



first community

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

*DAILY REFLECTIONS WRITTEN BY
FIRST COMMUNITY CLERGY*

*Thank you for joining us
on this Lenten journey as we bring
all of who we are to God and
trust that God will be with us
along the way.*

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

Psalm 51:1-17 - “Create in me a clean heart.”

The traditional view of this psalm sees King David as its author following his admission of two terrible, horrific sins. As the most influential person in his kingdom, David could have quickly silenced his accusers by sentencing them to death. Instead, he falls on his knees and openly admits, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

This is one of the most amazing stories in all of the Bible. David as King can do whatever he desires to protect his reputation, to keep himself in a place of dominance. His decision to admit his horrible behavior becomes one of the reasons he is so beloved. There are other reasons too. Some are full of myth and legend inspired by supposed military strength. However, when David admits his guilt, he shows more extraordinary courage than any other time in his life.

There’s no evidence in Psalm 51 that David is the author, but it is very easy to imagine him saying, in a soft and repentant voice, “create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within.”

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

Acts 7:33 - “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’”

Each Camp Akita session hikes to Rock Stalls Nature Preserve to visit its waterfall. The pool beneath the waterfall is inviting—so inviting that a handful of campers always jump in. “It’s cold!” they exclaim. They hold hands and dunk. “Swim out to the deep end!” they dare each other. But there is no deep end; they find they can touch the whole way. Their giggles and splashes are childhood exemplified. I look on with a smile.

After a while, we call campers to come sing songs with us. The kids who looked for salamanders or skipped rocks mosey over to the tarps and find a comfortable seat.

The kids who have been swimming, however, become miserable. “Where are my shoes?” they ask Counselors, who don’t know. Wet feet are stuffed into dry socks. Mud is produced. “I’m cold!” they exclaim, and Counselors provide their own spare clothing. “Leave my shoes, they’re drying,” they tell each other. But there is no drying; they find shoes don’t dry in 15 minutes. Their complaints and demands are childhood exemplified. I look on with a smile.

Turns out the venn diagram of “children who swim at the waterfall” and “children who overlook advice on packing dry clothes” makes a nearly perfect circle. I once got annoyed. I once considered outlawing swimming. Yet the swim and its aftermath have become a kind of ritual. As I sweep for abandoned socks, I think of Acts 7:33: “Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Maybe those campers know what we forget: that the sacred and the casual, the wild and the divine, the joy and the discomfort all overlap. May we throw off our shoes every now and then and dig our feet into muddy, holy ground.

by Rev. David Hett

Psalm 91:1-2,9-16 - “The Lord of Love Protects Us”

Because you have made the Holy One your refuge...

God will command the angels concerning you

to guard you in all your ways. (Ps. 91: 9a, 11)

This is the ultimate protection, beyond all forms of human ideas of security—health and life insurance, technology, weapons of mass destruction, the list goes on—to put one’s trust in the Loving Beingness we call God or Lord, although It goes by many names.

Here is a prayer translated from the ancient Hindu Upanishads, that we used in our Contemplative Way group meditation recently (from *God Makes the Rivers to Flow: An Anthology of the World’s Sacred Poetry and Prose*), and I’m using as either a nightly, or morning prayer these days. It is the same message as that of the psalm for today:

May the Lord of Love protect us.

May the Lord of Love nourish us.

May the Lord of Love strengthen us.

May we realize the Lord of Love.

May we live with love for all;

May we live in peace with all.

May the Lord of day grant us peace.

May the Lord of night grant us peace.

May the Lord of sight grant us peace.

May the Lord of speech grant us peace.

May the Lord of space grant us peace.

I bow down to Brahman (God), source of all power.

I will speak the truth and follow the law.

Guard me and my teacher against all harm.

Guard me and my teacher against all harm.

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 - “There is a Time and Season for Everything”

We all go through seasons of our lives; others might call them chapters. I prefer the word “seasons” because it allows for the transitions that blur the lines between one and the next, allowing for the warm sunny day followed by the snow storm, reminding us that the transition from one season to the next is rarely graceful and gentle. But once you’ve made it, you know, because you can look back and remember.

“Dear God, help anyone who is struggling know that it will get better. Amen.” These were the words of one of our teens at Crossroads. A prayer for the recognition of seasons of life. I heard Psalm 30 echoed in this prayer: “*While weeping might endure for the night, joy comes in the morning.*” And we know that a night might really be a week or a month or year. And the morning might be a glimmer or a moment or a memory.

What season are you in right now? Or what season were you in? Or maybe you’re bumping through one of those transition times?

No matter the season, may you rest in the promise that God goes before you, beside you, and within you.

by Tim Vansant

Luke 4:1-13

The story in this scripture speaks to the forty days that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Jesus overcame temptation as the devil first said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus did not. Then the devil offered Jesus glory and authority over all the kingdoms on earth. Jesus did not accept. Finally, the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and stated, "'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you'". Again, Jesus did not. The devil then left.

I find it interesting that, in this story, the devil appealed to the ego of Jesus on the first and last attempts, appealing to ego more often than greed. "If you are the Son of God..." is goading Jesus to prove he is special and holy. How often are we tempted by our own ego? We are drawn to prove we are special. At work, school, or with our family we may have something to prove. When we prove these things and receive the recognition we crave, how often does it come at the expense of the greater good? Does our good work stop until we receive adoration for it? Are we doing good works only for the recognition it provides? This parable illustrates that feeding our pride and ego is often the most common and successful temptations we face.

