Isaac was "comforted" in the loss of his mother by his marriage to Rebekah. But the hindsight of holy history is, indeed, "twenty-twenty." Rebekah is a fitting addition to the family of the promise, and her actions will go far in preserving the patriarchal line.

The message for our own journey on this Lenten Monday seems rather simple. The God of Abraham has been present as Abraham obeyed and went. Wherever Abraham obeyed and went. Throughout Abraham's life, YHWH has blessed Abraham with wealth and the promise of eternity. Even the servant is vitally aware of the leading hand of YHWH.

Sometimes things just work out. But if allow the past to teach us anything, we will not discount the grace and presence of God along our journey. We will look for the powerful in the mundane and ordinary. And we will be willing to be blessed by God's presence and God's plan.

May a faithful God find us faithful and willing to be blessed. This day and every day.

**Tuesday, March 17, 2020**

**Psalm 81**

**Genesis 29:1-14**

**1 Corinthians 10:1-4**

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban (Genesis 29:9-10).

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 (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

Water appears to be this week's theme, and today's reading from Genesis treats us to the second installment of the well "courtship" stories. There are numerous differences between the stories of Abraham's servant and Isaac's son as they come to the well and find a mate. Perhaps the biggest difference is that Jacob has come on his own behalf, and Isaac's wife was chosen by his father's servant. The careful reader will also note that Abraham's servant showered Rebekah and her family with gifts, and Jacob has only the "kisses" of family greetings for his cousin and his uncle's family.

We modern readers may think it odd that the sheep herders are waiting for a critical mass of flocks to water their sheep. But the ancient wells – little more than seeps – usually took a while to fill up with enough water for the demand. Therefore, they were covered by a stone that would be too much for one shepherd to remove, ensuring that multiple flocks could share the water. So Jacob's feat of strength is impressive, as he removes the stone by himself.

And that may signal the most important difference between Jacob and his notable ancestors. Where Abraham was obedient and Isaac passive, Jacob is independent. He is also conniving and deceiving. And chosen by YHWH to be the eponymous patriarch. We do, after all, call them the children of *Israel*. Here at the well he meets his mate and his match in Rachel. He will, by dint of his own labors, outwit his uncle/father-in-law and leave Laban's household far wealthier in goods and family than he arrived. Despite his character flaws, Jacob will bear the unmistakable mark of being God's chosen.

Preachers tend to want to see Jacob as a shining example of patriarchal character. In fact, Scripture most often portrays him as one who achieved his goals through deceit. But there is never any doubt that YHWH has chosen him to carry on the promise to Abraham.

Which may be the best lesson for this day. A twin reminder that God cannot be controlled and may be seen to act in "mysterious ways." That God's choosing – even of us – may not always make logical sense. And that things don't always go the way we planned them.

And that's probably enough for this day's journey....

May God shower us with grace and love this day, even though we did nothing to deserve it.

**Wednesday, March 18, 2020**

**Psalm 81**

**Jeremiah 2:4-13**

**John 7:14-31, 37-39**

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

Water runs through today’s readings, in keeping with what seems to be a theme for this week. But, since we’re in the Fourth Gospel, we shouldn’t be surprised to hear the gurgle of water. It bubbles, it flows, it springs, it wells; the Gospel of John is full of some kind of water or another. Water is certainly important to life, and water in the semi-arid Middle East was rendered even more vital by its relative scarcity. But water in John’s Gospel is more than just a chemical compound. Water is a vital symbol of the life-giving power of God and God’s Spirit. And a symbol of Jesus’ messianic power and identity.

In today’s reading, Jesus has returned to Jerusalem in the midst of a religious festival, and he has come to the Temple precincts to proclaim the immanence of the reign of God. There is narrative foreshadowing in this passage, as the questions of messianic identity which will ultimately fuel the accusations from the Jewish leadership that will force the Roman leadership to execute Jesus continue to come to the narrative’s fore. As he often does, Jesus parries those questions – with their implicit (and sometimes explicit) challenge to his identity, authority, and honor – by turning the questions back on his accusers sprinkled throughout the crowd. They will have no answer to his logic, and our narrator allows us a glimpse of the divided nature of the populace, as we hear some in the crowd ask tentatively if the Messiah could “do more signs than this man has done?”

Our inner reader, far more informed than anyone other than Jesus in the narrative, scoffs at the crowd’s reluctance to understand and comprehend the true identity of the one in their midst. But neither the festival nor Jesus is finished. On the final day of the festival, Jesus returns to the Temple mount to proclaim the availability of “rivers of living water” for those who are thirsty. Presumably the Jerusalem festival crowd will catch on quicker than the woman at the Samaritan well, and Jesus’ reference to the words of Scripture may help them in their understanding. But I suspect that many of them will hear his words and look for a political salvation. He has tapped into the traditions and folklore surrounding the announcement and appearance of the promised Messiah, and the festival crowd will already be poised to accede to their own preset notions about the Messiah’s political intentions.

But John’s narrator will not let us misunderstand something this important. The narrator will quickly remind us that the rivers of living water refer to the gift of God’s Spirit to those who follow the way of Jesus. Just as quickly, that narrative comment will also bring us back to our own time and place, reminding us that we are readers/hearers of the story by reminding us here – in the middle – that the end of the story is yet to come. At this point in the narrative journey, the Spirit has not yet been given to believers, since Jesus has yet to be “glorified.”

Here, at last, is water for the thirsty of any age and in any story. We are not just looking over the narrator’s shoulder to see an ancient hero standing near a well; here is water to sustain our own journey. Here is relief for the parched places in our lives. Here is life-giving sustenance for the journey that

seems to be moving inexorably toward the cross and the valley of its shadow. And we have been invited to come and drink.

May God's Spirit well up within us and encourage us to drink deeply! This day and every day along our journey....

**Thursday, March 19, 2020**

**Psalm 23**

**1 Samuel 15:10-21**

**Ephesians 4:25-32**

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:25-32).

Today, well along the Lenten portion of our journey, the readings from Samuel and Ephesians raise the question of integrity in our dealings with God and with each other. And it might do me good to spend some time pondering the nature of speaking the truth, for our culture encourages us to push the boundaries sometimes. To walk along the edges arguing with ourselves and the cosmos about the very essence of truth and reality.

But it is the words of Ephesians about community that grab me today. That idea that our motivation for speaking truth, for resolving anger, even for giving up criminal and anti-social behavior, lies in our relationships. That we are “members of one another.” I have no doubt that the ethical exhortations of ancient Greco-Roman philosophies provide Paul with some of the words and phrases in today’s reading from Ephesians. But I would gladly give Ephesians credit for introducing the idea of God’s Spirit and the motivation of relationship.

The juxtaposition of truth-speaking and tenderhearted forgiveness may raise the possibility of dissonance. For sometimes it is our unwillingness to bring hurt to another – our tenderhearted caring for each other – that makes the speaking of the truth very difficult. And, quite possibly, our definition of “truth” has been filtered overlong through the lens of our Western love of logic and rationalism. That’s going to take a little more pondering.

