



Dear Friends:

This project has been so much fun! (Don't tell Susan Ody I said that, the compilation of the essays has been a bit stressful for her!!) that over 40 members of this parish volunteered to write a reflection on a scripture passage appointed for the days of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter has blown me away. This "devotional" is a collection of these reflections.

I have been deeply blessed reading the insights that each of our theologians submitted. By our baptisms, by our participation in the body of Christ each of us is a theologian. Each of us has experiences and insights into our God that need to be shared!

I would like to say that the thoughts and opinions expressed in these essays are not necessarily that of the management! By management I don't mean me, or the Vestry, or the Episcopal Church; I mean GOD! Truly not one of us can fully understand the mind of God. But what's contained in these essays are particular insights, of particular people, at a particular time and they are particularly good!

If you didn't get a request to write one of these reflections it may have been because you don't have email or that my scam filter or your spam filter blocked it because I sent my plea to as many of you as I could! So if you weren't asked it was my lack of computer skills and not an intentional oversight. If you'd like to give it a try next year or for Advent let me know!

Faithfully,

Fr. Dave

(cover)

### Mandala of Sowing Woman

*Mandala* is Sanskrit word meaning to have possession of your essence, your oneness. My mandala was created reflecting on a Holy Week reading. I started the composition with the crown of thorns, but as I worked, the thorns became roots with new life flowing through them. They blossomed and reached outward. At the center is the figure of a woman, the gardener, scattering seeds. I like to think some of the seeds will grow where they are planted and the cycle will begin again, but others are blown by the wind or taken by the birds out into the universe; carried like the Word.

To best understand this passage, the reader must first understand a brief history of the author and his time. Not much is known about this Minor Prophet. Although, how anyone who has direct contact with God can be considered “minor” is beyond this writer’s comprehension. Scholars differ in their opinion on the time frame that Joel wrote his composition, but he probably lived between 400 and 350 BC. Because of his references to Jerusalem, it is thought he resided in Judah. Joel’s writings can be found as part of the twelve prophetic books known as The Twelve.

A lot of Joel’s writing prophesizes doom and destruction. Joel refers to recent plagues and draughts that have already consumed his people and uses these as examples of God’s fury. “A day of clouds and thick darkness” and “A day of darkness and gloom tell us that God has and will continue to reek havoc on our lives. Joel tells us that more devastation will occur if we continue to sin and not follow God’s Word.

Yet Joel offers a survival guide from destruction. Joel tells us that no matter what terrible obstacles are thrown in our way, we must continue to ask God for help. “Consecrate a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly” “...return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate.” Joel reminds us that God is slow to anger and is “abounding in loving kindness.”

So “Blow a trumpet in Zion.” Let everyone know that the day of the Lord is coming and we had best be prepared!

Joel’s words are especially difficult to follow in today’s society. As a country, we live from one festivity to another. The Christmas decorations weren’t put away and the stores were filled with Valentine’s Day paraphernalia. We are surrounded by consumerism and the need for instant gratification. Who needs a plague of locust’s? We are plagued by commercialism and greed. We have super-sized everything from fast food to houses. We are being attached by an army of insatiability.

So “Blow a trumpet in Zion.” Let everyone know that the day of the Lord is coming and we had best be prepared!

Lent is our time to prepare. This is the time to remind ourselves of what is important and repair the damage of our transgressions. Lent is our time to reflect on our relationship with God. It is a time to gain a stronger spirituality between oneself and God. It is a time to put right that relationship if it is not in line with what God wants of us. It is a time to congregate and pray together as a family. It is a time to seek forgiveness and atone for one’s evil deeds. Joel tells us that through prayer, meditation, and sacrifice we can purify our minds and our souls; therefore being prepared for the coming of the Lord.

“Now return to the Lord, your God, For He is gracious and compassionate.”

Closing Prayer:

Hear, Lord, the prayers we offer from contrite hearts. Have pity on us as we acknowledge our sins. Lead us back to the way of holiness. Protect us now and always from the wounds of sin. May we ever keep safe in all its fullness the gift your love once gave us and your mercy now restores. Amen.

<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/pray0485.htm>, retrieved January 13, 2008

## 02/07 Luke 9:18-25

One day when Jesus was praying alone, the disciples came to him. "Who do the crowds say I am?" he asked them. Some say that you are John the Baptist," they answered. Others say that you are Elijah, while others say that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."

"What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are God's Messiah."

Then Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell this to anyone. He also told them, "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will be raised to life."

And he said to them all, "If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, take up your cross every day, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it."

Commonly referred to as "Peter's Profession of Faith," this is truly one of the most profound passages in the New Testament. In fact, the account appears almost verbatim, but with more detail, in the Gospels of Matthew (16:13-25) and Mark (8:27-35). This one passage sets the foundation of the Christianity, foretells what must happen to the Son of God in order to save mankind and instructs us, as followers of Christ, as to what we must do to have life everlasting.

You are God's Messiah.

Historically, it is important to realize that in the Old Testament, the title "son of God" was given to angels, the children of Israel, kings and the God's "Chosen People." As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it signified an adoptive sonship that establishes a relationship of particular intimacy between God and his creatures. It does not mean that Jesus was more than human in the literal meaning of Old Testament passages. Those hearing (Simon) Peter's profession could have thought this was nothing more than an acknowledgement of Jesus' intimate relationship, in a spiritual sense, with God.

But it was God himself that revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the true Son of God, a total differentiation from the meaning of this title from the Old Testament. It was at that moment the foundation of the Church was laid. Thus, the profound significance of this passage in our faith.

Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell this to anyone. The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will be raised to life.

Ironically, Jesus never outwardly proclaims that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, but he allows the faith of others to proclaim that on his account. With his disciples sworn to secrecy so that God's will can be done fulfilling the prophecy that "He will be put to death, but three days later he will be raised to life." As Jesus stood before his accusers', he was asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" Jesus answered them, "You say that I am." (Luke 22:70). The epitome of this being the centurion's exclamation before the crucified Christ, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39). Following the resurrection, the apostles confess, "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Martyrs of the early Church spread out to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. Paul writes in his letters to the Galatians, "When he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16). The Act of Apostles records, "And in the synagogues immediately [Paul] proclaimed Jesus, saying, 'he is the Son of God'" (Acts 9:20).

Without God revealing the identity of his only begotten Son to Peter, the apostolic faith and the early Church may never have survived. Over two thousand years after the birth of Jesus Christ, we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. A belief, which is inseparable from our belief in the holy trinity, that being the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, take up your cross every day, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will save it.

By accepting Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and our personal savior and carrying out the teachings of his Church, we will be granted eternal salvation. For he who loses his life for Jesus' sake, will save it.

A Closing Prayer.

To conclude, reflection on the following Collect, "Confession of Saint Peter" is proper and just:

"Almighty Father, who inspired Simon Peter, first among the apostles, to confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of the living God: Keep your Church steadfast upon the rock of this faith, so that in unity and peace we may proclaim the one truth and follow the one Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

**02/08 Matthew 9:10-17**

**The times they're a changing! Those of us who grew up in the sixties in America know those are the words of a great Bob Dylan classic. The times they're a changing might be Jesus' message in these verses from Matthew.**

**The kingdom of God has come near and everything is changing! No more rules about who can eat with whom. The times they're a changing! The Christ eats with tax collectors and sinners.**

**The kingdom of God has come near and everything is changing! No need to fast. The bridegroom, that is the Christ, the Messiah is among us. The kingdom has come near its time to party!**

**The kingdom has come near, the times they're a changing! Do not try to cling to the old ways. It would be like trying to sew a unshrunk cloth on an old cloak or pour new wine into an old wine skin: IT WON'T WORK!**

**God's kingdom is open! God's kingdom has room even for tax collectors and sinners. God's kingdom is big enough even for me.**

#### **A Prayer**

**Lord, who do I think you should not be sharing a meal with? Lord, who do I believe has no place in your kingdom? Lord, before I answer help me to pull the log out of my eye before I point out the speck in my neighbor's.**

#### **A Spiritual Exercise**

**Who are the people you look down on and feel superior to? Who are the people with whom you would rather not spend eternity? Try to be specific. Put a face and a name to it, Consider some concrete way to show that person God's love.**

The AMA recently announced a brand new branch of medicine—doctors who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of healthy people. Makes a lot of sense, right? Of course what we really need doctors for is to help us when we're sick, and that's the metaphor Jesus uses in this passage to explain why he mingles with tax collectors and troublemakers of various kinds. When the body suffers, in other words, it's not that different from when the soul suffers—both feel pain, and both are in need of healing. Jesus often speaks of suffering (“Come to me all ye who are heavy laden”), and pays special attention to people who are hurting, who know how difficult life can be, who have “hit bottom.” And we sometimes forget that an image of intense suffering is at the heart of the Christian experience—Christ on the cross.

As I've grown older, I've experienced the death of people close to me, and confronted serious illness in my own body in the form of a recent diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease. Would I prefer that these things not have happened? Absolutely. But I've also had occasional moments of gratitude, when I begin to get a glimpse of the mystery of suffering—how it leads to what the Gospel calls repentance, which I see as a change, a “turning” toward a deeper connection with life and with God.

I've recently befriended a man with advanced MS who used to be a high-powered ER doc, but now is a painter and writer. He is wheelchair-bound and has only the partial use of one hand. In addition to our respective illnesses, he and I share many things—an interest in creativity, a passion to learn and grow, a need to connect with others, an awareness of our failings, a struggle to find empathy and compassion in our lives. I come to this stuff from a religious direction. It turns out that he is an atheist, has no interest in religion, and is intensely involved with Existentialism, which gives him the strength to live a full life despite the extreme deterioration of his body as well as the essential void that he sees in the universe.

Logic says that he and I should be on opposite sides of the fence, hurling insults at each other. Yet our most recent conversation was such a beautiful meeting of minds and hearts. We sat together in his house as the afternoon faded into twilight, talking about choosing life—as he said, using up all the life we've been given. The Episcopalian and the Existentialist, talking the same language, feeling that connectedness, that “ground of being.” I call this God. He calls it something else. But I'm willing to bet that God doesn't care what name we give this experience. What matters is that we're open to it when it comes calling.

This conversation would not have happened if I hadn't been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, and not only because our friendship grew out of our shared experience of illness. Being sick has changed me. It's introduced a note of desperation in my life. It's intensified a need to find and honor that which matters, that which is real. Through illness, I've become more open to the Physician in my soul who wants to heal me. I know this sounds like a cliché—the sick guy who sees his spiritual poverty and finds God. But what Jesus says is true: if I were whole, I wouldn't need a doctor.

Have I grown closer to God? Maybe. I guess that's one way of describing what's going on. But my experience with my new friend has made me wonder what “finding God” really means. Sometimes I think “God” is just a word that we all knock around like a tennis ball, back and forth, while the real God, the real Word, quietly do their work of healing in the world.

May the Lenten season remind us of the great mystery of crucifixion and redemption, and teach us not to turn away from suffering, but to let the difficulties of our lives lead us to a greater openness and a deeper sense of connection with God.

Why didn't God give us Christ as a beetle? Or a chrysanthemum?

Or a powerful dragon? Because when we see Jesus on the cross, we are challenged to see ourselves ...we can sort of imagine what it would have been like to be hung by nails driven into our limbs and left to die -- on the slow plan.

The Heavenly Father, after all of the years of watching humans trying to abide by the ten commandments and failing miserably, took pity on us and sent us a savior -- a human savior in Jesus Christ, who suffers with us (com, with + passio, suffer = compassion) and teaches us and walks with us, has meals with us, and heals us through the Holy Spirit.

This is one of the most amazing aspects of the story. The God of creation is with us! But why bother sending Jesus to us, instead of letting us just bake and broil in our sins? What would God care if Adam and Eve were no longer in the garden -- after all, they were rightly warned and rightly punished!

The answer might be in Genesis 3: 8-10, which takes place directly after they have eaten the forbidden fruit:

"The the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

God created Adam and Eve and shared His garden with them. When God couldn't find them, he called to Adam, "Where are you?" Implicit in this scene is God the Father's desire for companionship, for communion, for relation, for friendship. Again, God could have done whatever God wanted, including ignoring them.

With one act, Adam brought sin and death into the world. It hurt Adam twofold ... it caused a spiritual death, and it also made him mortal. I think God wanted Adam and Eve in the garden with Him forever. I believe this one disobedient act on Adam's part (and Eve's as well) took God's friends out of the garden. The consequences of Adam's actions separated him from God, and this hurt God, too.

And isn't that really what sin is? That which separates us from God? It's a spiritual death. Because when we're "with God," we are transported to the highest heavens and our feet are deeply rooted in the earth -- all at the same time!!! Jesus was always with God, in constant communion with God, as expressed in the Gospel of John 8: 54-55...

"If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word."

(That is but one way we know Jesus was divine -- no human can attain this level of communion with God!).

But when we turn away from God -- when we sin -- we separate ourselves from communion with God. However, through grace and divine forgiveness, God is always there, waiting for us to return, if we will only turn toward God again.

So thank the Lord God for giving us Jesus! He is waiting for us. He is always waiting for us, reaching out to us. The Holy Spirit is always whispering in our ears to come back ...come back to Jesus.

Yes, sin can separate us from God temporarily, and yes, we are mortal, but as the passage in Romans 8: 38-39 teaches, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus."

So keep listening, and when you hear a still, small voice calling, "Where are you?" ...know that you are being loved.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, by the light of Your righteousness we see the path of life. By your Word, by your example in Jesus our Lord, by Your Holy Spirit, help us to speak, act, and show Your heart

to the people You have placed in our lives. Help us to be faithful servants of Your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Spiritual exercise: In a given day, or even in a given hour, notice how it feels in your spirit when you sin. Then notice how your spirit feels when you are in communion with God in some way, ie., opening your heart to ask for forgiveness. Search for a room where you will not be interrupted and meditate on these two states of your spirit. Ask God for strength and for a heightened sense of the presence of Jesus in every moment.

## 02/11 Leviticus 19: 1-2, 11-18

The Lord assures Moses that the people of Israel will be Holy because he is Holy. This is to assure them, as God assures us that we are Holy and he loves us without reservation. We can trust His love and live and act with this knowledge. The Lord, then goes on to give the people some laws which they should live by. He does not say that his love is conditional upon our following these laws. We are to know he loves us even if we stray from following the law.