The message of community, however, is one that requires me to look up and around this day. To remember that there are others along the path of this Lenten journey, and that I am part of a journeying community. I am not some lone ranger, whose thoughts and deeds are mine alone. I am no mortal island; my life is bound up with those for whom Jesus died. Who are themselves also marked by the seal of God’s Spirit. Perhaps we can learn about truth speaking together.

May God’s Spirit grace us with love and forgiveness this day, that our words and actions might be redemptive.

**Friday, March 20, 2020**  
**Psalm 23**  
**1 Samuel 15:22-31**  
**Ephesians 5:1-9**

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

No one promised an easy journey, and the standard of faith and works is set ultimately high. “Be imitators of God... and live in love.” Love sacrificially and give.

It’s a message that runs so counter to our culture. We are bombarded constantly with messages that encourage us to take and get and consume. And every now and then we see a commercial designed to make us feel guilty so we might commit a small philanthropic act. The get far outweighs the give. And the give too often comes from the shallow places in our lives.

Even our worship services threaten to devolve into consumer events, focused on entertainment and shallow theology. Designed to entice attendance and promising to deliver a religious product worth consuming.

But on this Friday that is not quite yet Good Friday, Paul’s words remind us that our spiritual journey is about imitating God’s holiness and living in love. And that love is oriented outwardly, toward the other. There is something fragrantly pleasing to God about sacrificial love. And we are called to imitate the one who “gave himself up for us” in such an ultimate fashion.

I doubt that it will be easy, and I’m certain it won’t always be comfortable.

May God’s Spirit give us the grace to love sacrificially. This day and every day, now and forevermore....

**Saturday, March 21, 2020**

**Psalm 23**

**1 Samuel 15:32-34**

**John 1:1-9**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world (John 1:1-9).

John's Gospel narrative seems to thrive on misunderstanding. And the word carefully chosen usually provide the occasion for that misunderstanding. We scoff at Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well for their ludicrous responses to Jesus' words, but we have the benefit of seeing the entire scene, including Jesus' further explanation and explication of his ideas. The words themselves have multiple meanings. I'm not sure I would have done any better had I been in their shoes. Being born "from above" likely made little more sense than being born "again." "Living" water would have admitted to the meaning of "running" water far more easily than the abstraction of a wellspring of spiritual "fluid."

I have always enjoyed working my way slowly through the first paragraphs of John's prologue. For there are layers of meaning and complex thoughts clothed in what appear, at first read, to be rather simple declarative statements. That a divine "Word" existed in the cosmic order and was present with the Creator at the moment and in the act of creation would not have surprised any of John's First-Century readers, particularly those familiar with the more philosophical edge of ancient Judaism. In fact, the echo of Genesis 1 is clear; the ancient speakers of Hebrew Scripture heard the creative power in the "word(s)" of the transcendent God. And the writers and thinkers living closer to the time of Jesus and his disciples had already imagined a functional "trinity" of God (Theos), Word (Logos), and Spirit (Pneuma) that the early Christian writers would have no trouble drawing upon.

But these verses provide a prime example of the shortcomings of translation. For our translation paradigm insists that we serve both languages equally, and that requires the translator to make choices. For the words of ancient languages don't always have modern equals. And the words of ancient languages often possess multiple meaning or shades of meaning, which cannot all easily be captured with an equivalent word in the receptive language.

And so we come to the phrase in John 1:5: "and the darkness did not overcome it." A simple statement implying a spiritual battle playing out on a cosmic stage. Even if we are careful readers of the text of our English translation, we will not know that the word in the Greek text also means "understand" or "grasp/make one's own." These multiple meanings of the word are not mutually exclusive, but the choice of one meaning over the others – mandated by the need to produce a translation of the Bible suitable for public reading as well as private study – cannot help but guide the readers' interpretation of the passage and the story to come.

Holding all three meanings in tension, however, enriches the interpretative possibilities for the entire Gospel narrative. Clearly, John's Gospel is interested in the relationship between light and darkness

on a spiritual and cosmic level. And the narrative is full of opportunities for that to play out, often marked by the play between physical light and darkness. And, it seems likely on an important level that John's narrative is interested in making the point of Jesus' eventual mastery of the cosmic darkness, and our need as Jesus' followers to live in the "light" not the "darkness." But there is also the ironic statement, echoing throughout the Gospel's narrative, that the darkness is incapable of understanding, grasping, or overcoming the light at all. Darkness is – in the final analysis – incapable. Powerless. Futile. And, therefore, defeated. And the true Light still shines.

I may not actually be able to get an official diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder, but this is the time of the year when the gloom of rainy winter days seems to have seeped all the way into my soul. And I crave the life-giving and life-affirming rays of sunshine. I suspect that we all have something of that craving within us. Everything around us seems to crave the sunshine. Seems to crave the presence of the light. How nice to be reminded that the Light continues to shine and push back the darkness.

May the light of God's love and grace shine on our lives this day and every day!



## **Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2020**

**1 Samuel 16:1-13**

**Psalm 23**

**Ephesians 5:8-14**

**John 9:1-41**

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out (John 9:13-34).

The "man who had formerly been blind." Just another nameless character in an ancient Gospel narrative. A narrative persona known for one salient characteristic throughout his appearance on the Gospel stage, encountering Jesus just long enough to carry the story along and make a narrative point. In this case, the man's blindness brings the contrast between light and dark into strong relief. With spit and mud and a required trip to a pool named "Sent," Jesus transforms the man into one "formerly" blind. The "Light of the world" quite literally brings the "light" into the world for the man born blind.

Unfortunately, the "darkness" does not seem to be that easily cast aside. The passage is full of words with easily accessed dual meanings. And those meanings prompt the readers' questions. What does it mean to "see?" Just who are the "blind" folks? And what more evidence could anyone wish than Jesus' ability to bring sight to the blind? There might have been moments in this experience where the formerly blind man wished that Jesus had just passed him by or given him some coins. His presence is certainly a thorny one, raising all of those difficult questions about sin and curse and the true nature of Jesus, not to mention the familiar question of healing on the Sabbath. More than once the religious authorities bring him in for harsh questioning, and their investigation manages to touch everyone concerned except Jesus. And how ironic that, with a blindness from birth that somehow marked him as a sinner, the man was included in the synagogue and community. Once given sight,

though, his lack of an outward sign of the “original” sin is the proximate cause for excluding him from the faith community. No wonder he saw the flaw in their logic!

His encounter with Jesus will drive home John’s point. One of the major themes in the Fourth Gospel is the relationship between seeing and believing. And we have not yet gotten to the point in the story where those who believe without needing first to see are “blessed.” Here is one to whom “sight” has been given, and it is the kind of “sight” that John’s Gospel has in view. Not only can the “formerly” blind man see the physical world and its light, he appears to be able to “see” the cosmic “Light,” as well. And “he worshiped him.”

May God give us eyes to see....

**Monday, March 23, 2020**

**Psalm 146**

**Isaiah 59:9-19**

**Acts 9:1-20**

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God" (Acts 9:17-20).

Today's reading narrates one of the more famous journeys in Christian history, as Saul/Paul ends up in a far different place than he had intended. Sure, he still traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus, but he actually "traveled" further than he could have imagined. Ironically, an encounter with the risen Jesus leaves him blinded. Only after having spent three days in darkness does Saul emerge to see and be filled with God's Spirit.

By this point in the narrative we have seen ample evidence of the Spirit's power and ability to advance the cause of God's gospel. So we will not be surprised to hear of Saul's amazing transformation, a "conversion" so complete that it will involve a name change worthy of the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. And we will watch through the rest of Luke's story as the Spirit uses Paul to be Jesus' "witness" and spread the gospel unto the ends of the earth.

The story is a quick reminder on this Lenten Monday that meeting Jesus on the road of our spiritual pilgrimage can entail some danger. For the Spirit of God may wish us to make changes as we go. And I think it's highly likely that we will not finish as the same people who started. Even on a journey so comparatively short in duration as our Lenten pilgrimage.

We have drawn near enough to the end of our present Lenten journey for the shadows of the cross to become more pronounced. We will need – and welcome – the presence of God's Spirit even more as we move ever closer to Jesus' death. And we will welcome the Spirit's light to break through the dark places of our own inner lives, as that light guides us through the shadows.

May God give us grace and strength for the living of these days.

**Tuesday, March 24, 2020**

**Psalm 146**

**Isaiah 42:14-21**

**Colossians 1:9-14**

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:9-14).

“...that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord.” Our theology and preaching do such a good job of reminding us of our sins and inviting conversion. And they probably do an equally good job of listing all of the ethical and theological “don’ts” to be avoided by the pious believer. But we don’t always do a good job of connecting redemption and forgiveness to our faithful response. Perhaps we are worried that we will fall into the trap of thinking more of our faithful behavior than it is worth. Of assuming, in other words, that our ability to avoid the occasion of sin occasionally should be rewarded by God with salvation and redemption. Or, perhaps, those of us raised as “good” Baptists remain convinced that the “perseverance” of the saints is a promise wrapped up in our conversion experience, rather than a description of those whose sainthood is best observed at the end of their earthly journey.

I will admit that I am often drawn to the middle way, a true “moderate.” Extremes frighten me with their fierce conviction of right that brooks no dissent. And I am less certain of “rightness” with each year that passes. And I am just as certain that the only arbiter of truth is a God who whom we are likely incapable of knowing fully this side of eternity – if even then. But the words of today’s reading seem to justify my unwillingness to cling to either side of my spiritual journey to the exclusion of the other. For they offer a strong reminder that our motivation – and our ability – to “lead lives worthy of the Lord” comes from the once, present, and future action of a redemptive and forgiving God.

The theologians among us will likely lapse into a “conversation” about questions of priority, trying to discern whether God’s grace preceded our salvation in some linear fashion. But I’m afraid that this is a life-discussion that will not admit a conversation bound by human linearity. That we are redeemed, we are being redeemed, and we will be redeemed. That we have been forgiven, we are being forgiven, and we will be forgiven. That we are continually in the process of being sanctified by the ongoing presence of God’s Spirit with and within us, with the circle and cycle of eternity our only context.

And our faithful attempt to “lead lives worthy” of that ongoing redemption our only logical response.

May God’s grace find us faithful, this day and every day, now and forevermore!

**Wednesday, March 25, 2020**

**Psalm 146**

**Isaiah 60:17-22**

**Matthew 9:27-34**

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you." And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district. After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees said, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons" (Matthew 9:27-34).

I know what we're all thinking, and we have – once again – condemned the Pharisees to the lowest pits of Dante's Hell for their willful ignorance of Jesus' true identity. We certainly won't get any argument from Matthew, since one of the reasons he seems to have written his Gospel is to put some distance between the synagogue and the church in the late First Century. And to find a place within the people of God for the nascent Christian communities.

That's not to say that the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time – and beyond – weren't as unhappy with Jesus and his fledgling movement as Matthew and the other New Testament writers make them out to be. Or that some of them were more than willing to sacrifice Jesus and his disciples for the sake of their portion of the *pax Romana*. Since any disturbance of that *pax* was going to make everyone's life that much more difficult, particularly those whose positions of power were supposed to be used to protect their "flock." But I suspect that the "Pharisees" were not as unified in their reaction to Jesus and his followers as Matthew's literary license portrays them. If nothing else, such unanimity among religious folks would be an anomaly on a cosmic scale....

But I wonder what sense of hurt or betrayal lay in the past for Matthew's Pharisees. What dark places in their heart and soul would make someone so quick to condemn the hands that brought sight to the blind and speech to the mute? And that isn't just an idle musing on my part; I'm really interested to know, even though such knowledge is both a narrative and historical impossibility. For I'm painfully aware that my reactions mimic those of these Pharisees, especially when faced with piety and religious fervor which makes me uncomfortable. I know why it makes me uncomfortable, and I can name the grief and hurt that still lurks in my inner being as well as recall the faces and instances that planted that hurt. But such naming doesn't make it any healthier. And my reactions that approaches condemnation and self-righteous disdain worry me. Because I'm fairly certain that the Pharisees' reaction was incorrect, and when I "extrapolate and apply" to my own reaction I have no choice but to entertain the notion that I am likely just as wrong.

The Lenten journey, for me, is a chance to explore those darker inner regions of my life and soul. The lengthening shadow of the cross really gives me no other choice. And it seems to me on this day, that I am in danger of remaining in blind darkness and mute silence, if I am not willing to let the unconventional – and often uncomfortable – healer who is Jesus the Christ bring Light and Word to my journey.

May God's grace shine on us all this day and every day, now and forevermore....

**Thursday, March 26, 2020**

**Psalm 130**

**Ezekiel 1:1-3; 2:8—3:3**

**Revelation 10:1-11**

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities (Psalm 130).

“...steadfast love...and great power to redeem.”

Hebrew Scriptures are full of the idea of YHWH’s “steadfast love.” It is a characteristic activity that marks God as faithful and committed. And the history of YHWH’s relationship with the Children of Israel would suggest that the only way they came to redemption was through the commitment of God to those whom God had chosen. They rarely deserved to be loved, much less loved faithfully.

That’s an easy lesson to apply, for I’m not sure any of us always deserve to be loved. If nothing else, our inability to remain faithful ourselves would likely be enough excuse for a lesser being to move on to folks who would be more deserving of such divine love. Perhaps the key lies in God’s decision to be redemptive. That the commitment to love and care for the cosmos and those of us who inhabit it is manifest in God’s “great power to redeem.”

I find it interesting that the Psalmist begins with a cry “out of the depths.” It’s possible – even probable – that this cry is born from a conviction of unloveableness on the part of the Psalmist. And how quickly the cry of confession and acknowledgement of unworthiness turns to words of hope in the forgiveness and redemption of God.

So we listen for those hopeful words of redemption. Even though, in our weakness, our ears seem so much more attuned to words of condemnation. We hear negative words so much easier; they are the ringing in our ears. But the message of this day’s Psalm is that there is forgiveness to overcome our iniquity. There is love with the power to redeem our unworthiness.

We not alone; God is with us. Thanks be to God.

May God’s steadfast love guide along our journey. This day and every day. Now and forevermore.