Let's look at the Laws that he chooses to mention. I won't list them in detail, but will point out that they all revolve around how we treat our fellow man. For example: You do not steal, you do not defraud, you do not render unjust judgments, you do not put stumbling blocks before the blind or the deaf, you do not slander or hate. Let me stop there. Just what does this mean for us? The answer to that question is so clearly stated in the Book Of Common Prayer. It reads: "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang ALL the Law and the prophets."

For me, that's it in a nutshell, the true meaning of Christianity and our mandate from God in the conduct of our daily life. In Leviticus, God gives us guidelines on just what he means for us to do and how to live. I do not believe though that it is all inclusive. There are also so many more less dramatic things that we can do: smile, reach out, help, be courteous, gentle, understanding, listen, support, empathize and encourage among a multitude of others.

It sounds as if we can easily do these things, but of course it's not easily done. Not as God wants, at any rate. It means sacrificing something of ourselves. It means being more concerned about the wants and needs of others and less about ourselves.

In Leviticus God sets in motion what he later came to earth as a human, in Jesus Christ, to show us without what he meant about how we should try to live and love. Jesus was perfect and we certainly cannot match him, but we can try. We can use him as our guidepost in the conduct of our lives at work, at play, and at worship. God did give us, what might be seen as a stumbling block for his efforts, "free will". We are able to choose our own actions. As I see it, that's where an awareness of God's love comes in. If we truly accept God's love, we can return it by attempting to live the life that he would wish us to live. Even though we know that God's love for us is not dependent on whether we follow his wishes for us, his hope for us is that our knowledge and awareness of his love will guide us in our free will actions and we will realize his kingdom is available to us here and now, and that we will act accordingly.

Oh gracious father who gives us his unconditional love, let us fully realize that love and help us to return it by using the talents you have so graciously given us to follow your will in our love for you and for our neighbor.

## 02/12 Isaiah 55:6-11

In preparing for this devotional, I prayed that I would be shown what this passage was saying to me. I read it multiple times and was having trouble seeing or hearing what God was trying to tell me. It suddenly became so clear right in the first verse...6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near. I realized that God was telling me to look right inside myself and ask him to guide me because he is near. I was so hung up that this was in the past and thinking about when Christ was walking the earth and preparing to go to the cross. I forgot that our GOD is a living GOD. He is here with us right now. He is not gone. We just have to call upon him.

Isaiah reminds us of God's promise that is repeated throughout the Bible. If we have turned away from him, all we have to do is come back to him and his forgiveness is abundant. WOW! Just like my mom or dad he has unconditional love. And like any parent, he may not always like what we do but he will always be there for us and will take us back.

Isaiah tells us that God's thoughts and ways are not the same as ours they are higher, as heaven is higher than the earth. Should we expect GOD to have the same thoughts as us? And should he have the same ways? Well I hope not! Again I see this from a child's perspective. As a child I used to get frustrated with grown-ups because they did not understand what I was thinking or why I wanted to do certain things. I did not know about the bigger picture. I did not think beyond myself or the immediate. This still happens at work for many of us. But the one thing I have always known is that GOD can see the bigger picture. He has his plan for me and for all mankind.

I realize now that this passage is so full that I would have a week long devotional. I have not even gotten to his promise in verse 11, that the words that go out of my mouth will not go unanswered and that I will succeed in the things GOD has planned for me.

I pray today that each of us turn to our FATHER GOD, accept his loving embrace, his words of comfort and love. Remember that he promises to always be there for us. And he will always have an answer for us even though it may not be what we want to hear.

"Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love." Francis Havergal 1874

6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

## 02/13 Jonah 3:1-10

Imagine that God spoke to you and told you to travel to New York City. There you must tell everyone that their sin, their culture of violence and injustice, is going to cause their destruction. It can only be avoided if the whole city were to ask God for forgiveness.

Imagine standing in Times Square preaching that message to people passing by. Most would probably ignore you, but others would mock or argue. It would be frightening, so much so that you would probably consider running at your first chance.

I know I would.

It's no surprise that the first two chapters of Jonah are spent describing him running from God's call. God can be pretty persistent, and spending a few days in the stomach of a large fish was enough to convince Jonah to listen. This time he left right away.

In the New York City illustration I can imagine a few dozen people actually listening. I can imagine one or two repenting, but it would take a miracle to get an entire culture to repent of their sins, right?

That's why verse five is so shocking:

The Ninevites believed God.

All of them, from kings to paupers, fasted and put on sackcloth. If Jonah was surprised that they repented, he was not surprised at what happened next. God forgave them.

It seemed as though Jonah's reason for running was his fear, but in chapter four we find out the real reason:

That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

It's not that Jonah was afraid of being reviled, it's that he was afraid that Nineveh would repent and be spared. Jonah hated the Ninevites, and wanted to see them destroyed.

It's not as if God was yearning to destroy Nineveh in anger for their sins. All along he planned on sparing Nineveh and cleansing them of the pain and suffering resulting from their lifestyle. That's why he called Jonah, and Jonah knew it all along.

When we are constantly reminded about how terrible sin it's easy to begin to not only hate sinfulness, but to feel resentment and even anger and hatred towards those who we see as sinful. We've all heard "love the sinner, hate the sin" used in discussing how we treat others. How often do we use this phrase when turning inward toward our own sinfulness?

Lent calls to us much like Jonah to the Ninevites to remember our sinful state and cry out for repentance. During this season we fast and cry out to God as the Ninevites did. It is easy during Lent to concentrate so much on our own sinful condition that we begin to mourn or even hate ourselves for what we do. The sacrament of reconciliation exists not so that we can hate our self, nor does it exist to make us feel guilty for the things that we do, but rather so that we can take glory in our forgiveness and be healed. If we never learn to move past our own sin, we will never learn to live a new life in Christ as one who is forgiven.

Remember: all along God has planned on forgiving and healing us. Throughout the rest of Lent, as we fast and repent of our violence and evil ways as the Ninevites did, let's not fall into self-hatred for our sinfulness, but rather remember that He is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" and praise Him for it.

## 02/14 Esther 14:1-6, 12-14

When I first read this scripture, I wondered to myself, “Wow, how bad off does one need to be to lock yourself in a room ‘seized with deadly anxiety,’ remove your clothes and put on the equivalent of a burlap sack, cover your head in ashes and dung, mat your long hair all over your body and pray for three whole days?” Frankly, I thought this woman sounded a little nuts. So, I read the whole story.

Turns out, Esther was a woman who, from all outward appearances, had everything for which anyone could wish. She was described as the most beautiful woman in the kingdom; she was married to the most powerful man in the kingdom – the Persian King Ahasuerus- and had unimaginable material wealth as a result. However, as is so often the case, she was an anxiety-ridden mess in her heart. She had not asked to marry her husband but was selected by him after she was forced to participate in the biblical equivalent of the Miss Universe pageant. She was Jewish, a fact she had kept hidden from her husband who had just signed a decree to cleanse the land of all Jews (all her family). And, she had just been asked by her cousin Mordecai to use her influence with her husband to convince him to rescind his decree. Which was very troublesome to Esther because she knew that her husband’s first wife, Vashti, was cast out (according to some accounts, beheaded) for disobeying the king and she feared for her own life if she were to speak to the king without his requesting she do so. All in all, she saw herself in a lose-lose situation and she became a bundle of anxiety as a result.

Esther saw herself backed into a corner and turned to the only place she could go for help when there was no person to whom she could turn. She turned to God. In a ritualistic way, she made herself as humble in appearance as the lowliest beggar in the kingdom to show God she did not see herself as being any better than any other of his children, acknowledged how God had saved her ancestors from Egypt, and appealed to God to help her. She did not ask for a sea to be parted. She did not ask for a lightning bolt to strike her enemies or plagues to befall them. She asked for more subtle intervention. She asked for the courage she needed to act, for him to give her the words she needed to approach her husband and that God open her husband’s heart to hear her and see who his true enemies were.

It is funny how relevant this passage is to me once I had learned the full story of Esther. Though, by my outward appearance to others, I seemingly have everything ‘all together’. So often in my life I have found myself in situations where I have had to do something that scared me or have an important discussion with someone I feared (or from whom I feared losing love or a relationship) and in my mind I have felt utterly backed into a corner, seized with my own ‘deadly anxiety.’ In these situations, I have perceived that no good would come from staying silent or not acting but sizable negative consequences were also a real possibility by speaking what was on my mind or taking action. In these instances in my life, I cannot count the number times I have prayed to God to give me the courage to move forward, walk with me and give me the words to productively address the issue(s) at hand.

I think Esther’s story reminds us that, no matter what, God is always with us. All we have to do is ask for the help we need. When we seek to improve our conscious contact with God and give our fears and anxieties over to his care, the fears lessen, the burden we carry is lightened and we are given the tools we need to proceed. For the most part, I have not required nor asked for big and impressive miracles (though God gave me my children and that was a pretty big and impressive miracle – but that is Sarah’s story not Esther...), just periodic, subtle interventions. Not unlike Esther, I have not asked God to do it for me, but do it with me. When I have prayed on these things, I have felt less alone and somehow the courage has come and the words have flowed forth to allow me to do what I needed to do.

Please God, when I am paralyzed by my fears and anxieties, instill in me the strength of character I need to move out of my fear and on with my task. Please may I always be reminded that the light of God surrounds us, the love of God enfolds us, the power of God protects us, the presence of God watches over us, wherever we are, God is; and wherever God is, all is well.

Very early in the bible we read that, when God created the heavens and the earth and all earth's inhabitants, He pronounced them good. And very soon after that we find that humankind has turned away from God's laws and become involved in their own desires, and fallen into envy, falsehood, even murder. Then, all throughout the bible, there arise prophets and sages and heroes who hear the word of God in their hearts, and tell the people of God's love and care for them. The passage for today's lesson was written when the children of Israel were in captivity in Babylon, and there was a feeling among them that they were being punished for the sins of their fathers. But Ezekiel tells them "No!" the past history of the community does not trap the present generation in judgment, nor does the past history of the wicked man mean he is condemned to death,. The future does not depend on all that is past, but on the choices we make in the present. When a good person turns to evil ways, he is responsible for what punishment he may receive. BUT, when a person turns from sin and follows God's will, he is forgiven for his past sinfulness--- And Ezekiel goes on to say further that God is not really interested in punishment, but in repentance and forgiveness. Many things befall us all in our lives, that are not connected to blame or punishment, but to cause and effect--- If you walk in front of a speeding train, you'll surely be killed. But this passage deals with the evil we all do, and the possibility of punishment for sin---and the joy and wonder of forgiveness. When my children were young, and knew they were going to be caught out in some naughty deed that they KNEW was forbidden, they would often come running to me, with much weeping and gnashing of teeth, saying "I'm SORRY Mommy"--and I would tell them that it was good that they were sorry for the misdeed, but they should stop being sorry, and just go on, and not do it again. At this time of Lent when we are considering the world's sinfulness that cost Christ His life, and our part in it, we have an opportunity, once again, to turn from the things which we know are displeasing to God, and to turn our lives around, and be forgiven. No matter what happened in the past, it is never impossible to turn around and receive God's spirit. Ezekiel tells us that God desires repentance, a giving up of our sinful desires. In Mark 1:4 we read of John the Baptist's call to repentance and forgiveness, and then in verse 15, of Jesus' call to repentance. For us, then Lent can be a time of joy as well as sorrow -- because the passages don't indicate that God is interested on having us spend our days moaning and bewailing our many sins and lapses, but in TURNING TO His will and learning to walk in His way. We could consider our captivity to sin as similar to the Israelites' captivity in Babylon, or the captivity of a kidnapped person to his kidnapper who demands a large ransom for the release of the captive. --- and God Himself paid our ransom, and gave us freedom from that captivity, He gave us life everlasting, and peace that passes all understanding. and so---- yes, when we contemplate Christ's Passion, we're filled with sorrow because of our own culpability, but we can also sing, with the hymn writer

Were the whole realm of nature mine

That were a present far too small.

Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

## 02/16 Deuteronomy 26 :16 - 19

In the beginning when God was trying to shape a people of His own, Things were talked about. Commandments and rules called statutes and ordinances were given to the people He was grooming to know. Moses was the earthly person used by God to groom these people. After much grooming and grumbling we come to Deuteronomy Chapter 27 verses 16 to 19.

This day was the day of acceptance by these special people; to accept all God has asked of them. There was much to learn and do but God did tell them what He expected of them. The Lord asked this day would they say YES. When I read this I realized we are asked the same question at our Confirmation. However, it jumped into my mind that after Confirmation it is hardly mentioned that there is a YES still applied. As a special people we have commandments, statutes and ordinances to read about and try to follow. OH, I know it is an unpopular statement I'm making but it is still a real part of being God's special people as we Christians are supposed to be. We have a responsibility just like the people in the Old Testament to try to live God's way. I am not trying to make any personal judgments just an observance. Just look into yourselves and be truthful. Could we do better? Are we willing to keep learning God's Way? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all were truthful about ourselves? Not whitewashing the truth to make ourselves happy.

The more we read the Bible (God's love story to us) the more we learn about God. He loves us so very much. Couldn't we try harder to understand God? If we pray to the Holy Spirit for His help in understanding we will receive help. God is not dead. His promise to the people who try to follow the rules is very clear. He will set us above all nations that he has made, in praise, fame and honor. For we are to be a holy people to the Lord your God according to His promise. God wants us for His own. Take the time to read the Bible, learn how patient God is with us. He wants us to try, try and try some more to be His holy people. Won't you all try a wee bit harder. Just think what could happen to the world if we all tried. People would notice, don't you when someone is kind to you. We are to be God's light in the world. Don't put your light under a bushel basket so no one can see the light.

God is faithful. Let us try to be faithful to Him. We all could have a good look over ourselves. Just remember God will be looking over you in the future. Do you want to be coming up short in His eyes? When we cheat God we only cheat ourselves. Eternity with God is a wonderful prize. Go for it. Lets remember we did say YES too as they did in olden times.

### THE SERENITY PRAYER

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can change,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

### AN EXERCISE FOR THE DAY

Just read the Ten Commandments as given to Moses by God.