**Friday, March 27, 2020**

**Psalm 130**

**Ezekiel 33:10-16**

**Revelation 11:15-19**

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth." Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (Revelation 11:15-19).

American Christians seem fascinated with the book of Revelation. Almost every place I've been, someone has been asking – even clamoring – for a study of the book. And most of the time those folks want to talk about the "end times." For a group of folks who have a freedom to worship and practice our Christian faith that is probably unparalleled in the history of Christianity, we seem remarkably worried about persecution. And remarkably titillated by the "scary" parts of John's Apocalypse.

What disappoints many readers of Revelation is that the narrative rarely conforms to popular Christian reconstructions of the end times (*eschaton*). We want long descriptive passages of the battles between God and Evil; we want to see blood and destruction. And we want to see "the Rapture." John's narrative contains very little in the way of graphic blood and destruction, and the "battle/war" between God and the forces of Evil is over in one verse. The appearance of Jesus provides all that is necessary for victory. And the "Rapture," misnamed and misappropriated, needs to be found in Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica.

In fact, most of us seem oddly disappointed to find passages like today's reading dominate John's narrative. I'm relatively certain the same wasn't true for most of John's readers/hearers throughout history. For it is these glimpses of heaven that remind us that God is in control of the cosmos, even with all of the evidence that might lead to the contrary impression. And today's reading offers us a mighty hymn of worship and praise, one that Handel's libretto certainly took full advantage of.

I must admit, horror movies and scary thrillers are not my favorites. I'll take the Hallmark Movie Channel any time. And, most of the time, life's journey provides me with just about as much challenge from sin and sorrow as I can handle. I need the daily reminder that the battle(s) between God and cosmic evil has already been decided. That "the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."

May God's Spirit give us voices to join the elders in their heavenly song this day, and lift our hearts along the journey!

**Saturday, March 28, 2020**

**Psalm 130**

**Ezekiel 36:8-15**

**Luke 24:44-53**

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:44-49).

I wonder what the disciples and others were thinking. Today’s reading comes from the end of Luke’s Gospel, in that time between Easter and Jesus’ Ascension. We readers know that Jesus is about to leave them and return to the heavenly realms; I’m not sure they had figured that out yet. And it sounds as if Jesus is still trying to help them wrap their minds around his death and resurrection. We’ve had over 2000 years to get used to that concept. I doubt that we can expect those around Jesus to think it through in a few days.

But now Jesus is talking about “all nations” and “witnesses” and “power from on high.” I wonder if any of those listening to him had an inkling about the changes that were about to take place in their lives. I rather suspect they were more than a little concerned about Roman and Jewish authorities, since Jesus’ resurrection was just going to call more attention to their growing band, and none of the authorities was going to just ignore them. But I doubt that they heard what for us is the “echo” of Jesus’ thematic words in the early chapters of Luke’s next book, when Jesus will make it clear that being his “witnesses” will take them in the ever-widening circles from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and unto the ends of the earth, as the gospel makes its unhindered journey through the book of Acts.

We cannot help but hear it, though, since we are privy to the entire story. We know what’s coming; we will easily allow Luke to re-open the story that seems to be coming to a close at the end of the Gospel’s first volume. And we have already seen the results of Jesus’ ascension and the power descending on the disciples from “on high.” In fact, we are dependent on that same power still, subject to Jesus’ same call to be witnesses along our journey.

It’s a good reminder as our Lenten journey inexorably approaches the cross. We have done an excellent job of making Christianity complicated, adding layers of sophistication and requiring evangelistic erudition. But today’s reading seems to suggest that our basic responsibility may be little more than waiting and listening and following. That the only power for salvation and the message of repentance and forgiveness is the one from “on high.” We know in our hearts that redemption has taken place, is active, and will continue. Our adding to that message of redemption will hardly serve to make it better, more powerful, or more persuasive. Frankly, faithful listening and following is plenty to work on.

May the Spirit of the living God be powerfully present with us, and find us faithful. This day and every day, now and forevermore.



## **Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**Psalm 130**

**Romans 8:6-11**

**John 11:1-45**

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:17-27).

Today's reading from John's Gospel is one of my favorite scenes/stories from the narrative. A number of the themes from the Fourth Gospel begin to coalesce in this scene at Bethany, and the story has so many interesting elements. On top of that, from this point forward John's narrative begins to rush toward the cross and resurrection.

On one hand, the story is transitional. The next chapter, famous for its anointing scene, will also mark Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Passover/passion week that ends so tragically. If the conflict between Jesus and the established authorities that will ultimately lead to his death has not been obvious to the reader up to this point in John's narrative, the reader should have no doubt after overhearing the conversations that follow Jesus' raising of Lazarus.

Today's story also seems foundational. It will certainly add to our sense of irony later on, as we watch the same disciples who observed Jesus' power over death in the case of Lazarus be unable or unwilling to consider the possibility that the same power could overcome Jesus' own death and result in his own resurrection. The narrator's specific mention of Thomas (11:16) has always struck me as almost heavy-handed in its foundation for the ironic conversation regarding faith and sense following Jesus' resurrection.

But I chose a center section of today's reading, not because the verses don't often get quoted, but because the interplay between Jesus and Martha so often gets overshadowed by the miracle of grief and resurrection that it precedes. And, because Martha so often is compared unfavorably to her sister, Mary. For it is Martha who comes first to meet Jesus upon his arrival in Bethany. And it is Martha who pours out her grief and anger and plea to Jesus before he ever fully arrives on the scene. She has a narrative right to all of that anger, since we know that Jesus delayed his trip to Bethany, even though he was well aware that Lazarus was sick and dying. And her honesty with Jesus and his God is refreshing, if not even liberating. If Jesus had come earlier, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus didn't; Lazarus did.

In the midst of all that, though, Martha is the first in John's Gospel to utter a confession of faith and understanding of Jesus' true identity. "You are the Messiah/Christ." In the Synoptic Gospels, those words are reserved for the mouths of men. Peter and the centurion in charge of the crucifixion are the first confessors of Jesus' real identity. Jesus interprets Peter's utterance as the gift of God's Spirit; the centurion's confession seems the judgment of an objective witness. Martha, however, speaks the

Gospel's truth in the context of her grief and what little lingering hope she still possesses. And it is a confession clearly named as words of faith.

One of John's primary themes is that faith is the only proper response to Jesus. But woven throughout his story is the reality that such faith is never quite as easy as we would like to think. All too many people who encounter Jesus in the words of John's narrative are unable to come to that response of faith. They are unable to make the transition from their darkness into a cosmos brightened by the Light of the world. They remain bound by their grief and anger and hopelessness and the cares of life in general, blinded to the light and unable or unwilling to make the leap of faith.

Our Lenten journey intentionally takes us through the valley of death's shadow annually. It reminds us not to run too quickly to the empty tomb. For our arrival at that empty tomb will be, itself, empty, if we have not taken the time to remind ourselves of the events that brought us all here. Of the sacrificial death of Jesus and the redemptive power of the one who is Resurrection and Life. And of the power of light to drive the darkness away. Even in the midst of our joy.

May God's Spirit give us grace and light and strength for the living of these days!

**Monday, March 30, 2020**

**Psalm 143**

**1 Kings 17:17-24**

**Acts 20:7-12**

Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you. For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead. Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled. I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah

Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.

Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Save me, O Lord, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge.

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path.

For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.

In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant.

(Psalm 143)

“Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul” (Psalm 143:8). Is a pretty good way to begin the week on what is – at least in Atlanta – a very rainy Monday morning. The Lenten journey is waning; we can feel the menace of the cross from here, and its shadow has grown long and more distinct. And we have walked this Lenten road before, so we know that the shadow will threaten to overcome everything before things are completed. We know that the valley of death's shadow lies between here and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

Our path is a narrow one, for we ignore Jesus' suffering at our peril, yet we do not want to give in to the helpless hopelessness of living too long in the shadow of that suffering and death. We need guidance along the “way we should go.” We pray for perseverance and preservation along this journey. We crave the “steadfast love” of a delivering God.

May the leading of God's Spirit be clear in our lives, this day and every day. Now and forevermore.

**Tuesday, March 31, 2020**

**Psalm 143**

**2 Kings 4:18-37**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:4-10).

As I read today's familiar passage, it seems obvious to me that Christians have been trying to earn salvation by doing good works from the beginning. It's such a logical response to me. After all, we smile and someone smiles back. And we have made an art form out of responding to the good things – the favors – other people have done for us. Of course, we're also very good at returning evil for evil.

So grace is a difficult concept. Almost as difficult as those of "mercy" and "love." And even though I've become adept at the theological articulation, I'm still overwhelmed – and, at times, confounded – by the concept of God's mercy, love, and grace. And sometimes bewildered trying to figure out what to do now. I'll confess that I'm not all that good at just "being." I'm not sure, in fact, that any of us steeped in Western thought and culture really grasp the idea that "being" is as good as "doing." But the New Testament's words about mercy and love and grace seem to call us to work as much on who we are as on what we do.

I suspect we're worried about the wrong cause and effect. Western Protestants seem to worry about the process leading up to the moment of conversion, and I'm convinced that we should be spending significantly more time worried about what comes after that initial confession of faith. Concentrating on what it means to become saved (and sanctified and redeemed) and remain saved, not just fixing on one moment in our experience of eternity. As if our conversion experience were a "good work" we could count on to deserve salvation.

Bonhoeffer's admonition against a theology of "cheap grace" helps here, of course, with his emphasis on the deep call of Jesus on the lives of the faithful. A call that is total and eternal. A call that elicits the good works for which we were created. And the Lenten calendar of our present journey provides a contextual reminder that the "good work" which occasions salvation is never ours, but that of Jesus' sacrificial crucifixion. That "grace" and "mercy" and "love" are cruciform. And call us to faithfulness.

May God pour out mercy and love and grace in our lives this day in abundance...and find us faithful.

**Wednesday, April 1, 2020**  
**Psalm 143**  
**Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41**  
**Matthew 22:23-33**

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her." Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching (Matthew 22:23-33).

One of the hardest things to learn, I think, is how to ask the right questions. Or how to answer the question that is being asked. People ask and answer the wrong questions all the time, whether from stress and anxiety or just lack of knowledge; I suspect that few of the wrong questions and answers come from the kind of overt challenge intended by the Sadducees of today's reading.

They were hoping to trip Jesus up, to catch him without an answer to a question that couldn't really be answered to their satisfaction. They were hoping to make him look less than wise in front of the crowds. It was a well-calculated ploy, and everyone involved – Sadducees, Jesus, and onlookers (crowd) – were familiar with the way such scenes were played out in their cultural context. Had Jesus been unable to answer the challenge, he would have lost honor. His ability to answer the question with a better question preserved his cultural status and sent the Sadducees away defeated. And the crowds "were astonished."

If we look/read/hear closely, we'll quickly realize that Jesus didn't answer the question he was asked. Instead, he answered the deeper question about resurrection in general and the nature of eternity. And, in the process, he answered a salient question about the nature of God. It is, perhaps, easy to miss the impact of the statement Jesus makes about God paying more attention to the living than the dead. But that concept is so important to the Gospel narratives, that I think it deserves a little contemplation.

To ask ourselves if we are sometimes more concerned with theological discourse than with the impact of our theology on the lives of real people. To ask ourselves if we are sometimes so concerned with orthodox behavior and correct doctrine that we forget to ask the right questions and consider the results in real life. To ask ourselves if we have become so intrigued by what will happen that we have lost sight of what is happening and the questions of our ministry to those around us today.

May God's Spirit give us the grace to ask the right questions and the strength to invest our lives in the lives of the other, this day and every day.

**Thursday, April 2, 2020**

**Psalm 31:9-16**

**1 Samuel 16:11-13**

**Philippians 1:1-11**

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:3-6).

I will confess – and likely not surprise anyone – that I am not much of a Calvinist. I know the Scriptural references that Calvin found so persuasive, even without taking them out of their context. But I am just not willing to follow his arguments all the way to their logical conclusion and ultimately hold the Divine responsible for everything that happens in the cosmos. And, no matter what one might think of a personified Evil, I'm also not willing to lay the blame for my own poor decisions and shortcomings off on any other agency. Tempting though it might be.

So I am both encouraged and a little perplexed by Paul's confidence expressed in today's reading. And I suspect that the coherence of any one theological construct might be at risk. In other words, both Calvin and Arminius were both correct and incorrect. And our desire to find one theological construct to aid our understanding of the mysterious and uncanny God will likely go unfulfilled. We are, it seems, neither creatures bound by predestined acts nor free to exercise our own decisions. The answer seems to lie somewhere in the moderation between the two extremes. Or...in some different construct(s) altogether.

I guess I could retreat into the safe territory of the biblical scholar and claim just to allow the text(s) to speak for themselves, but that seems a little disingenuous. And, I fear, makes me look just a little too smug. Perhaps my difficulty lies in being too linear and far too time bound. Or, perhaps, I should just focus on Paul's encouraging words about the power and grace of a God willing both to begin a "good work" among us and bring it to completion with divine timing. And, with that, one more seemingly random insight before moving on. If I'm not careful my culturally-trained ear will mis-hear Paul's emphasis on the communal "among you."

Perhaps that's the insight I've been looking for all along. The reminder that this spiritual journey is a group exercise, and that the good work(s) of God are powerfully at work within us as we minister to and with each other. That we are even partners with the one who has saved, is saving, and will save us, bringing us to completion and fulfillment in the fullness of time. To be reminded that God is with us; we are not alone. Thanks be to God.

May God's Spirit shower us with grace and love this day and every day. Now and forevermore.

**Friday, April 3, 2020**  
**Psalm 31:9-16**  
**Job 13:13-19**  
**Philippians 1:21-30**

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1:27-30).

The city of Philippi took considerable pride in its status and reputation within the Greco-Roman world. It had been established after Caesar Augustus' defeat of the armies of Brutus and Cassius, following the assassination of Julius Caesar. Rather than transport his entire victorious army back to Rome, Augustus had offered those who wished the opportunity to settle in the area. And he declared the city and its environs to be the equivalent of Rome for the purposes of taxes and legal protection. They were proud of their status and reputation, and they fostered the civic values related to their military heritage.