## 02/17 Romans 4: 1-17

I was already aware of having faith and a relationship with God, before the reading of this passage. This reading does relate Jewish beliefs and history with that of the New Testament. It provides a connection for the Jews reading Paul's letter along with the Gentiles. In the Old Testament I was reminded of Abraham and his faith. He did not have to earn it but just believed in God. He then received the promise of progeny. Also, in the Old Testament, King David learned that faith allowed him to receive forgiveness and God's righteousness through acknowledgement of his sins and confession of them. These are two examples from our past, of two Jewish men with faith that was not earned but given to them. Paul also discussed the Covenant and laws. Faith is separated from law. Abraham, David, you and I all have faith and that makes us all God's children.

In my life I have had times I feel "entitled" to various paths or material things. I have learned that my faith and relationship with Jesus Christ is all I need to journey forward. I can do with out the clothes or jewelry to go to church Sunday. It is not the material items I think I need to live; it is my daily life of prayer and my relationship with Jesus Christ that give me strength and courage. When I er r, I know God is with me teaching me that it does not matter if I err, what matters is his presence in my life and my faith in our relationship and all will be well. God is righteous and loving. Paul's passage stresses this.

One lesson I learned during a previous Lent was that it is not by giving up that we practice a Holy Lent. Giving is the way I practice Lent, not giving up. It is in giving time to my relationship with God that I give up some of the habits that weaken my faith. As we are starting our twelfth day of Lent, lets us each give more time to our relationship with God. I am journaling about what I have given each day, to gain strength and stability in my journey with Jesus Christ. I can set time aside for Jesus every day and pray, listen or journal. Some people may choose to draw their expressions of themselves, write poetry or sing and listen to music. Please join me in "giving of yourself" to build a stronger relationship with God and increasing your Faith in him this Lent. I hope your relationship grows and continues after Lent.

"I will trust that you are with me God.

I believe that you will guide me.

I place my confidence in you

even when my faith is wobbly and unsure."

Joyce Rupp; from the Lenten section of *Inviting God in: Scriptural Reflections and Prayers throughout the Year*; 2001, Ave Maria Press.

## 02/18 Luke 6: 27-38

I learned the "Jesus Prayer" over twenty years ago and, like many who make it a part of their spiritual life, I keep it on a twenty-four / seven loop in my head. It's my first thought each day – other than that morning comes much too early – and my last conscious thought before slumber takes hold. It's a powerful prayer for what it says, for what it asks, for what it clarifies about my relationship with God and for what it reveals about my relationships with others.

The simple truth is that I live my life with two things clearly understood. First, I am a sinner. I am in no way deserving of the love of God, grace of God, forgiveness of God or mercy of God. Borrowing from one of my Rector's sermons, "I'm bad enough to go to hell and not nearly good enough to get into heaven". Second, I understand that the very things I don't deserve have already been given me in measures I cannot comprehend. Love, grace, forgiveness, mercy and eternal life have been given me; despite my sinful nature and inability to repay the debt. Almighty God, creator of the universe and all that exists therein, came to earth and died...for me. In His mercy and compassion He gave – everything – knowing I could never repay Him.

Today's Gospel, calls us to love and pray for our enemies and turn the other cheek, pronounces the "golden rule", tells us to give – everything – without expecting a return, admonishes us to be forgiving and nonjudgmental with others and promises that we will receive "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over." It's a difficult passage to wrestle with and apply in our modern world, until I consider how undeserving I am and how much Jesus has already given me.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

We all have enemies. They may not threaten our lives but they abuse us, use us and take from us in subtle ways – the colleague at work who blind-sides us in meetings or steals our ideas, the neighbor who doesn't respect our property or the fellow parishioner who uses us as gossip fodder. We may feel they don't deserve the time of day, much less our forgiveness and love. We also know people who owe us debts and we, in turn, owe debts to others. How we choose to respond to these people is the essence of Christ's message here. He's calling us to show others the patience, forgiveness and love God shows each of us every single day.

I cannot repay Christ for the gifts I have received but I can pay it forward. I can understand the "golden rule" in a different way. I can perceive it saying "Do unto others as God has already done unto you."

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Prayer:                    Lord Jesus, you give me mercy and love beyond measure and I am too poor and imperfect to repay you. Teach me to approach everyone with your loving kindness, even those who don't respond in kind. Teach me to give as you have, to forgive those who injure me and to be humble in the face of those I have injured. In your name I pray. Amen

Exercises:            Make it a point to smile and say good morning or a kind word to someone whom you find irritating.

                          Pay a stranger's toll on a bridge or highway.

Say the Jesus Prayer and think about its meaning – especially when you feel anger toward someone.

## 02/19 Matthew 23:1-12

How many of us agree with Fr. Dave when he says that he doesn't like to think of "cranky Jesus?" In this passage Jesus appears to be annoyed with the Pharisees, yet again, for making themselves seem important in public. It is perhaps easy for us to let that be what this passage is about. The simple truth is that the leaders of the church in biblical times are not unlike the leaders of the church, leaders of nations, and leaders of companies of today. Gospel passages such as these are hard for us to look at, because they talk about humanity at any age and any time.

This year our nation will choose a new president. There is much debate over "change" that must take place and which candidate has the best interests of the people at heart. I always find myself wishing that I could peer into the heart of each candidate to find the one who has that special something that will make him stand out from the rest. I wonder which one is honestly interested in being the public servant that will truly care about the middle and lower class people, while he is going about the business of gaining more and more campaign contributions and boasting about himself.

I think it is comfortable for us to think of hypocrites as people other than ourselves. We even laugh out loud when thinking of the lyrics of the old country western song sung by Mac Davis, "Lord it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way." However we would do better to identify ourselves with the Michael Jackson song, "Man In the Mirror" - especially the specific lyrics "I'm starting with the man in the mirror I'm asking him to change his ways And no message could have been any clearer If you wanna make a change...Take a look at yourself..."

Let me illustrate this with a personal, humbling epiphany. This year is the year of a significant high school reunion for me and my classmates. All of us remember how difficult relationships were at that age. When pondering the idea of attending, I thought at first that I wouldn't want to go back and be in the same room with "them." After taking out my yearbook, I decided that I would like to go if there were enough of my old buddies attending. Then I realized that I would like to go back and see the people who I grew up with. Perhaps there are friendships that need to be mended. Perhaps I could bless someone's life and be blessed by their lives. I believe that God would have me go - in love - and see what He has in store for me there.

We, as Christians, especially would like to think of ourselves as more enlightened about what Jesus calls us to do - to humble ourselves, to be servants of others, to love our neighbors as ourselves. But in reality we too fall short in our humanity. We wish to have others recognize our successes by applauding us publicly. Each of us likes to have a pat on the shoulder, and we forget that Jesus is with us each moment doing just that.

Spiritual Exercise: Today think of songs lyrics that may bring this gospel passage to life for you.

[or] This week, be intentional about being the last to be served and the last in every line.  
for those in front of you. -- from Daily Discipleship written by John and Robin McCullough

Pray

Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see thee more clearly; love thee more dearly; follow thee more nearly, day by day. -- Richard of Chichester

## 02/20 Matthew 20:17-28

I remember I had come home from college during one of my breaks and I was watching TV with my younger brother. I noticed he was out pretty late the night before and I asked casually what time he got home at. He said around 12am. At that point I freaked out a little bit, knowing that when I was a sophomore in high school I had to be home at 11 at the very latest. I knew that if I walked in the house at 11:01 I was going to be grounded or hear about it the next day. But here comes the baby of the family walking on water, getting more privileges than I ever had, and experiencing discipline in a whole new set of rules. Needless to say I was mad. I stormed right up to my parents and asked them why he got to do this, that, and the other thing, but when I was in high school I wouldn't have been able to get away with any of that. They gave me some sort of answer but I still walked away thinking to myself, "my brother gets away with murder."

Were my parents favoring him over me? Or because they let him stay out later on a Saturday night did that mean they loved me less? Did it make my brother have more authority in the family because he wasn't disciplined as much? The answer to all these questions is no. However it made me realize that I was a little jealous of being the older child opposed to the younger one. Being the older one did have one perk that I never really thought about until this passage. My mom wanted her children to have faith. So with me, being the eldest, she pushed faith on me everywhere. She wanted me to get involved in youth group, she wanted me on mission trips, she wanted me to be an acolyte, but most of all she wanted me to find God...and eventually I did. And once I found Him, I couldn't let Him go. I think she found all of this so overwhelming that she didn't really press the issue with my brother. She wanted him to find God but she wasn't as worried about how he did it that she didn't push the issue. Because of my faith, my brother and I are very alike but very different people. We look at political and religious issues on very opposite sides. We handle confrontation differently. We handle family situations very differently. But one thing that my brother and I have in common is loyalty. We are loyal to our families and we are loyal to our friends. And in turn our loyalty brings out the servant in us. And in the long run that's all that matters. If we serve, then it doesn't matter who got to stay out later when they were 15. If we serve it doesn't show whom God loves more and if we serve it doesn't make us a favorite among our parents. It shows our love and grace for the people around us, the people we don't know, but most of all God.

O Lord, Lover of men, who forgivest us our sins; Cleanse us of all that is base or selfish, and make us to be in all things thy servants, and the messengers of thy love. Amen.

## 2/21 Luke 16:19-31

“Stop, look and listen” was a public awareness campaign initiated by America’s railroad industry in the early 1990s to raise awareness of the danger of railroad crossings. The idea was to remind the general public to stop at any railroad crossing they approached, look for any oncoming trains, and listen for any whistles or horns warning of an approaching train. The campaign was born of necessity – despite railroad crossing signs, flashing warning lights, and even crossing gates, some people still did not heed the warnings and were killed by oncoming trains.

The rich man of whom Jesus speaks in this parable found himself in a similar situation. Sitting in hell, where he was in torment, he is reminded that despite the admonitions to live a life of service and obedience to God, he had chosen to ignore the signs around him. Most specifically, he missed the reminder which was placed at his gate everyday- Lazarus, a man who was so needy that he longed even to eat the scrapes which fell from the rich man’s table; so despised that the dogs came and licked his sores.

And so, now in hell and in agony in the unquenchable fire, the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to the house of his father to warn his brothers of the fate awaiting them should they continue to live like he had. Abraham answers that they, just like he, have been given Moses and the Prophets to act as warnings, and if those signs and warnings weren’t enough, nothing else, even someone rising from the dead, would not be enough to save them.

And so it remains to some this day – in spite of the star over Bethlehem, paying no mind to the loaves and fishes, indeed, with utter disregard for the death and resurrection, some continue to miss the signs of God’s abundant love for us.

Perhaps more importantly though, are the little signs. Oh sure, we all know that a train could come barreling down the track at any minute, but do we heed the small circular, yellow sign with the “X” and the letters, “RR”. Or are we too caught up in that cell phone call, or with the weather report on the radio to really stop, look and listen.

The same can be said of our daily living. Do we really take the time to stop, look around at all of the goodness which the Lord has made, at all that he has provided, and- in the stillness of even just a moment, to listen? To listen, to hear the voice of God in our daily lives and to truly hear what He is telling us. To see the signs and wonders all around us and truly understand what it is to “be still, and know that I am God.”

While it certainly is true that the Word of the Lord can, and does come forth like John the Baptist – crying out in the wilderness, how much of what God is saying to us do we miss, simply because we haven’t taken the time to see the signs, even those posted daily at our own front door. Stop, look and listen for the signs of God’s love all round you, and see that God’s grace is present for you, and for all of us, everywhere and in everything, for all time.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us in the struggle of our daily lives to stop and see the signs of your love for us, help us always to look for your loving kindness in the words and actions of those around us, and allow us the patience to listen for your will in our lives. Grant us the ability to always be outward and viable signs of your kingdom, and to be messengers of your love. In your name we pray. Amen.

## 02/22 Matthew 21:33-43

My younger niece is my godchild. For her fourth birthday I spent a lot of time shopping for a special gift for her, something I thought she'd really like. I finally settled on the book *The Rainbow Fish*. I even bought the videotape to go along with the book. When the big day came and the family gathered for her to open her presents, she got to the gift I had chosen so carefully, took one look at it, handed it back to me and said, "Take it back, I don't want that."

It hurts to have your gift rejected. And so it was in this parable. The master has provided for his tenants, he's built a vineyard, a watchtower, dug a winepress, and walled in this little paradise. All he asks of his tenants is his share of the harvest as rent, a return on his investment. The tenants reject his gift by killing first his slaves and then his own son.

We can see that Jesus is really referring to the Kingdom of God and how the people of Israel are rejecting this gift by being selfish and keeping the entire harvest for themselves. They have rejected the prophets (slaves) and are soon to reject the owner's Son (Jesus).

This parable can speak to us today in terms of the gifts God has given to all of us: in fact all that we have is a gift from God. The homes we live in, the jobs we have, the children we're blessed with, the cars we drive, the leisure activities we pursue, all of this comes from God. And it is all a gift. The only thing we're asked in return is to love the Lord and our neighbors as ourselves, to give thanks to the Lord for all we've been given. We live such an abundant life we should be inspired to return a generous portion to Him.

And He has given each of us special gifts and asks only that we use them to bring His kingdom here to earth, now, at this time. He has spread these gifts around, no one person has all that he needs, we each rely on everyone else to function in this world of ours. We are all parts of the same body—we need each other just as much as we need both feet and hands.

We must remember to use these gifts to further God's work on earth. We do not want to be like the wicked tenants and keep these gifts for just our own use. We don't want this kingdom to be taken away from us and given to others who do bear the fruits God expects.

Spiritual exercise:

Do you recognize your gifts?

When during this week have you used your gifts?

How do you use your gifts? Do you share them as God expects or do you use them only for your own ends?

How could you extend the use of your gifts?

Have you given thanks for your gifts lately?

## 02/23 Luke 15: 11-32

The Prodigal Son tale is a timeless example of God's grace and love for all families.

In our modern world, we use labels such as "dysfunctional" to describe such families however this Gospel assures us that labels do not apply.

The younger son in the family is caught up with youthful impulses. His actions are based on physical rather than spiritual grounds. He opted for the "geographic" cure when things at home didn't go his way so he left with Dad's money for a distant country. Whether due to lack of experience, maturity or addictions, his life is out of control.