So Paul's letter to the Philippians often makes use of military images. One of my favorites is in today's passage, as he hopes to hear that they are "standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind." It is an image connected to Roman military power, the image of the legionnaires presenting the united front of the shield wall. Each man aligned his shield with that of his neighbor, and they marched in lock step toward the enemy in a phalanx bristling with spears or swords. They overwhelmed their opponents...as long as they were united. As long as everyone moved in step. As long as they were striving side by side.

I sometimes wonder when we decided that the Christian life was supposed to be easy. Or when we convinced ourselves that the spiritual journey was a solitary one that not only could – but was supposed to be – assayed by each individual. Perhaps the better question is why we came to such an erroneous conclusion. We have imaged the life of faith in the singular, reading all of the New Testament's "you" plurals as "you" singulars. And the Eastern Christianity of the writers of Scripture almost always has "all y'all" in mind.

I find that immensely comforting in these waning days of this year's Lenten journey. For I am convinced that I will be more aware and more successful along that journey if I am part of a community seeking to follow God's Spirit faithfully. And that the suffering which we are promised will better be endured – and overcome – if we are willing and able to strive side by side, stepping out together and taking care for each other.

May God's love and grace unite us and provide us communion with God and with each other.

**Saturday, April 4, 2020**  
**Psalm 31:9-16**  
**Lamentations 3:55-66**  
**Mark 10:32-34**

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again" (Mark 10:32-34).

Like Jesus' disciples, we have been hoping that the story might end differently this time. But we have known the way our Lenten journey will end from its beginning. The story has never had a less than tragic ending, since both cosmic and narrative forces have been inexorably moving us toward Golgotha's cross.

But we have, at times during our journey, been able to ignore that sense of impending doom. To drown out the low-level anxiety and push back against the lengthening shadow of death and the cross. We have that luxury no longer. Our journey is approaching its terminus. Golgotha's hill may still be hidden by the splendor of Jerusalem and the events of the coming week, but we cannot help but sense its rocky presence and the cross-sized holes in its dusty face. And somewhere beyond Golgotha's skull lies the garden's still-empty tomb.

And we remember that the next few days of our Lenten journey will ask us to relive the last passionate days of Jesus' life and ministry. To re-witness the triumph of his entry into Jerusalem as well as the tragedy and travesty of his trial and crucifixion. To hear, once again, the words of betrayal and Jesus' cry of dereliction.

There have been a few times during this year's Lenten pilgrimage that it might have been nice to skip to the end. To move right to resurrection and ascension. To wrap our life's spiritual journey in eternal cosmic triumph and pay attention to the suffering and death of Jesus nevermore. But the words of Scripture have always brought us back to eternal cosmic reality. They have always reminded us that the victory over sin and death was dearly won at and on the cross. With the empty tomb and the risen Lord being the result of God's power and might, rather than its proof. And with cosmic redemption and our salvation being achieved in Jesus' sacrifice and death.

So, today, we have struggled to keep up with Jesus. Just faces in the crowds that are reluctantly and fearfully following Jesus up the rise in the road on the way to Jerusalem. We have all stopped for a moment to gaze on the Temple's mount and hear the echo of the prophets of old who were ignored and destroyed in this most holy of cities. Jerusalem has always been where they kill the prophets, and the week to come will end no differently than it ever has. Or ever will. Or ever can.

But we have not lost hope along the way of our Lenten journey. And we will not lose hope here, so close to its end. For God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.



May God's Spirit give us eyes to see and ears to hear this day. And grace and strength for the living of these days.

**Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020**  
**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matthew 21:1-11).

Commentators and sermonizers often make a big deal about the mode of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, arguing that the authorities ought to have understood that the donkey and colt symbolized peace and good will. And reminding us that conquering kings and generals usually used the spirited war stallion to symbolize that their arrival was a final act of total victory. I would agree that the symbolism is there, and it speaks loudly to our understanding of Jesus as a cosmic Messiah. But I suspect that understanding that symbolism is much easier this side of the resurrection, ascension, and two millennia of theological reflection.

The ancient Jewish and Roman authorities understood the symbolism. They saw clearly that this triumphal parade announced another Messiah. And they weren’t likely to stand around and debate the nuances of words and phrases like “Son of David” and “Hosanna.” Those were messianic words, and the political overtones could not be separated from the religious overtones for ancient ears. Jesus, for all Jerusalem to see, was here to re-establish David’s kingdom.

For a sense of context, we will do well to remember that Jesus was neither the first, nor the only, to announce the imminent restoration of David’s kingdom. Jerusalem and its surrounds were rife with messianic fervor, and Palestine/Judea was not a comfortable posting for Roman soldiers and officers. I suspect the hill just outside of Jerusalem known as Golgotha had any number of squared-off holes in its face, perfectly fitted and deep enough to hold the vertical part of a Roman cross. And the existence of a “tradition” that the Roman procurator would release a political prisoner each Passover suggests that he had no lack of candidates for such public leniency. And that the political situation was volatile enough that the representative of Roman power and might needed the political good will that such an act would purchase.

Perhaps it comes from my having read all four Gospels, but I hear a note of desperation in the voices of those shouting “Hosanna.” I certainly hear the narrative’s irony, for the careful reader of any of the Gospels is aware that the crowds have correctly named Jesus a king and Messiah without coming close to understanding his sense of what it means to be such. We are often so disappointed in the crowds by Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Perhaps because we expected them to know the end of the story as we do. Perhaps because we think we would not have been so desperate for political and social deliverance as were those ancient residents of Jerusalem and Judea. Perhaps because we

think we would not have been so disappointed when Jesus failed to live up to our excited expectations, even though they were erroneous.

It's easy to stand on the sidelines and ponder the psycho-social dynamics of religious and political fervor. It's even easy to get caught up in the moment ourselves, pick up a palm frond, and march along with this crowd. We just need to remember that this parade does not mark the end of our Lenten journey. Jesus is not entering Jerusalem as a victorious conqueror. That victory will have to wait until Friday. And may God give us the strength to abide with Jesus all the way to that end....

May God's Spirit make our hearts shout praises to God, not just our lips.

## **Monday of Holy Week, April 6, 2020**

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Psalm 36:5-11**

**Hebrews 9:11-15**

**John 12:1-11**

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).

Early in my teaching career a group of students in my Synoptic Gospels class chose to present a film as a group project. The student playing the role of Jesus wore a cross around his neck throughout the movie, and every now and then one of the other characters would ask him about it. His answer? "Foreshadowing."

Today's reading narrates what seems to be a happy occasion at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. It was, in fact, only the previous chapter in John's Gospel where this same home had been plunged into grief over the death of Lazarus. Now, all are celebrating his resurrection and life with a party. The place seems packed with well-wishers, disciples, and other onlookers; the combination of Jesus and miracle worker and Lazarus the resurrected must have been too good to resist. But death is still very much in the air. Foreshadowing.