Neither intervention by professionals or 12 Step Programs is necessary though. God's pure love and grace touch the younger son and he is transformed as only God can change us. This son was willing to work with the lowly swine to atone for his sins. At last, he was willing to humble himself and make amends to his father even if that meant working for him as the hired help.

The younger son's transformation is so complete that even at a distance, his father recognizes it and is thrilled. The father does not question the change or ask where he himself had failed. Maybe he sees that God has indeed done what he himself had been praying for to happen.

"He was lost, and is found". The son was lost to sin but has been restored. Let the party begin!

We are reunited as a loving family.

The elder son however has been laboring under expectations. His expectations were defined by his rules and norms. He has crossed his t's and dotted his i's and probably made his bed every morning. A wise friend once mentioned that expectations are premeditated resentments.

Unfortunately, the end result of those expectations was a profound resentment against both his father and brother. When we define the rules, and family around us do not live up to our expectations, resentments fester. Who are we to judge? Are we now holding fast to such a resentment because we are right??

Lent is traditionally a time to deny ourselves. Chocolate and caffeine are often items we "give up" for Lent. Maybe this year we should consider prying ourselves from some old resentments. Those resentments that are keeping us from God's love and grace. Ask Jesus to shoulder these resentments with His Cross as he continues His journey to Calvary. Pray for the willingness to allow God to be the Judge.

Pray the Our Father and listen to Jesus' teaching.

..Forgive us OUR trespasses as WE FORGIVE THOSE who trespass against us.

Make a list of those individuals you are harboring resentments against. Ask God to bless them. Pray for each of them every day until Easter morning and you may experience the Risen Lord with a lightened heart.

## 02/24 Romans 5:1-11

**FAITH:** Trusting that the Creator, although at times displeased by the actions of His creations, is above all else a forgiving and merciful God who will not hold a grudge. Without forgiveness, how could we continue in this life without any peace or hope of salvation? If every sin was indelible we would be crushed under the cumulative weight of them – I believe that God created us to live in peace and provides for us the means to erase past failings and to start anew.

I love every picture that I have ever painted, photographed or sketched – even the ugly ones! I believe that my Creator loves everything that He has extended His almighty mind and hand and brought to life – and said: “This is good!”

Christ is the visible expression to us of the invisible God. God wants to be seen by us, and He made Himself known through His only Son – Jesus. Through the life of Jesus we can see the reflection of the Master – His love – His caring – His willingness to sacrifice that which He held most precious to Himself.

I believe that I do not have to fear the wrath of God. I only have to fear the consequence of my own behavior as it relates to my relationship with the One who made me. God has only promised love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the choices that I make are mine and I am fully responsible.

**LOVE:** The love of God is the very life of God.

We are in the safekeeping of a God who loves us – a God who protects us even when we do something wrong or stupid! The proof of God’s limitless love for us humans lies in the knowledge that, at the very time when we had abandoned Him, He presented Himself, in the form of His Son Jesus; to not only wash away a sinful past, but to open a fresh path and a direction by which we can stay close to him and better understand His purpose for us.

God sent Jesus to bring all people – the Jew – the Muslim – the Christian – the Buddhist – the Hindu – and those who have chosen no religion at all, back to His loving embrace and sanctuary. It is we people who have forgotten or ignored this purpose, and the two rules He provided: Love your God with your whole being and to, at all times, love your neighbor (everyone else in your world) in the same manner as you would have God love you.

Not very hard to understand – often difficult to put into practice!

**SALVATION:** When God’s love impacts on us, it irrevocably changes us so that we turn from looking inward to looking outward – from materialistic to generous – from self-serving to being a servant to others. Once you have fallen under the spell of unending love, there is never any reason for turning away. We may slip from the greatest of relationships, but He is always present with grace in full abundance – and you don’t even have to ask for it!

I fear no shadow – for in the light of God I know there is no such thing!

**SPIRITUAL EXERCISE:** Write your own spiritual autobiographic highlights and see where you came to your awakening to God’s presence, and determine how and when you changed.

**COLLECT:** Omnipresent Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who watch over my journey through this life. Imbue in me a constant awareness of the endless love given and stored for my behalf. Guide me as I travel its course, and forgive me when I fail to follow the path provided. I ask this in confidence in the knowledge that a gift requested is a gift delivered from the God who reigns forever and forever. Amen.

At first glance, this is a story about the healing of Naaman, a powerful and proud man. Naaman is a soldier, 'a mighty warrior', who has led his armies to victory over many enemies. This powerful leader of men also has leprosy. The leprosy hasn't advanced to the point whereby isolation is required – but, none the less, he has a horrible disease which strikes fear in people's hearts.

During a recent army campaign Naaman's army captures a young girl from Israel who is then given to Naaman's Wife as a servant. This young slave suggests that if her 'Master' were to see the prophet (Elisha) in Samaria, he could be healed. Naaman receives permission to travel to Samaria to see this prophet; he meets Elisha; Elisha tells him to wash in the nearby river; Naaman does so, but under protest; Naaman is healed; as a result of his healing, Naaman believes that 'there is no God in all the earth except in Israel'.

This is a story recounting the healing of Naaman. It is a story recounting one of Elisha's many miracles. And it is a story of a young servant girl, a nobody by societies' standards, a woman of faith who tells someone about the great God of Israel. This is the line of the story that jumped off of the page for me!

I wonder if this story would be in the Hebrew Scriptures if this servant girl hadn't spoken? I wonder what else hasn't happened because someone didn't know about God? What is happening because an individual or a community does not know about God?

We who are reading this devotional during Lent are blessed to know God through our Lord Jesus, the Christ. We know about the journey of the Jews to know God as told in the Hebrew Scriptures; and, we know about the disciples (and the other followers) who struggled on their own journey to discern who Jesus was and what He wanted. So... we know the history...we know the stories...we know that Jesus is the Messiah...and we know what He wants. He wants us to '...love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and ...love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37-39) I think it is fair to say that the young servant girl loved God with her whole heart and loved her enemy - enough to want healing for him. Jesus also wants us to spread the good news: 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.' (Luke 7:22) The servant girl shared the good news.

The young girl was indentured as a servant and yet lived as a Servant...of God. What will happen if we do as Jesus asks?

Lord, you give the great commission:

'Heal the sick and preach the word'.

Lest the Church neglect its mission

And the Gospel go unheard,

Help us witness to your purpose

with renewed integrity;

with the Spirit's gifts empower us

for the work of ministry.

Jefferey Rowthorn

Hymn #528, The Hymnal 1982

## 02/26 Daniel 3:25-27,34-43

To set the stage for today's devotional reading, in the preceding verses 3 Israelites are thrown into a fiery pit by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon for not worshiping his gods. The 3 were Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego or aka Azariah. While in the fiery pit God sends an angel and saves them from certain death. The reading for today is an excerpt from a work appropriately called "The Song of Azariah in the Furnace". Azariah sings the song to God even though at this time he is in the furnace and many of his fellow Jews are being held in brutal captivity in Babylon.

Azariah sings to God a song of hope and redemption for himself and for Israel. He sings a joyful song because he is certain that God will continue to be with him while in the fire and will not abandon him nor will God abandon Israel while in captivity. He sings and praises God even though there is no apparent reason for hope for himself or Israel.

We are all thrown into a "furnace" at some point. The furnace may be a metaphor to a divorce, the death of a loved one, a loss of a job, mental or physical illness, or the bottomless pit of a guilty conscience. Fiery furnaces are part of every person's life whether due to one's own fault or by chance, and we may have no apparent reason for hope and want to shout out in desperation as in Mark 15:34 *my God my God why have you forsaken me?*

It is then the scripture says we need only to turn our hearts to the Lord for comfort. As so eloquently stated in Psalm 23 *"even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for you are at my side"* or as Paul says in Romans 8:38-39 *38 For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, 39 nor angles, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come nor any power nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus.*

The scriptures promise that God loves us and is always with us; for *Love is from God and God is love* (1 John 4:7-8). No matter what "furnace" we are in God will always be there and in drawing near to God with humility, prayer, and love we can experience our Lord's eternal presence, hope and peace even when the world provides none. We should never give up on God even when things seem the darkest for God's promise is that perseverance will win you your lives (Luke 21: 19).

Some time ago I became seriously ill by a condition I had never heard of. While I was slowly recuperating the Dr. stated that if I do not make good progress I may need surgery and it could have a significant impact on my quality of life. I asked the Dr. was there anything I could have done to prevent this and to my total shock he said no.

Just prior to my illness I had recently learned of centering prayer through my spiritual director. One of the center pieces of centering prayer is that we give up depending on ourselves and depend on God. During my, what seemed like a slow prolonged recuperation, I practiced meditative prayer. I understood that my illness was out of my control and that I needed to depend on God for my security. I needed Christ to be my guide where ever this illness was going to take me. I slowly developed a sense of peace that no matter how dark my valley was going to be God was there with me and he would see me through to what ever the end was going to be. Fortunately, I fully recuperated but I now see the illness as a blessing that led me to turn to God and which strengthen my walk with God.

There is an old Persian proverb that says, "it is only at night can we see the beauty of the stars".

### Closing Prayer

Lord help me not to forget that when I find myself like Azariah in a fiery pit of despair that you are there in the midst of the fire and can drive the flames outward from our heart, and send a coolness as of the breeze and dew and help me deal with the pain and distress through your eternal love.

### Spiritual Exercise

Take 10-20 minutes each day and in a quiet relaxing place meditate on and give thanks to our Lord for 10 things that you are thankful for. They can be big things or small or even bizarre things such as my being thankful for an illness that strengthen my walk with God.

## 02/27 Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 5-9

After reading this passage, I thought of the choices we all make throughout our life. Moses made a choice to follow God's demands. Interesting to think what would have happened to the Israelites if Moses had chosen to remain in Israel. Would they have remained in Egypt? Tried to leave on their own, and if so, would they have gone to Canaan or Moab?

Think of the many choices we have made during our life – as toddlers, teens, adults. Some choices are easy – what brand of toothpaste should I buy. Others become more difficult – changing jobs, moving to another area of the country, serious life-changing illness to a family member, and I could go on and on. How do our choices impact our lives and those of our family. Sometimes in retrospect, our choice is not the right one.

But we learn to live with our choices and move on.

Our ancestors made a choice to come to this country for many different reasons. Some to start a new life, some to escape persecution, some to be able to worship as they chose, and unfortunately some were brought here against their will – slaves. Think of the dilemma these persons faced, leaving loved ones, their homes to travel thousands of miles to a strange land. Many struggling to learn an unknown language, customs, food, etc. Even today there are those who chose to come to this country for the same reasons. Again choices to relocate and start a new life. Were these new visitors also given advice

from family and/or friends about what they might expect in moving to a strange country?

We, too, also have a choice in meeting strangers. Do we greet them with respect, a smile? Try to make them feel welcome or do we shun them, because they dress differently, or don't understand the language? I admit I have been part of the latter group at times and immediately regretted my actions or words spoken in haste.

Imagine not choosing God. What a bleak world that would be! Do we choose God in times of trouble, illness, death or in time of joy? God chose us – our choice is to accept him. How empty life would be without God's presence.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4

A verse learn very early in Sunday School, and one that has stayed with me ever since.

## 02/28 Jeremiah 7:23-28

In the above passage God is speaking to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah appealed in vain to the people of Judah to repent and turn back to God. He warned of the consequences of their disobedience but they would not listen. They did what they wanted. They “stiffened their neck” (New American Standard) and were rebellious. Stubbornness is a word that describes their behavior. Their sacrifices had become empty rituals. They were living a lie.

What does this passage say to us today? My thoughts went to my formative years when I remember many a time I chose not listen to my parents’ counsel but chose my own way. I stiffened my neck and rebelled. I chose to please others rather than God and I suffered the consequences of many of my actions.

Even as an adult we can be rebellious choosing our own way rather than God’s plan for our lives. We avoid those who like Jeremiah warn of the consequences of disobedience and we refuse to listen to those who try to counsel us. It is easier not to listen because if we listen, we may be convicted of our disobedience. So we, like the people of Judah, stiffen our necks and refuse to listen.

God promises, “Obey me and I will be your God and you shall be my people; only do as I say and all shall be well!” (The Living Bible) Even during the difficult times in life, God promises all shall be well—do we trust Him enough to believe His promise?

I was struck by verse 24 where it says, “They went backward instead of forward.” Have you ever felt that way in your life; I know I have. Usually it is because I am trying to do things in my own strength and not relying on God for His direction. Quick to take action rather than quick to spend time listening to God.

Life is hectic. We all have busy schedules. During this time of Lent perhaps God is asking us to take time to listen to His voice. The people of Judah wouldn’t listen or even try to hear. Are we trying to hear what God may be saying to us?

Prayer:

Dear God, we pray that you will soften our hearts and help us to listen as you speak to us this Lenten season. May we be teachable. May we be obedient. May our lives be pleasing to You.

Exercise:

Take 5 minutes during your daily devotional time and just listen. What is God trying to teach you? Will you choose to obey?

## 02/29 Hosea 14: 1-9

In the verses of Hosea, it is a time of turmoil for the people of Israel. Murder, lying, stealing and adultery are prevalent. Those in power are growing rich through the sins of the people. The people of Israel are unfaithful and are not acknowledging God.

Hosea, the prophet, whose life can be paralleled to the lives of the people of Israel, appeals to the people to return to the Lord their God. Hosea, in his relationship with his adulterous wife, has demonstrated forgiveness and mercy by reestablishing a relationship with her despite her transgressions. Such forgiveness and mercies are the same which God is applying to the people of Israel in verses 1-9.

God's compassionate approach to the transgressions of the people of Israel is dramatic in the verses of Hosea. God's punishment of continued turmoil for the people of Israel is not retaliatory but a method to restore their relationship with Him. God has allowed suffering so that recovery is possible. God has caused the turmoil in order to lead the people of Israel back to Him. Israel's struggles are an opportunity for the people to experience the compassion and the goodness which is God. Restoration is achieved when the people of Israel confess their sins and repent in humility. Healing comes to the people of Israel from God's love. The people who begin to love God and who live in the shadow of God by following His plan will heal.

The reading from Hosea is a valuable reading for the Lenten season and was an opportunity for me to consider a question which has remained unanswered for me throughout the years. Why does God allow suffering in the world? I have concluded from the reading from Hosea that human suffering can provide us with the opportunity to restore and or reaffirm our relationship with God.