We've come too far into John's narrative to be able to avoid the subject of Jesus' death. We've known the end from the beginning, and the narrator has consistently reminded us of that end through well-placed asides. But we have probably done a pretty good job of pushing Jesus' death off to the side, trying to ignore the way we know the story must end. Hoping, perhaps, that this time things will play out differently than they ever have before. By now, though, we've come too far. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, and the events of his suffering – his passion – will play out during the festival of Passover. The death angel will not pass over God's house this time.

It's hard not to smell the death in this passage. I'm sure that my friends who minister to the dead and dying might associate a different smell, but the smell of death to me is lilies. And it doesn't help that the cloying smell of lilies makes it difficult for me to breathe and sing, especially when I'm singing as part of the funeral service. I'm sure that Lazarus had washed since his emergence from the tomb, since his sisters were quite insistent in the previous chapter that he had been in the tomb long enough to stink. But I wonder if the smell of death didn't still linger in his nostrils as he reclined at table with Jesus and his friends. We can guarantee that things smelled like death – the entire house – after Mary finished her extravagant ministry to Jesus. In fact, if we missed that part, the narrator was quick to remind us that the scent of the anointing permeated the house.

John's narrator cannot miss the chance to vilify Judas – foreshadowing – but we should not be distracted from the scent of death that permeates this story. For the narrative is calling us to prepare for Jesus' death, just as Mary has anointed beforehand a body that will neither receive nor need anointing for its final burial.

This preparation is, for me, the point of my Lenten journey. If I'm not careful I will tend to blow past the suffering and death in favor of the happy ending. If I'm not careful, I will jump from Palm Sunday to Easter without a second thought for the days and events that lie between. And I will have missed the very events that give depth to faith. And hope to the faithful.

May God grant us the courage to follow Jesus to the cross this week, sharing in his sufferings so as to participate in his resurrection. And find us faithful.

## **Tuesday of Holy Week, April 7, 2020**

**Isaiah 49:1-7**

**Psalm 71:1-14**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

**John 12:20-36**

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:25-31).

"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).

I am so used to Christian iconography and the use of Christian symbols that I usually don't ponder the implications of some of those symbols. Especially as they are used outside of an overtly religious context – like jewelry, for example. But every now and then I'll be reminded just how common the use of the cross – in any number of different iterations – has become. And that reflective space raises uncomfortable questions that almost sound like the punchline to an old joke. If Jesus had been executed by stoning or impaling or hanging or electrocution or lethal injection, would the symbol of the faithful be a rock or a pointed stick or a noose or an electric chair or a needle? Would we be so quick to hang the tiny replica(s) from our ears or on a chain around our necks?

We have, seemingly, come so far from a time when Paul could write of the cross as being a stumbling block, an impediment to faith for those looking for heavenly signs or cosmic wisdom. We have become so comfortable with the inane and incomprehensible parts of the gospel story that we now feel persecuted if someone standing outside our faith community dares to ask any thoughtful questions. The stark reality is that our faith tradition worships the dying Savior as well as the risen Lord. Divine suffering and glory are inextricable. And, especially in John's Gospel, Jesus goes to the cross intentionally. His journey back to God's glory, his return from his human sojourn, goes through the trial and scourging and crucifixion and death and burial. Death by accident or natural causes will not be enough. This is the true Passover lamb, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the cosmos.

Familiarity may not breed contempt in this case, but I am afraid it often results in glib words. In Good Friday words and Easter "Hallelujahs" that are sanitized. Devoid of the horror and curse of Jesus'

last days and breaths. Grace, it turns out, is neither cheap nor logical. Jesus' call on our lives comes to us from both sides of the grave, from suffering as well as triumph.

May God's Spirit give us strength and find us faithful.

## Wednesday of Holy Week, April 9, 2020

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 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 (John 13:21-30).

If we’re not careful we will always read this passage from John’s Passion narrative with at least a little sense of self-righteousness. We would never be like the clueless disciples from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, slowly sinking into a drunken stupor. Or even like the disciples from da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, all seemingly caught up in their own ruminations and hardly any paying attention to Jesus, even though he is at the center of the tableau. And we certainly wouldn’t be like the narrative’s arch-villain Judas, scurrying off to make the arrangements for the official ambush still to come in Olivet’s garden.

We would never have been that out of touch. We would never have been that venal. We would never want to worry if we were the ones who would betray Jesus with a holy hug or deny ever having known him. We would never have scattered and disappeared into the shadows of the city, leaving Jesus to die abandoned by those who had answered his call to follow.

Perhaps we know more than those ancient disciples did in those anxious Passover days. Perhaps, living on this side of resurrection and ascension, we have a better sense of what Jesus’ call demands of us and where that call might lead us. But I’m not sure that knowledge is always internalized. Or if I’ve quite come to the point of being able to cast aside “every weight and the sin that clings so closely” in order to persevere in the journey on which I’ve embarked.

The days of this year’s Lenten pilgrimage lie in ever-deeper shadow. The cross no longer lies somewhere out in the blurry future; its edges have become clear and defined. Its shadow has become weighty and oppressive. And it’s far too easy to bow our heads and lower our eyes. To look at the ground or off to the side as we shuffle along. As we force ourselves to remember. As we force ourselves not to break and run in the face of death’s malevolence.



But the author of Hebrews reminds us that the way to bring our Lenten journey – and our larger spiritual journey – to a successful completion is to lift our heads. To look upward and onward. To look at Jesus. Too many days, weary is easy. Too many times, hopeless seems so logical. Far too often we think ourselves alone and abandoned, choosing to look down and out and forgetting to look up and on.

May God's Spirit give us the grace to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, this day and every day. Now and forevermore.

## **Holy Thursday, April 9, 2020**

**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).

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

It could be magic. I'm sure many of the faithful over the millennia have watched with awe and reverence as the priest uttered the words that changed the wafer and wine into body and blood. In fact, when those words were intoned in Latin (and the clergy were the only ones who spoke Latin) "hoc est corpus meum" sounded like those magic words "hocus pocus."

We could spend some time arguing over what actually is supposed to happen in the Eucharistic worship service, and plenty of blood has been spilled over the history of Christianity arguing whether the bread and wine has become the literal body and blood of Jesus, has become like the body and blood of Jesus, or is just supposed to symbolize the sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood. Wherever we might come down, I'm pretty sure that something is supposed to happen. Something – or someone – is supposed to change as we engage in communion with God and with each other.

It seems to me that we have spent so much time fighting over the nature of the elements of the Eucharist and who is eligible to receive those elements that we have missed Scripture's salient points about love and memory.

When Jesus took the bread and the cup in hand in the upper room, the bread and wine were already tools to re-member the Passover experience. They already evoked the transformational event in the life of the children of Israel and those images of death and deliverance so much a part of the Exodus. And Jesus' appropriation of the food so common to the annual festival/memorial will only expand the meaning of those elements. A new transformational event in the life of God's people is in the midst of occurring. Jesus, the new Lamb of God, will shed his blood to redeem all of God's people, and God's chosen people will be all those who answer God's call to love and remember.

I suspect that almost every ancient meal included wine and bread. So every meal had the potential for Eucharistic overtones. And I wonder what opportunities for "mystic sweet communion" we might have lost by formalizing and institutionalizing the Eucharist. By controlling and scheduling the event. By spending at least as much time on organizing and "delivering" the elements as we do pondering their meaning and their importance.