### Prayer

Almighty and most merciful Father,

we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,

we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,

we have offended against thy holy laws,

we have left undone those things which we ought to have done,

and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,

spare those who confess their faults,

restore thou those who are penitent,

according to thy promises declared unto mankind

in Christ Jesus our Lord;

and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,

that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

### 03/01 Hosea 6:1-6

Come let us return to the Lord. This is the call of Hosea to Israel to return to the worship of the one true God. Israel was keeping the laws but in a superficial way. Offering burnt incense to the Lord but not taking care of the poor. Offering sacrifices but cheating their neighbors out of land. This was not the first time that the Israelites were called upon to return to the Lord. Over and over the prophets had to point out their misdeeds and to demand that they return to the Lord. Unfortunately, this is just not a story of the Old Testament. It is a story that is all too true today. We offer our burnt offerings; going to church every Sunday. On Monday, we blast our horn at the person that cut us off in traffic. We make our sacrifices; we write a check to a charity. On Wednesday, we keep our eyes averted when passing a homeless person on the street. We dishonor the love that was so freely given to us by God.

If you think back to the creation story, God loved us and created us. He gave us all the goodness of creation. He did that out of love. And then he performed an even greater sacrifice, he so loved us that he gave us free will to choose. And choose we did immediately; wrong was our choice. We just couldn't get it that he only wanted us to love him and to love our neighbors. He finally had to send his only Son to show us the way; that God truly loves us and we are saved by grace.

How then do we show God we love him? In unselfishly loving and giving to one another, we show God that we love him. How easy to write but so much harder to do. It is easier to offer burnt offerings. It is easier to offer sacrifices. But God wants our love. During this Lenten season, I am suggesting we make showing love to others a part of each day. Start small. Pray for God's help and guidance. Ask Him to help you help someone that day. Then go out and do it. Does it have to be a headliner miracle? No. Try holding the door for that person following you. Give them a smile. For some people it has been a long time since they have witnessed the kindness of strangers which is God's love working through you. Work your way up to greater help. Try stocking the shelves at a soup kitchen don't just drop off the food. Go from there. This world is crying out for help. Remember showing your love to others is showing love to God.

And that is all he wants from us.

Oh God, Creator of the entire universe, source of all goodness and love; help us to reach out to others and to show them your love through our acts of love and kindness. Amen

### 03/02 Ephesians 5:1-14

Thoughts from today's reading can be very comforting to most of us. The father loves us, and all he asks is for us to love others. We need to remember everyday that Christ died for us because of his love for us. Christ asks in return for us to love others the same as he loves you and me. Christ refers to his love for us as sweet perfume, can you imagine being loved that much? Sweet perfume, It makes me smile just thinking of that.

This reading reminds us that God told us there are some things that he would not tolerate, if we want to enter The Kingdom of Christ. Things that we should each know but might need to be reminded of, such as let there be no sex sin, nor greed. No dirty stories, foul talk, or jokes, and that each of us are asked to be aware of the sinful things and dark words that might be around us. He calls us to remember not to be fooled by those who make excuses for these sins, not even to associate with them. God reminds us that there is a wrath for such behavior.

We are each filled with the light of Christ, Christ loves each of us and it is our job to share with others this light and love. When we are with those who are not filled by this light due to sin and wickedness Christ calls upon us to love and to share our own light with them. He wants us to show others how to let Christ's light shine in their lives and to show them that God offers us forgiveness for our sins and wickedness so that all of us can enter The Kingdom of God.

What a special gift we are being given, to love others as Christ loves us. To be a part of helping others understand God's forgiveness of sin and wickedness. We are called to share God's unending love with others in this world through our own behavior and actions.

Oh God, please let our lips only say what is pleasing to your ears, let our actions show our love for you and give us forgiveness for when we fall short of your wishes so that we enter the Kingdom of Christ pleasing to in your sight

Let our own Christ light be shared with all who we meet and all whom we know. The sweet smell of perfume.

### 03/03 John 4:43-54

“The man believed what Jesus said”

Jesus tells the officer to return home – his son will live. Up to this point in the story, the officer had been begging Jesus to come with him to his son and cure him, probably thinking that this was the only way the healing could occur. And the people in Cana were probably expecting to see a miracle: this, after all, was the city where Jesus had performed his first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding. But Jesus asks, “Will none of you ever believe without seeing signs and portents?” John tells us that “the man believed what Jesus said” and then started home. Upon being met by his servants with the news that the fever left his son (at the exact hour Jesus had spoken to him), the man and his entire household become believers.

John tells us that “this was now the second sign which Jesus performed.” But what was the sign? Hadn’t Jesus just expressed impatience with people seeking signs and portents? The sign which Jesus performed was the healing of the officer’s son, and this was done with only a word. Jesus did not need to lay hands on the boy; he did not even need to be where the boy was (more than a day’s journey away). He merely had to speak the word, and the healing took place. Jesus did not do what anyone expected: he did not produce a flashy show, and he did not go to where the boy was. But he did heal the child. We may have our own expectations of how something should occur. We may even think we know the best way for something to happen. But, thank goodness, the kingdom of God is not bound by time or space, and certainly not by our expectations.

### 3/04 John 5:1-18

As we are in this season of Lent, we begin to see how our lives are filled with sin and how gracious God really is. In this passage of John 5:1-18, the healing at the pool, we are given insight to God's character. Let us take a look at Jesus' words in this passage. Jesus' first words are, "Do you want to be well?" Even though Jesus is talking to a paralytic, we can also respond to this question. This question reminds us that our lives are covered in sin that hinders us. We can even feel helpless by our life of sin as the paralytic does in this passage, but God wants to heal us from our infirmities and sins. With this question, God is giving us the opportunity to repent and be made well again. Jesus' next words are to "pick up your mat and walk." Because of God's grace the man was able to walk; however, it was done on the Sabbath which was not allowed in Jewish tradition. This shows us that God wants to forgive us and make us whole again. The man then proclaims the good work of Jesus even though he did not know that it was Jesus who had healed him. This means that we need to tell of the good events of our lives and be thankful for the many blessings that He bestows upon us. One important note is that after the healing occurs, Jesus slips into the crowds. This is a sign to remind us that we are blessed with many gifts; however, we need to humble ourselves and not be boastful. Jesus' next words are, "See you are made well. Stop sinning or something worse will happen to you." This is a reminder of the blessings that God graciously gives us and that sin can make life seem more difficult than it already is and with God's help we can repent and be made well again. Jesus' last words in this passage are, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." This is a reminder that God is always working in our lives even though we may not be able to see it. Another reminder is that God is in control of every situation and that even though a situation may seem hard at the time that God will ensure that good eventually comes out of the situation. At the end of this passage, it is important to notice that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because Jesus compared and made Himself equal to God. Jesus is allowed to make Himself equal to God because of the doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, when we try and make ourselves equal to God this is when we sin. When we sin we separate ourselves from God and then we need to truly repent. We also need to rejoice as the paralytic did when God forgives us and relieves us of our burden of sin.

#### Closing Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

I thank you for the time I have had to be in your Word. Every time I have the opportunity to be in Your Word, You open up my eyes to new insights about myself and my life. I thank you for what You have revealed to me today. Help me not to make myself equal with God today because that causes me to sin. I ask that You will forgive a sinner such as myself and make me well like the paralytic. Help me to remember that You are in control and that everything that happens to me today will be intended for good. Please make me aware of Your presence in my life especially today and continue to reveal Yourself to me as our relationship grows. I pray this in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

My grandfather was a dentist. A very good one! In fact the only dentist to serve a very small Midwestern town and it's surrounding community. It was his dream for years that his only son would, naturally, follow in his footsteps and also become a dentist. To my grandfather's everlasting dismay, his son chose to become a mechanical engineer. My grandfather, however, carried on his practice until his retirement. (His son the engineer had six children, four of whom became dentists)

Sometimes our fathers want us to learn from their teaching and claim equality with them. Do we, so often, brush off their examples, thinking that we "know better", or "I can do it myself"? Or, as in many relationships, the father teaches the son, and they become partners in their venture. Eventually the son takes over and continues the chosen work, having been given full jurisdiction.

There are numerous thoughts and memories about relationships in our own histories. Sometimes they are joyous and fond and comforting. Sometimes we grieve and weep and wonder how things could have turned out so sorrowfully. Sometimes we are so shut-down and numbed by circumstance, that we fail to have any real emotional feelings at all.

Our hope is to look beyond to the heavenly example that we see in this passage. The Son learns from the Father, and does what the Father does, because the Father loves the Son and shows him all his works. In fact the Son has been given the full jurisdiction of his Father who sent him

As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to us as he determines.

Let us rejoice in the example we have been given in this scripture and help us, through our belief and faith, to accept the Son who has been sent to us. That we might be raised from our own "dead" selves and truly hear the voice of life!

Through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Amen

This story in this reading begins at verse 1 of chapter 5 and takes place in the context of a festival in Jerusalem. At this festival Jesus heals a man who has been paralyzed for 38 years. Rather than celebrate the miracle, the religious leaders declare it unlawful because it was done on the Sabbath. In defense of the healing Jesus declares that he only does what his Father tells him to do. That only intensifies the religious leaders' anger and persecution towards Jesus. How dare Jesus claim to be the Son of God! After a few more wondrous claims about himself we pick up at verse 30 in today's reading and see Jesus listing the witnesses to the truth that he is the Son of God.

Jesus tells his opponents that God himself, John the Baptist, Jesus' signs and wonders all bear witness to the truth that he is the Son of God. Jesus further claims that the active presence of God in the lives of his followers further proves that he is the Son of God.

To his detractors Jesus declares that their refusal to believe that he is God's son demonstrates that God's word does not live in them because the scriptures also bear witness to Jesus' identity. Jesus tells his opponents anyone who really loves God would believe him. So he tells them that Moses himself testifies to Jesus' identity as Son of God; so if they don't believe in what Moses wrote why would they believe in what Jesus says.

Basically Jesus is telling his opponents that they are blind to the truth that is all around them. They don't believe because they don't want to believe. One would suppose that they don't want to believe because Jesus' doesn't meet their expectations; they had other things in mind.

Sometimes I am blind to the presence of Jesus in my life. Sometimes my blindness is just busyness, no time to see Jesus; hi ho hi ho its off to work I go. Sometimes I am blind to Jesus in my life because he comes to me asking me to change and I prefer the status quo to the unknown presence of God in my life.

Sometimes Jesus comes to me through people who bother me. They are difficult people. A friend calls these folks God's sand paper that been have sent to us to smooth out the rough places in our lives. These difficult people God calls me to love no matter how mean and nasty and hurtful they might be. God calls me to love them because God loves them and God wants to use me to love them. After all Jesus would die on the cross for the very people who persecuted him at that festival and even for selfish sinful me.

Jesus was being careful and cautious. He knew that there were people who wanted to take his life and he had to be careful for there were many who didn't believe in him. No matter what happens in life, we must show the non-believers there is a God and his will must be done.

Eventually Jesus emerges from his anonymity, and becomes public in his dealings with the temple money changes and his rebuke of the Pharises. Christ pitted himself against the religious establishment. It was questionable as to whether or not Jesus was the Christ because people new where this man came from. Also people expected more miracles from the Christ than this man was producing

In our daily lives there are and probably always will be, people who don't believe in you, who question what you're doing, how you're doing it and why. There are those who don't understand, don't believe, don't care and are not compassionate. Life is full of these obstacles and these people. We can be more like Peter by eliminating all other spiritual options and put our faith in the "Holy One of God".

Jesus pitted himself against the religious establishment, but followed the Jewish religious observances of his day; speaking against the religious leaders only when their spirits were hollow and their behavior arrogant.

The reading for today concerns an invitation that the Lord made at the feast of tabernacles in Jerusalem, which is followed by statements to the effect that those who heard Him were amazed at what He had said, and went and told the authorities (the chief priests and Pharisees). The authorities did not react kindly, and when Nicodemus stood up for Him, they challenged his loyalties. The reading ends with the words "And everyone went to his own house" suggesting that there was no resolution to the issue.

The Lord's invitation was this: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." What does that mean? How is it that not just water, but "living" water can flow out of someone's heart? It would be easy to say that Jesus was speaking allegorically or perhaps just using flowery language to get some concept across; but that would be to miss the point entirely. Every Christian acknowledges that the Bible is the Word of God. If the Bible is the Word of God (given to us through the agency of others: Moses, the prophets, the evangelists, etc.), then it necessarily follows that it must have Divine truth within it, both in general and in particular. To me, the three key words in the above invitation are: heart, living and water. First, we all speak of the heart with relation to intentions and loves as for instance: "she has a good heart", meaning that she intends well. The second word, living, (as well as life, and eternal life) is used extensively in the Bible to refer to heaven. A single example of this is: "If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire" (Matthew 18:8). The third word is water. In essence, water is what we use to clean ourselves and help sustain our life. Perhaps, then, in a spiritual sense, water is what cleans and sustains our spirits, and that would be truths that we learn from the Bible. With that in mind, it seems to me that the Lord's invitation to us in the above reading could be interpreted as follows: if you desire it (thirst), go to the Bible (come to Me, who in the beginning was the Word) and learn truths (drink). If you do what you learn there (believe in Me), He will create in you a love (heart) for heavenly truths (living waters).

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

03/09 Romans 6:16-23

Sometimes when writers are making a point they use too many words and the words that they use might be stronger or harsher than necessary. Paul often does that and perhaps especially in this reading.

British Bishop N.T. Wright suggests Paul is telling us readers that there are two kinds of slavery and two kinds of roads that we can follow. We can be a slave to sin and all its destructive and life-limiting patterns or we can be slaves righteousness. We can live our lives for good or for bad. We can live our lives for life or for death.

We have been created in the image of God with free will. We get to choose which road to take.

A Spiritual Exercise

In what ways do I choose death over life, sin over righteousness? How does that affect my life? Is there some habit or behavior to which I am a slave?

A Prayer

God grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;

Courage to change the things I can;

And wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as He did, this sinful world

As it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that He will make all things right

If I surrender to His Will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life

And supremely happy with Him

Forever in the next. Amen.