There could be magic here. Here in the grace-filled presence of God's Spirit. Here in the company of those whom we love.

May God's Spirit give us the grace to love one another and experience true communion.

**Good Friday**  
**April 10, 2020**  
**Isaiah 52:13—53:12**  
**Psalm 22**  
**Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9**  
**John 18:1 – 19:42**

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth (Isaiah 53:1-9).

First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people. Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself. Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed (John 18:13-27).

“...and at that moment the cock crowed.” It seems to be one of the few things Jesus is unable to control as the Fourth Gospel narrates the events surrounding his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He has ensured his arrest, and he is rather calmly answering the trumped up accusations of the authorities. As the evening wears on toward morning, he will make sure that the “trial” escalates from the Jewish court to that of Rome. And, he will almost calmly tick off a cosmic “to-do” list from the cross. John’s narrative is not without pain and suffering, but Jesus is presented as firmly intentional that the road returning him to heavenly glory goes through the cross and the tomb.

It isn’t as if Jesus hadn’t predicted that Peter would deny him. But John’s narrative seems almost to wallow in the pathos created by Peter’s final failure. Willing to fight in the garden, Peter has shrunk

to a furtive shadow hanging around the watch fire. He is compelled, somehow, to be present, but he can no longer bring himself to accept the risks of being Jesus' disciple. John's narrator bounces back and forth between the two scenes. Inside the house, Jesus is answering the priestly questions and inviting further scrutiny into actions and words that were always public and transparent. Outside, in the courtyard, Peter is trying to avert his face. To rebuff the questions that are growing more insistent. Three times someone recalls Peter's face as among Jesus' inner circle. Three times, Peter denies being a disciple.

And the heart-stopping moment of dawn and cock-crow punctuates his final denial/betrayal of Jesus.

Today's readings offer a number of different lenses through which to view the cataclysmic and transformative events of the day we ironically name "Good" Friday. And those of us who like happy endings will certainly have to defer that need in this case. For the day will never end on a positive note, no matter how many times we stand with the women and the soldiers at the foot of Golgotha and watch Jesus suffer and die. Judas' betrayal may ultimately be inexplicable; we just don't have enough information in the narrative to know exactly why he decided that handing Jesus over to the authorities was the right move. Peter's denial/betrayal hits closer to home, though. For Peter's response in these passages could as easily be our response.

Like Peter, we could find ourselves standing just outside where the action is taking place. Drawn to the crowd scene with a morbid inability to look away from impending doom. And, finally, unable to affirm the identity of either Jesus or ourselves. For Peter's betrayal is a denial of himself almost as much as it is a denial of Jesus. Neither he nor Judas deny Jesus' true identity; they deny their own and their own calling.

Our Lenten journey has brought us to the edge of darkness, as we expected. But this dark day is too often mirrored in our spiritual journey at unexpected times. And those unexpected dark days catch us unawares, ill-prepared to defend and affirm our own discipleship. The faint light of a charcoal brazier is not going to be enough to push away that darkness. We're going to need to trust in a Light quite a bit more powerful.

May God's Spirit shine in our hearts and lives this day, and every day.

**Holy Saturday**  
**April 11, 2020**  
**Job 14:1-14 or Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24**  
**Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16**  
**1 Peter 4:1-8**  
**Matthew 27:57-66 or John 19:38-42**

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there (John 19:38-42).

We have removed the royal purple cloth from the Lenten cross and replaced it with black. The shadow of the cross has deepened into cosmic darkness, and the tragedy of Jesus' death is complete. The Fourth Gospel probably does the best job of evoking that darkness, which shouldn't surprise those of us who have been hearing the narrator's and Jesus' words about L/light and darkness throughout its narrative.

So it's fitting that John speaks of "secret" disciples and reminds us that we first met Nicodemus under the cover of night's darkness. We are never told whether these two come to full faith in Jesus and escape the darkness for the light. All we know about them, before they pass from the story completely, is that they are uniquely suited for this post-crucifixion scene in the dark.

It seems an interesting moment in time to make a public declaration for Jesus and his movement. For even though their action takes place in the Gospel's "darkness," the sun will rise on that next day, and both Roman and Jewish authorities will be watching for lingering signs of insurrection on the part of Jesus' followers. So Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus may well have shined a light on themselves, just as all seems most hopeless for Jesus' followers.

And I find the lack of women in this narrative to be very interesting. Have they finally been overcome with grief? Has their part in the burial of their friend been postponed due to the urgency of getting him in the tomb before Sabbath laws are broken? Or is the narrative just too "sparse" to mention anything extraneous at this point?

It does seem as if all of the chaos of Jesus' Passion has come to an abrupt halt. Darkness and silence reign, and the narrator quickly and dispassionately describes a quick anointing, wrapping, and burying. And, with a Tenebrae silence, they went away.

May God's Spirit be palpably present in our lives, even when they feel full of darkness....

**Resurrection of the Lord—Easter Day**  
**April 12, 2020**  
**Jeremiah 31:1-6**  
**Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24**  
**Acts 10:34-43**  
**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 20:1-18).

The angels’ question is a good one for us this morning: “Why are you still weeping?” For it seems that every year’s Lenten journey provides a good reminder for us of all the reasons we have to weep and cry aloud. Friends and loved ones die, leaving us to grieve our loss. Human beings don’t seem to be making much – if any – progress toward solving the myriad problems facing our world, and we insist on going to war over most of them. Poverty and illness still enable each other, even in the most affluent of societies. And, try as we might, we just can’t seem to figure out how to combat the dark and evil places in our lives.

So Lent has given us the freedom to weep alongside of Jesus. To watch him struggle with poverty and illness and sin and death. But if we aren’t careful, we will have become too comfortable with the Lenten shadows. We might rather live in the shadow than see what the light might reveal.

But we’ve come to Easter’s empty tomb and resurrection reality. We’ve heard, once again, the testimony of the Mary and the disciples. On this side of the cross, the cosmic Light shines and brooks no shadow, no barrier. It’s a time for shouting and leaping with joy; the only tears allowed are happy tears. This crucified Jesus is risen from the dead! The incarnate Word cannot be silenced and speaks of redemption and glory. And, as we might say in the South, God is “fixin’ to” wipe away every tear.

So it is time to leave our Lenten journey behind and step boldly into the light of Easter. We have been changed by our journey, our larger spiritual journey somehow deepened and made more

intentional. We have found new dark places of shadow to name, and we have reminded ourselves that some we have known about for many years still lurk. But we have, we hope, learned how better to keep our eyes raised and our heads held a little higher, in order that we might keep our eyes fixed more firmly on Jesus and the trail he has blazed.

We have run with the disciples to see the empty tomb, and we have looked on in amazement as Jesus revealed himself to Mary. And now that we have caught our breath, we join with the heavenly choir to sing "Hallelujah, Christ is risen!" And the reality sinks deep into our souls. In life, in death, and in life beyond death; we are not alone. God is with us. Thanks be to God!

May the Light of Easter shine in our lives and give us joy! This day and every day, now and forevermore. Amen.