## 03/10 John 8:1-11

Ah, Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. How many times have we heard this story? It's the story of a woman who was accused of something that would cause her to be put to death, but it becomes the story of the grace of Jesus. The Pharisees have once again tried to trap Jesus into saying the wrong thing, and are using Jewish law and the fear of Roman rule to do it.

Jesus certainly knew the law. He knew that the law stated that the parties involved in adultery should be stoned (by the way, where was the man?) But, he also knew that the Jews under Roman rule had no power to kill someone. If He said the woman should not be killed, He would be in direct opposition to the Law. He would lose His credibility as a Teacher. But if He said she should be stoned, then He was in danger from the Romans. The Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, would love to have evidence that Jesus was setting himself against Roman rule so they could hand him over to the Romans as a troublemaker. This way they could get rid of Him without getting their hands dirty by doing it themselves. Talk about having your cake and eating it too.

The Pharisees were very self-important people. They just knew that they were the best Jews ever! They were people who felt that everyone should be looking to them for guidance and listening to every word they said. They were so wrapped up in the Law that they couldn't see the forest for the trees. They only saw the Law. They only knew the Law. They were convinced that they followed the Law precisely, and that by following every commandment and every single rule that they were justified. They were very good at finding the sin in others, very good at pointing out the faults and failings of others. But did they have any idea that they weren't close to righteousness?

They had become so hung up on the minute details of the Law that they forgot that the Law was about living the kind of life that God wanted. They were so busy judging others and pointing out the when others had sinned that they totally missed the big picture. The Law was about more than dietary rules and who you could eat with and whether you washed your hands properly. It was about being the kind of person that God wanted them to be. They were so caught up in their feelings of superiority that they forgot all about mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus once again saw that he had an opportunity to make a point. He could try to show the Pharisees that strict adherence to the Law wasn't the way to salvation. That only through God's grace can righteousness and salvation be obtained.

How often do we find ourselves in the role of the Pharisees, both as individuals and as a Church? Or a community? A country? It is often so easy to think that we know what is best, what is right. That we are doing it right, and everyone else is some kind of sinner. And even if we acknowledge that we are sinners, well at least we aren't as bad as the other guy. The other guy is a much worse sinner than we are.

But Jesus used this situation to point out that we are all sinners and in need of God's grace. Even the Pharisees, who tried to follow the Law perfectly, finally had to acknowledge that they weren't up to the task alone. They had to acknowledge that they were sinners, just as we have to acknowledge the same thing. We can't get anywhere without God's grace. If we try it on our own, thinking that all the good things we do are enough, then we run the risk of becoming just like the Pharisees – so hung up on what WE are doing that we forget that we need to turn to God and accept His grace and forgiveness before we can obtain righteousness and salvation.

### 03/11 John 8:21-30

In contemplating this passage, I have found myself in curious sympathy with the Jews, which feels like an embarrassing admission. How could I possibly feel for these stubborn people who questioned what Jesus was all about? Well, in struggling to understand John 8:21-30, I confess that I not only sympathize with the Jews, but wonder to what extent I might be like them.

Jesus says, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going you cannot come." For those of us who know the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, this part is easy. Jesus will die and rise again and join his father in glory. But why did Jesus say that these Jews would search for him? If they didn't believe in him, didn't understand him, why would they search for him? It even sounds like if they did search for him, they would die in their sin anyway. What's going on with that? I have no idea, but the Jews are less concerned with why they'd be searching for Jesus than with where he is going. "Is he going to kill himself?" they wondered. It's a reasonable question for someone without the benefit of hindsight. It's a question that suggests that these people were thinking, were processing, were trying to understand what Jesus was saying to them, but they just couldn't wrap their minds around it all. Sometimes neither can I.

Jesus continued. "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." The Jews quickly followed up with another question, the most important question: "Who are you?" they asked. To us, it seems like the stupidest of questions and we wonder how these people could have missed what was right in front of them. But if I imagine for a moment what it was like to hear these words without first knowing all about Jesus, then I begin to appreciate something new about this crowd of listeners. They didn't give up. They kept listening, kept trying to make sense of what Jesus was telling them, and most importantly, they kept asking questions, hard questions, questions that went right to the heart of belief. And Jesus kept responding.

Maybe these people, as some commentaries suggest, couldn't understand Jesus because they were not open to what he had to say, could not believe who he was. Perhaps that is why Jesus responded so harshly to their question. "Why do I speak to you at all? I have much to say about you and much to condemn." Yet still they remain to listen as Jesus tries to explain, yet again, his relationship to the father. Amazingly, at the end of the passage we learn, "As he was saying these things, many believed in him."

Like the Jews in John's Gospel, I am slow to understand Jesus. I sympathize with their confusion, with their problem of listening without hearing, with their difficulty in fully fathoming the gift of revelation right in front of them. Yet, I hope that I will always continue to engage Jesus in conversation, to bear his condemnation of my sin and lack of understanding, and to ask questions that will help me grow in my belief. .

### 03/12 John 8:31-42

Jesus continues in his efforts to bring God's message to the people, speaking to small groups at a time. It appears to be an extremely frustrating experience. He meets with constant disbelief and criticism, often being chastised for speaking in opposition to what is believed to be the word of God. In these verses, however, he speaks to "the Jews who had believed in him." He tells them that if they "continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." This statement, though, seems to bring disagreement and a lack of understanding. The Jews argue that they are free already, because they are descendants of Abraham. They appear to return to the human side of their experience and their inability to see the difference between being descended from human flesh and the larger truth, that all humanity is descended from God. Jesus tries to use logic to bring them to understand his message, but it seems to me that he is once again frustrated in his attempt to make his message clear, and he is back to "square one." His words, even though he spoke with the authority of God, as "one who came forth from God," did not bring recognition of who he is. Certainly, he did not measure up to the hope and expectation of those who looked for a savior in their time. These were simple people whose higher authority in their earthly existence was always in the form of a monarch, one who ruled with power usually obtained through fear and violence. The best they hoped for was one who would rule with the authority of a God who would allow them to live a life in comfort, without the fear and violence they had experienced. The message from Jesus that his kingdom was not of this world was beyond their comprehension. What words, indeed, could Jesus use in speaking to these people that they would understand who he was---that he was flesh and blood only during his time among them, but that he was, in fact, the manifestation of the God, the power that was, and is, and will be from the beginning of time for a world without end.

I find some measure of comfort in Jesus' frustration. So many times in my own life, I found myself in conversations and discussions with various groups and individuals during which I tried to find the right words to bring the comfort of faith, to provide an expansion or new dimension of faith, or to cause a non-believer in Christ, or someone with no faith at all to consider the idea, the truth, of God. How frustrating it was, and still is, to find my words were usually so completely inadequate, so seemingly uninspired. It seems that I should have some divine assistance when speaking of God, which would cause the other person, or persons to consider what I say has merit and is worthy of their consideration. That Jesus may have experienced the same frustration is comforting to me. Not everyone to whom he spoke responded as did the thousands who gathered to hear his "sermon on the mount." Yet, his message did find its way into the hearts and minds of millions and still holds the truth for Christians---and humanity---today.

". . .still holds the truth..." is what seems to me to be the key. How many times does Christ speak of the truth; how many times does he say, "truly, I say to you?" In just these few verses (31-42) the words "truth" and "truly" appear six times. Jesus never changed his message; he didn't "water it down" or adjust it to make his teaching a little more palatable or to be more politically correct. Also, Jesus lived in a manner true to his teachings. He spoke of his death, and he did not turn away from the truth of that terrible event. To discern the truth and to speak it freely, always consistently and without "adjustment" depending on where and to whom one is speaking, seems to be the key for us in our time in spreading the message of Christ.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give me the wisdom to know the truth and the courage to speak of it. Help me through my life, my deeds and my words to impart to others your truth, that their lives may be the richer for having known me.  
Amen

Optional Exercise: Today, make a phone call or send a note to at least one person, who may be going through a rough time, either physically or emotionally. Let the comfort of your own faith in a loving, caring God be known through your words.

Jesus boldly states who he is before the Pharisees. The Pharisees have been baiting him in the temple, trying to get him to say something that they can use against him. They believe that Jesus is lying, for Jesus is claiming that whoever keeps His word will never know death. Wait a minute they cry, Abraham was faithful to God and he died. Then Jesus tells those listening that he, Jesus, has always existed. Abraham had seen this and rejoiced.

God has always existed. Jesus is clearly claiming that God is his Father, and like his Father, he also has always existed. He used the same words that God used to Moses, I AM. He is timeless like God.

This was blasphemous to the Pharisees. Jesus was challenging their beliefs. Their ethnicity was being challenged. Belief in Abraham, their father, had always been a major focus for the Jews. Jesus establishes his own heritage. The Son of God instead of the sons of Abraham. Jesus is pointing out that Abraham had faith in God. People need to keep their faith and focus on God. Somewhere along the way the focus of faith had shifted. The focus was no longer on God and his word.

Enraged by Jesus' claims, they picked up rocks to throw at him but He had slipped out of the temple.

Two questions come to me in this passage. The first is has my faith ever shifted from its focus on God? Yes and no. My belief in God has always been a part of me. This belief has never wavered. However, when I think about my life I am honest in saying that my focus has not always been on God. My faith and focus has grown over the years. When I first started going to church I did it because that was the right thing to do. I went to church but didn't pay attention to the words. It was more social for me. Then I gradually listened to what was being said, and my focus did change. God's love for us is overwhelming to me. I willingly want to follow his word. I want to reach out and love God and my neighbor. Was this what it was like for the Pharisees? Did they realize they had lost their focus on God, and were they really mad at themselves when they went to throw rocks at Jesus?

The other question that comes to me is what if God did not meet my expectations? Jesus is telling everyone in the temple that he is the Son of God. Imagine the reaction most of the people must have had. Here is a simple man, a carpenter, making this claim. The Jews had spent most of their years in Israel building a large temple to honor God. They are now face to face with God. Jesus certainly does not fit their image. Would I have had the same reaction? If He didn't fit my vision would I have wanted to pick up stones and throw him from the temple also? I would have wanted him to be everything I expected him to be. I would then have been putting my wants first. I also would have been going against the word of God.

Dear kind and gracious Lord, I was born a child of grace. Thank you for helping me keep my focus on you and your Word. Grant me the strength to not let my faith shift, and to share your love. To know that all because of you, I am.

## 03/14 John 10:31-42

The Jews were about to stone Jesus because they didn't understand. He was accused of blasphemy because he called himself "God". He argued against them by citing Psalms and then telling them not to believe he was God because he said so, but because of his works. Then he escaped and went across the Jordan where many believed him.

My first thought was of how cruel and barbaric this seemed. People were actually about to stone to death, our Lord. While it was the prescribed punishment for blasphemy, the visual picture of Jesus about to be stoned is unnerving. I suppose it's no worse than the horror of the crucifixion. But over time we have accepted that cruelty as the means to our salvation, something that was supposed to happen.

My second thought was that this story is not one of a typical hero who walks away victoriously. Jesus was accused of a crime, tried to argue his way out of it, didn't get their buy-in, and then escaped, snuck away to a place where he was better appreciated. It doesn't show the Jews coming to their senses. It doesn't show them recognizing Jesus as the Son of God. It doesn't even show them being swayed by his arguments. It shows Jesus "running away".

So if this passage is not to show Jesus convincing the Jews and being triumphant, what is the message?

Would we recognize Jesus if we ran into him? If he told us who he was and said he was the Son of God, would we believe him? I've always struggled with that question. Many cult followers have believed in someone that, obviously to us, wasn't God. How do you reconcile faith and belief with modern day skepticism and an over abundance of fraud? I'd like to think that my faith is strong enough and that I would be "smart" enough to recognize him. My fear is that I would not.

Jesus told the Jews to believe in his works as a demonstration of God, not in the words he uses. I think this message comes through stronger in other parts of the Bible, but it's still here. Show God in you, by the things you do. Let others recognize God, in you, by what you have done. And even more importantly recognize God, in others, by what they have done. Get past their appearance, their social status, the color of their skin, perceived ulterior motives and plays for attention, their words, and all the other things that make us criticize and doubt the genuineness of others.

I don't think God only shows himself through a priest, a nun, a vestry member, a long time church go'er, a nurse or other "good person". I think sometimes he can show himself in the drug addict who is looking out for a friend, the gothic dressed teenager with spiked hair who works two jobs to help support his ailing mother, the gruff tattoo covered roughneck who puts his daughter to bed and says her prayers with her, the receptionist with the rough disposition that is working and taking care of a sick child...

Collect

Dear God who has shown yourself in the works of your Son,  
We pray that we may look past the things that distract us in others,  
So that we may recognize You, in them, through their works.  
We also pray for your direction and guidance,  
So that You may be shown through us, in our works.  
Amen.

Spiritual Exercise

Think about a person that you have thought negatively about in the past week. It doesn't have to be someone that you had an argument with or a long-standing dislike. It could simply be the person you passed by and thought "what a bum, how can they act like that, dress like that, listen to that music, wear that much make-up, have all those tattoos and piercings, etc.

Then try to come up with one positive thing that they have done, one thing that might be God coming through. It might not be easy. You may even have to have a conversation with them, find out about them, and get to know them.

If you ran into God, would you recognize him - through the works of another?

There have been times in my life that I am simply amazed at how God works through us. In simple and seemingly insignificant acts that occur everyday we connect with others as part of God's master plan.

About 4 1/2 years ago I was pregnant with my 1st baby. As many first time parents I wanted to know and learn everything I could before the birth of this little miracle. I read books, talked with friends who had children and took whatever classes I needed to be prepared. I needed to be the best parent that I could be for this baby because I didn't know what I was doing.

I also felt it very important that my spouse attend all the same classes and read the books. This was going to be an equal partnership because we were in this together. We attended weeks of classes on giving birth, breathing, baptism and child care. Brian came along to everything with only a small amount of coaxing. As the weeks to the due date drew closer I was definitely getting worried that we weren't prepared. At times like these I tend to get more intense and Brian always remains calm.

The last class that I had us scheduled for was the Breastfeeding class. The instructor told me how important it was that the husbands attend so that they knew what was going on and how best to help and support you. We had this class scheduled for weeks, when a few days before the class Brian tells me that he doesn't think he wants to go to the class, that doesn't perhaps need to go. To my utter amazement, didn't have a hard time with this. As we talked I couldn't believe that I seemed ok with it, calm almost. This was not like me whatsoever, in retrospect there was something greater than me leading me through this in spite of myself.

The night of the class came and I went by myself, took notes, asked questions and learned that I wasn't the only one in the class that came alone. About halfway through the class the fire alarm went off. About 25 class attendants, mostly pregnant woman waddled up the stairs and outside. The first thing I did was look for a place to sit down. As I sat on a bench I was lamenting that I was alone as I watched the other couples chatting. In front of me was another pregnant woman who I offered a seat. She gladly took it, her name was Sara. As we started to chat we learned that we had much in common. We were due on the same week, we both hoped that our husbands were busy painting the nursery, and that we both came alone. We laughed and chatted until the class was sent back into the building. As we decided to exchange phone numbers we discussed where we lived. In the most unbelievable coincidence we lived one block from each other. We kept in touch soon after the birth of our children and have remained close ever since. Sara has been a very good friend and has helped me through parenting issues and been a great sounding board for me. When I think back about how we first met I am sure that God knew that I needed this friendship in his Master plan. Had I pressed Brian to come to the class, as is my nature, I would never have met Sara and this valuable friendship would not have happened. Having only lived in the area a short time and being the kind of person who needs good friends. Only God really knew how much I needed her friendship in my life.

As God spoke through Caiaphas to fulfill His ultimate plan for Jesus, He also speaks through each of us everyday to help us on our journey through our Master Plan.

Take this Lenten season as an opportunity to be aware of how God works through us. Times when we do things that we wouldn't normally do, that doesn't seem to make sense but later it all comes clear. Instead of thinking of them as coincidences let us think of them as God-incidences.

**03/16 Isaiah: 45:21-25**

Isaiah brings us the God who says it loud and clear: "I am the only God there is." We need this God. This God is absolute. Today, all is relative. We have come through an era in which certainty and steadfastness have suffered erosion. One little rule, one little tenet at a time, our certainty has become uncertain; our "sure-thing" has become only "possible" or "likely."

God says, in Isaiah: "My promise is true." Once again nothing is relative here: God is not saying "My promise is most likely true," or "Let's wait and see how things play out."

How important is it for us to know this God, who is the only

God, and whose promise is true? As in the story "It's A Wonderful Life," picture our living without this God, who is the only God, and whose promise is true. In this world we live in, we are constantly under attack: sickness strikes us or a family member, and we are forced to face the possibility of losing a loved one; disappointment weakens our belief in ourselves, or others whom we count on; calamity, natural or man-produced, makes us fear for the future our children will face on this planet.

All these things can break us down, until we remember Isaiah: "I am the only God there is, My promise is true..." Within us, we can carry those words as a shield, and an antidote to the ills and failures that attack us.

As Isaiah reveals to us just who God is, we also see who we are. "Everyone will come and kneel before me and vow to be loyal to me." God gives, God expects. God provides us with certainty to guide us through this uncertain world, and God therefore expects us to do our part. At any given moment in our daily lives, can we say we are "kneeling before Him," and offering our loyalty to Him. The answer should be yes. But alas, so often our response to our daily ups and downs is not to remember God, but to react as if we had forgotten Him. But how can we possibly forget "...the only God there is," whose "promise is true." In our time of need, how could we possibly be not reaching for our strength, "...the only God there is?"

Well, God made us the way we are; sometimes thoughtless, sometimes weak in our resolve, sometimes down right stupid, even nasty. Because human is what we are, what we find here in Isaiah is so important for us to carry with us as our strength: the absolute certainty that "I am the only God there is, my promise is true."

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PRAYER:

God Gives, God Expects

O God, in this world so fraught with turmoil give us the strength to understand that through You all things are possible.

Keep us in Your heart and let us remember that in spite of all we face in our daily lives that your words to Isaiah, "My promise is true" will help us to persevere.

Come into our hearts, fill us with Your love so we can be worthy of Your many gifts. Amen

### 03/17 Hebrews 11:39-12:3

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witness, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Faith ---Do you have tough faith

Think of what was taking place when the above passage was written. Christians were facing torture and persecution, and with this constant pressure, most Christians had a hard time keeping their faith. As I sit here preparing this devotion and having just watched a football game; I can't help but think that Hebrews 12 is like a pep talk to the Christians of that day. Think of the Christians that came before you and keep your eyes on the goal; fix your eyes on Jesus who in essence voluntarily died for us on the cross. Jesus led the way so that we will obtain the better plan God has for us.

When all seems lost and dark does your belief in God against all odds help you to hang in there no matter what?

We all are separated from our comfort zone from time to time either through various circumstances that affect our lives. Some of which are the loss of a job, sickness, death, or conflict. These life changing situations can be looked at as opportunities to increase our faith in God and put our trust in him.

It was a cold day in January, many years ago, when we were at the annual meeting at our church in Erie. Our 18 month old son was running and playing in the church hall when he fell. He was complaining that his back hurt. When we took a look at his back, he had a bruise the size of a basketball. When we looked further his legs were also bruised. We decided to take him home and call the doctor in the morning. At that time there was no internet.

In talking to my mother who was a nurse, she suggested that we take him to the hospital immediately. So off we went not knowing what could be wrong, but believing that everything would turn out fine. They admitted him to the hospital and their initial thought was he had leukemia. Just the thought of this stirred our worst fears. That night as we stay by his bedside in the hospital we prayed and put all of our trust in God to heal our son. We hoped that we would have doctors that God could work his miracle through. Through tests they were able to rule out leukemia. However the other shoe dropped when they determined he had a rare blood disease, ITP. Any bruise especially in his skull and he could bleed to death. That's when our church family kicked in. They found a soft helmet for his head, they showed their support with phone calls and meals and they helped to reinforce our faith and trust for God by their prayers.

With God's help and well trained doctors our son was cured. To this day our faith remains strong and whenever a situation occurs that, tests our faith, we know that we can trust in God to carry us through those hard times.

A Prayer

Dear Lord, no matter what our present circumstances, give us the faith to trust you in them. We just don't want to get by. We want to see you in our very difficult circumstances to come through in your great and impossible ways. Only you can help us out. We wait on you, our faithful one. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

### 03/18 1 Corinthians 1:18-23

It's all around us. Buy this, use that, think this, and fear that. You are considered a crazy person if you speak the gospel with passion. You are an outcast if you pray in public schools and a fundamentalist if you pray before dinner in a public place. It is not considered politically correct to celebrate Christmas for its origin. The world today thinks you are foolish to follow the message of the Cross. The wise are those who are pursuing wealth and the advance of technology without acknowledgement of the Creator. We are to be self-reliant and autonomous from one another and God. We are foolish to follow the Gospel and give our lives to Christ- to truly believe the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified and died for all of mankind's sins.

The force of our world constantly pushes against our efforts to place our lives in God's hands and to pronounce God's "foolishness" as the One True Wisdom. Our own skepticism and desire for signs overpowers our ability to fully accept God's grace. We want to have it all figured out with lightning bolt sized signs guiding our paths. Maybe we will believe in God's wisdom when someone we love is healed. Or perhaps we will keep our distance until our questions are answered. The problem with this method is that it puts us in God's place and God in our place. Our tendency to believe we know the all the answers causes additional separation from one another and from God. This was not Jesus' message.

It's scary to give up control and place our burdens in someone else's hands. It's a habit for many of us to cling to our anxieties instead of believing in God's ultimate sufficiency. I particularly have difficulty letting go and accepting that I cannot fully control my children and their choices, protect them, or fix what mistakes they will inevitably make. We have to remember God's Grace was given to us with Christ's sacrifice. We are ALL God's children and must trust that his grace is sufficient for ALL of our needs. What a quandary for humanity, especially because we struggle to humble ourselves and admit our own insufficiencies. We all seem to be Grace killers.

Our children look to us to for answers and have an uncanny ability to weed out hypocrisy in their small world. Humanity's "wisdom" has concocted rules regarding society, religion, and politics and our hypocrisy and shortcomings are ever prevalent. This makes it so difficult for us to buy into what is a heart changing and lifesaving relationship with GOD. How tragic as that relationship will never be hypocritical and is the ultimate truth.

So it is for us to take that Leap of Faith, during this Lenten Season and always, and on bended knee exclaim that man's wisdom is folly and God's wisdom is what will save us and set us free.

Prayer:

Father, Thank you for your gift of forgiveness and the life that is mine through faith in Jesus Christ. Forgive me when I allow the false wisdom of the world dictate my feelings towards you, my behavior towards others, and my doubts and fears concerning your love for me. While the world may continue to deny your love, mercy, and grace, give me the strength to confess Christ's name and proclaim my faith. Keep me from being fearful of what others may think about you and your gift of salvation and let me boldly live my confession of faith so that others may see your love and come to know you in their own lives. Help me to take a daily "Leap of Faith" and declare your Ultimate Wisdom that saves us and sets us free.

### 03/19 Hebrews 9:11-15,24-28

Sacrifice—an act of offering to a deity something precious, especially the killing of a victim on an altar; destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else; a bunt or fly in baseball that enables a runner to advance or score (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary)

Sacrifice was the topic of the recent Rob Bell talk that I went to with some other Trinity parishioners. The talk/sermon was entitled "The Gods Are Not Angry". Rob talked about the legend/myth/history of man's relationship with "the gods". He discussed how woman first got the notion that there was a force out there that made things like the rain fall and the plants grow and babies be born, and fire to work, etc. Then he talked about how we figured that it would be a good thing to thank those gods when good things happened and that we should also offer stuff to the gods to make them happy when things were going bad...in the hopes that things would get better again. And how this got to be a never ending cycle where the stakes got higher and higher.

Into this world stepped Abraham. He had one God who was in charge of everything. On the top of Mt. Gerizim, God ended that practice of offering people as sacrifices when he stopped Abraham from killing Issac. He started the Covenant with Abraham and He then kicked off the official program of sanctioned sacrifices that became the Hebrew's way of cleansing, atonement, thanksgiving, etc. Seven chapters in Leviticus are spent explaining what can be offered, how it should be prepared and who offers it. There are peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. Job security was provided for the many priests and temple workers who had to administer these sacrifices. The rules for the sacrifices are finished on page 130 of the Old Testament in my Bible. The Old Testament in my Bible ends on page 1163. That's over 1000 pages which somehow equates to many thousands of years of sacrifices given over and over and over. And after all that time and all those sacrifices, we still didn't get how to live by the Covenant.

Then along came Jesus. We know the story of his life and his ministry. Now we're down to the nitty gritty. It's Holy Week. Jesus is about to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice for everybody...for everything...for all time. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices! He did it on Calvary so that we don't have to do it anymore. Not because we're lazy and weren't following the rules, but because he's perfect, he's God, and he wants us to know that he does the ultimate for us.

Every week, we reenact his sacrifice. Not because the sacrifice has to be done over and over, but instead to remind us of his love for us. And every year during Holy Week, we reenact the triumph of his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his example for us on Maundy Thursday to the horror of Good Friday. And every year on Easter, the happiest day of the year, I cry. I cry with joy that he did what he did for me, so long ago, once and for all. Thank you Jesus.

In John 13, we read that Jesus knows His time on earth is coming to a close and His mission for the Father is almost complete. He also knows that He must teach the disciples the lesson of leading by serving. After supper, Jesus took the basin of water and a towel in preparation for washing the feet of his disciples, even the feet of Judas, who Jesus knew would soon betray him. When Jesus comes to Peter, Peter doesn't understand why his teacher is now becoming his servant. Jesus explains to him that if he does not wash Peter's feet then he will not be a part of Him, or his plan to be one who will spread God's word. Jesus also notes that not all of those present are clean. When He says this, he is allowing Judas the opportunity to know that what is in his heart is known to Jesus.

More importantly, the Washing of the Feet is an example of what God wants all of us to do on a daily basis. God has given us the calling to be responsible for our own personal lives and to serve the others we encounter everyday. Jesus shows us in this passage that a teacher, or leader, is not to feel that they are better than those who they guide. Each one of us has been called by God to use our gifts of knowledge and experience to guide others down the path of goodness. Everyday we have the opportunity, and responsibility to lead by example. We have all been asked to serve and learn from others, even though they may not be someone who is endeared to us. We have a responsibility to God and to ourselves to watch and learn from everyone. Even a seemingly insignificant deed; which is done for the good of another, is done for the Glory of God.

This reading also conveys to us that no one is so powerful, or so insignificant, that they cannot step back and take the time to be a part of someone else's journey in life. As Children of God, we are all members of the same family. With that in mind, would you not take every opportunity to guide, care for and learn from your family? This is a basic human instinct and if we always remain conscious of our humanity – caring for others will become second nature to us all. We must always be aware that as we learn, we teach. Every time that we become enlightened by something we learn, that lesson is now ours to share with another. This is what God wants from each of his children, to be as Jesus was at the Last Supper.

Prayer: God, help me to always find the way to learn the lessons that You have put before me, and never to dismiss the opportunity to find the path that will bring me closer to Your Kingdom. As a shepherd leads his flock, The Lord will lead us safely though the dangers of our daily life. We have but to heed our Shepherd's instructions. Lord, show me the way, I will promise to try and follow. Amen.

## 03/21 John 19:1-37

Today in Jerusalem pilgrims will retrace the journey that Jesus took to his crucifixion.

In the gospel of John, we too are observers of the events that unfolded 2000 years ago. It is almost as if we are there: listening as Pilate interrogates Jesus, amongst the crowd outside the Praetorium, walking the narrow streets to Golgotha, and then keeping watch with the women at the Cross during the agonizing last hours. We hear the words "It is finished." We follow Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as they prepare Jesus' body for burial and place it in a garden tomb. We also know that many of the disciples, who out of fear for their own lives, have scattered and remain hidden.

As I read the gospel and imagine myself in Jerusalem, I am struck by the sheer humanness of that day. In my humanness I identify with the participants in the drama, in my humanness I too must walk my own way of the cross.

First, Pilate, symbol of the authority of Rome, to whom Jesus is brought for judgment. He has Jesus flogged as a troublemaker but can find no reason to condemn him to death. Pilate's position as governor is in jeopardy, any misstep is sure to be reported to Rome, and he has the mob at the gate. Caught in a trap of insecurity and fear he is unable to condemn or release Jesus. He washes his hands of the whole affair and gives in to the strident voices calling for Jesus' death.

How many times have I, like Pilate, not followed my inner truth and let insecurity and fear dictate my actions?

Secondly, there is the crowd together with the chief priests. When Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns, is brought to them, they are quick to mock and shout "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him." To Pilate's question "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answer, "We have no king but the emperor."

How many times have I been swayed by the majority view or given in to what I perceive as outside pressure instead of carving out my own path? And how easy it is for us to tell others what they must do but take no responsibility for ourselves.

We look on as a beaten and suffering Jesus carries the cross of his own death to the place of execution. Jesus is treated like a common criminal. The method of his execution is calculated to serve as a warning, to instill terror in the populace.

We are at Golgotha, the Crucifixion, the women weep, the agony, and then "It is finished." Why has this happened, surely it cannot be true? He is man, human; he has become one with us. He has bound himself to suffering and struggling humanity.

As I walk my own way of the cross, with my own places of failure and need within, must I let go and trust? In a culture that idealizes self-sufficiency and individualism, dare I show my neediness and vulnerability? When I see evil as only existing in "others," am I being false to myself? When I put on the face of righteousness, does pride have control of my heart?

In my humanness I take my place amongst the throngs of sinners. If the way of the cross is to teach me anything it is to recognize my powerlessness and come to that place of self surrender, the daily Calvaries of life.

Lord, teach us to understand that your Son died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live as he did, who died to himself. George MacDonald

## 03/22 John 19:38-42

We have arrived at the end of Holy Week, which is called Holy Saturday. This is the day between Christ's death and resurrection. The solemn yet reflective day our crucified Lord was placed in a borrowed tomb. Joseph of Aramathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, which Pilate granted to him. Joseph then took the body away to be buried. Nicodemus also came to help Joseph prepare Christ's body for burial with a mixture of myrrh, aloes and cloth wrappings. The body was finally laid to rest in a dark tomb and sealed with a stone.

We can only imagine the darkness and quietness of the tomb. We can only imagine the feelings of grief and abandonment among the followers of Jesus. We can only imagine what kind of thoughts were going through the minds of Joseph and Nicodemus as they prepared their Lord to be buried. This is a place of death and darkness. A place where none of us like to be because it makes us feel uncomfortable. We may even find ourselves wondering why we have been brought to such a place.

As Christians, we sometimes encounter times of spiritual darkness. Times in which we feel we have been abandoned or forgotten. Or perhaps in places like the desert where our well has run dry. We may even go through times of trial or find ourselves stuck in jobs where we are unhappy. It is in times and places like these that we need to pause and realize there is divine plan in progress. No matter what we are going through, God will never abandon or forsake us. We especially need to remember that God always has our best interest in mind and will place us right where we need to be at the right time.

The Scriptures tell us that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day. We also know this day as the Jewish Sabbath. We take this day, Holy Saturday, not only to remember our Lord and Savior but also family, friends and the faithful. We also remember those who have given their lives for the cause of Christ and we pray for those who are persecuted for believing in our risen Lord.

Praise the Lord we can look to the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ, which comes at sunrise on Easter Sunday when we can boldly say: The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!!

## 03/24 Matthew 28:9-15

Notorious celebrity. Missing body. Bribery. Political cover-up. The Easter resurrection story has all the makings of a modern-day scandal.

Mary Magdalene and Mary have just left the empty tomb, where a miracle has occurred amidst earthquakes and angels, while the priests and elders are engaging in a conspiracy to explain away this phenomenon. They've paid a large bribe to the soldiers at the tomb to insure their silence and avoid the unwanted attention of the governor. So began a cover-up that was perpetuated for eons, like some of our own national scandals.

I have often wondered what today's society would make of this Easter miracle. Would the New York Times publish the headline: "RABBLE-ROUSER'S BODY MISSING: COMPLICITY OF DISCIPLES SUSPECTED"? Would this dominate the cable news channels and Internet for weeks on end and generate show after show of "talking heads" to present reasons why this event could or could not happen? Would people's belief or disbelief seriously divide the country, just like the O.J. verdict or the 2000 Presidential election?

More often, though, I wonder how many day-to-day miracles occur in the form of a Jesus who becomes, only for a moment, the stranger that we meet on the street, or on an airplane, or during an average day at school. Is he just like the assorted characters of the (now canceled) television show Joan of Arcadia, who turned up at the oddest times and places to give Joan advice in the form of confusing riddles (like Jesus' parables of old)?

Was it Jesus who stopped me two weeks ago on Walnut Street in Philadelphia, in the form of a homeless man looking ragged and weary? Was it Jesus asking for enough money to get a room for the night? And when I said no (even before asking how much he needed) but gave him \$10 for a meal, was it an angry and disappointed Jesus who tried to give the money back because it wasn't enough for what he needed?

And if it really was Jesus, what was he thinking while I walked away, shaking my head at the audacity of a homeless man to complain about being given \$10? Was it Jesus who let me get no further than half a block before I suddenly felt ashamed and embarrassed about not helping him in the way he needed?

And yesterday, when I met the next homeless person on a frigid winter's day, was it Jesus who caused me to reach in my wallet and give him exactly what he asked for?

No, this time I think it was me.

COLLECT/PRAYER:

Lord, throughout the ages you have manifested yourself on earth in countless ways. Help us to remember that Jesus appeared and lived amongst us as a fellow human being. Please remind us that he may be the next person we meet and guide our behavior so that we always do your will.

**Amen**

### 03/25 John 20:11-18

I believe the angels were guarding the tomb, just in case any of his followers would think of doing this. I would imagine when Mary saw the angels she was quite taken by the visual manifestation, as I do not believe she had previously seen a vision from above. The angels could not understand her weeping, her sadness. I believe its because they knew how wonderful the afterlife with God was.

Jesus also asked "Woman why are you weeping?" indicating to me, do not be sad, this is the plan He was willing and happily ready to fulfill.

The other thing that struck me was that the vision of Jesus was not obvious, he seemed to look to her as a common servant, possibly the gardener. When he called her name "Mary!" the explanation point seemed like a slight reprimand, like she was trying to interrupt the plan he was to follow.

He told her to spread the word instead of being sad. He wanted her to make it clear that he was supposed to do this, to ascend to his Father...he wanted her to emphase "OUR Father... his God ,OUR God " and He would then be sitting at the right hand of God. He wanted the word spread from his disciples and everyone to speak of his teachings as this would be proof that he was infact the Son of God.

He made it clear not to touch him and try to move him. "Do not hold on to me" meaning to let go of the sadness, and be glad of His life and what He was telling people, an example of how God wanted the people of the world to act.

I think in our personal life we tend to be sad at the deaths of our loved ones, for our own reasons and instead should be happy of their everlasting life.

I tend to fall in that trap and also to feel sorry for myself when health issues arrive. but here is a small prayer I say to myself to get though the pain.

"Lord, please give me the strength today, to forget my problems, feel stronger and allow me to focus on helping others and doing the good works, which was clearly one of your teachings from God."

I think we do need to ask ourselves daily "What would Jesus do?"

## 03/26 Luke 24:13-35

In this passage the disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus and are discussing all of the events of the prior week leading up to the crucifixion of our Lord. They are so saddened by the physical loss of Jesus that they fail to recognize that it is he who is walking beside them. Not only do they fail to realize that Jesus is walking with them, they even seem to be annoyed that this “stranger” is unaware of the tragic events of the past week. But then Jesus spoke to them and tried to interpret for them that these events were in fulfillment of the prophecies of Moses and all of the other prophets. Yet they still did not make the connection.

When they entered a village and were going to settle down for the night the “stranger” appeared to keep going. They convinced him to join them for the evening. They finally looked outside of their own problems and reached out to the “stranger”. As they sat down for their evening meal, the “stranger” Jesus broke bread and gave it to them. Only then did they realize it was he who had been walking with them all along. As Luke says, “their eyes were opened”. And once the presence of the Lord was revealed, he vanished from them. Only then did they believe that the Lord had risen and they returned to Jerusalem to spread the good news.

How many times in our lives is Jesus walking along with us but we are too distracted by our own cares and problems to recognize his presence? It is very easy to get so wrapped up in ourselves and in our busy lives that we fail to see the many signals that God is trying to send us. By looking outside of ourselves, and helping one another, we can truly see the face of God.

Many times in my life I have felt weary and discouraged by the cards that have been dealt to me. But I always try to remember that no matter how bad things may seem in my life, there is always someone else out there who is dealing with something worse than I am. When you can look outside of yourself and reach out to others, you allow God to enter your heart and help guide you along the right path. The things we think we want may not always be what are best for us. But, if you trust in the Lord and have faith in His will, you will always be set on the right path.

As I like to say, faith is easy when things are going well. It is when things are not going our way that we have the greatest opportunity to see God and to feel His hand guiding us. Jesus walks along with us at many times in our lives. It is up to us to feel his presence, to recognize what message he is trying to send us and have the courage and faith to follow his lead.

Lord, grant me the strength to feel your presence around me and the courage and faith to allow your will to be done

### 03/27 Luke 24:36-48

There are times in our lives when you feel abandoned and alone; when the person that you have loved and adored is no longer there. It is a time of uncertainty, maybe a time of fogginess. It can be a time of reflecting. Why me? Why now? How could this have happened?

As the disciples got together that evening, locked in a room for their safety, they were doing just that. Reflecting on the events of the past and talking about having seen Jesus risen from the dead. The two from the road to Emmaus would have been there telling their story about recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. It was during this time of reflection that Jesus came into the room. It was shocking and terrifying to the disciples to have the risen Lord among them but as always, He entered the room with "Peace be with you" and questioning why they were afraid of Him. The disciples couldn't be sure it was not a ghost among them so Jesus told them to look at the marks on his hands and feet, feel his flesh and bones. Surely this would be enough for his disciples to believe that Jesus was present. No, they still couldn't be sure He wasn't a ghost. As Jesus had done many times before, He sat and ate with them but the physical part of his presence wasn't enough to convince them. He had to show them that he had fulfilled what had been written in the scriptures. Their eyes were finally opened to believe in His presence.

The same thing the disciples were doing that night in the upper room applies to each one of us today. We must tell our own story about the time we met Jesus. Whether it was while walking down a road or while locked in a room, we all have met Jesus. Sometimes, like the disciples, we question the reality of it, but eventually we are brought to believe. The stories we tell are no different than theirs. We all have a personal relationship with Jesus. We, as Christians, are called to be modern day disciples ensuring that we share the good news of Jesus' triumph over evil and death.

As we move through our lives telling our stories to others we also must make time for quiet moments as God whispers and the world is loud.

Topic Question: "How are we like the disciples in this passage?"

"After these things....Jesus showed himself again"

This is the third time Jesus shows himself to the disciples after his resurrection.

The scene opens with 6 of the disciples planning to go fishing...Peter and supposedly John (as the Beloved Disciple) are with them.

It appears they have returned to doing what they were engaged in prior to Jesus selecting them as disciples. After remembering Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, and the celebration on Easter Sunday do we go back to doing what we normally do? Do we remember to follow Jesus' bidding to go out and serve? ...To love one another as He has loved us? ... To love our neighbor as ourselves?

In the 1st meeting of Jesus and the disciples (probably in the upper room), Jesus gives them the ability to forgive sins if people decide to believe in Jesus. (previous passage) Did they forget their commission?

Why? ...haven't the disciples joined together and determined a course of action to do what Jesus has asked? Why? ... did they return to their normal tasks?

When Jesus appears, the disciples do not recognize him at first. Could it be they were not expecting him and therefore did not immediately know Him? Perhaps there are times when God is working in our lives yet we are totally unaware; sometimes in reflecting on past events we become aware and acknowledge that our Savior must have been there with us and for us at a given time; this occurs especially during times of crisis and distress.

After fishing all night, the disciples have no fish. Jesus bids them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat...and ...there were so many fish they couldn't even haul it in. It is with this miracle that John identifies Jesus and tells Peter who he is..."It is the Lord!"

So, although there were two other meetings with the disciples, Jesus has to perform a miracle to "get their attention". And then he doesn't get the attention of the 4 other disciples (according to the written record)...they are busy bringing to shore the heavy load of fish. (John the writer does not tell us that the other 4 hailed Jesus as they were coming in). Sometimes we acknowledge the presence of God but continue on with our daily activities without God being a part of them.

Do we as Christians need a "reminder" miracle right after the biggest gift God could ever give us in the death and resurrection of His Son?

There is no written record that the disciples are saying "thanks" as they approach the shore.

Are we going to forget to thank Jesus for His sacrifice for all mankind? A sacrifice that is beyond descriptive adjectives?

There is no written record of the disciples "hailing" our Lord. Did they still not believe even after John identified Jesus?

Or were they using guarded behavior just in case it was/it wasn't our Lord?

Or were the nets so heavy they were just busy pulling them in! Being human! Our former "doubting Thomas" included!

"When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked".

The concept of "putting on clothes" is akin to preparing to meet our Lord...being ready...engaging in His expectations for us according to His teachings. ... to love our neighbors with our heart, soul, strength, and mind. and being examples of that love in all that we do.

"fire...fish...bread" These are symbols of the miracle Jesus provides for the disciples...they are in preparation for another reminder...a reminder of a previous "last supper" together and a reminder of past miracles. These represent examples of our knowing that the Lord will provide for us wherever we are. That is why Christians need to stay in communication with God...we easily forget!

"Peter...hailed the net ashore...full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them...and the net was not torn".

Did the disciples understand the meaning, the purpose of this final miracle? Do we try to understand the meaning and purpose of the miracles Jesus performed? Do we attempt to interpret them according to our present life and lifestyle?

Yet John the evangelist reports "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him; "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Perhaps this lack of greeting at the outset represented the casual, comfortable presence the disciples felt with our Lord; maybe they did not have to give any grand greeting. Maybe they did understand this was another miracle and felt blessed to experience it; perhaps "thanks" was understood...in their minds and in their hearts.

Quietly, sometimes we express our recognition of God's goodness in our minds and in our hearts without the "big hoopla". But I still believe...it is good to stand up and be counted!

Finally, "Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them...and did the same with the fish". This was the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead".

This passage ends with our final reminder to celebrate His life and resurrection in the breaking of the bread and the

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