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Psalm 17



One of the images of God I love the most is the image of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. Matthew 23:37 reads, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her

wings, but you were not willing." I'm not sure if you've ever seen a hen gathering her chicks together, so let me tell you, she does not play around. She begins to call her little ones and suddenly, her wings seem to stretch like an eagle's and far more tiny babes fit under there than you may think. When she is sure she has everyone, she nestles down and keeps watch over them as they huddle together under her protection.

Psalm 17 is a prayer of deliverance from one's enemies, an individual lament. Verse 7 begins, "Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand," and continues into verse 8, "Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings, from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me."

All of us feel we need protection or shelter, especially in the unprecedented times in which we live today. Know there is always room under God's wing for you if you feel you need respite, and she will nestle down and keep watch over you until you feel safe again.

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

Psalm 17 - "Guard me as the apple of the eye."

Many years ago, a man suddenly appeared in the doorway of my office. "I'm mad at God. Will you talk to me about this?" I was taken aback but said, "Sure. C'mon in." He told me his story. His name was Frank. He had been baptized in a Christian Church at age 13 but hadn't been back since. Now, in his early 50's, he is dying of cancer. He was married and the father of a young daughter. He had lived a good life, he said. I did all of the right things. "Is God punishing me for not going to church?" I was clear in my response, "No, God is not punishing you."

We talked many times over the next few months. He decided to join the church formally, so we arranged to welcome him as a new member the following Sunday. His health took a sudden downturn, and he was hospitalized. Hospice was called. I went to see him. As soon as I walked into the room, he burst into tears. He said, "Preacher, it seems like God doesn't want me to join your church." There were more tears but then, inspired in a way I have rarely felt before or since, I stood next to his bed, took his hand, and said, "Frank, since the moment of your birth, since the day you arrived in this life, you have been and are the apple of God's eye, the delight of God's heart. It is a great privilege that I pronounce at this moment that you are a member of the Christian Church."

Frank died the next day. We buried him on the following Sunday. It was a sad but beautiful day as we recalled how he had lived his life with great joy. With all of my heart, mind, and soul, I believe that, like Frank, every one of us is the apple of God's eye.

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

Psalm 17:8 - “Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

British artist Peter Koenig depicted Psalm 17:8 in his 1980 painting *Shadow of Your Wings*. In it, an



eagle with a man's torso wraps oversized wings around a human with black skin and a golden earring. It appears the eagle and human are braced against a powerful gust of wind. A closer look reveals that the airy tendrils bear pointed talons, each clawing toward the figures without quite touching them.

An interesting detail is that the winged figure (God, I presume) wears a hat made of crystal (or perhaps this is part of God's body). The crystal is similar in color to the wind yet appears solid. I like this detail. It reminds me that God is everywhere: beside us in life's harshest elements as well as in its safe, solid places.

It's important to me that the human in God's arms is a person of color. Psalm 17 is a cry for protection. The psalmist begs God to listen while also seeking to prove their worth: "give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit" (v. 1). The words mirror the injustice experienced in marginalized communities around the world. God's most vulnerable children are trying to prove they are deserving of the help they so desperately need. Yet time and again they are ignored, their cries falling upon indifferent ears, blown away in the winds of injustice.

Koenig's painting is a beautiful representation of a God who shelters those who need it most, who turns a stony face to stare down the sharp claws of injustice, and who wills us to do the same.

by Rev. David Hett

Psalm 27 - “Unbeing Dead isn’t Being Alive”

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.*

*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27: 13-14)*

A line of e.e. cummings’ poetry, “*unbeing dead isn’t being alive*,” is a reminder to me that to settle into an unattended, distracted way of being in the world, as natural as it might seem, means that I am absent from what the psalmist calls “the land of the living.”

Unless we are truly awake, attentive, mindful—present—in each moment, we are unable to see “the goodness of the Lord.” This “goodness” is the awesomeness, glory, and beauty of each moment of the arising of Creation in its fullness. If we were to see with the eyes of the Divine, which is our true nature, even when perhaps life was not what we wished it to be, we could also experience the radiance of the Loving Source of life within the midst of any worldly, human condition that can arise.

And even if we don’t see it right now, we can “wait for the Lord.” That is, we can settle more deeply into our truer nature than the consensual reality. This is our True Nature within, in which we are one spark of the Loving, Divine Source of all being.

The Persian poet Rumi describes the necessary awakening:

*The early breeze before dawn
is the keeper of secrets.
Don’t go back to sleep!
It is time for prayer, it is time to ask for
what you really need.
Don’t go back to sleep!
The door of the One who created the world
is always open.
Don’t go back to sleep!*

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Psalm 27 - "Seek God's Face"

I remember the first time I decided to give something up for Lent. I was (and still am!) a candy fiend! I tried to give up sweets one time in grade school. It was only about three days into Lent and one of my classmate's mom brought in cupcake ice cream cones for his birthday. Does anyone remember those? I ate it. And later I realized that I had already failed my Lenten practice.

I really appreciated it in middle school when my church emphasized taking on something new for Lent instead of giving something up. I decided I was going to write down all the things I was grateful for throughout the day every day. The lists kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller until I forgot entirely when we went away on Spring Break.

We're ten days into Lent, how are you doing? Have you stuck to your Lenten practices? Did you cave and eat sweets or drink pop? Did you forget altogether? It's okay. It's never too late to start again.

Our scripture for today reads, "Hear my voice when I call, Lord; My heart says of you, "Seek God's face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek." No matter how many times we mess up, we can always turn our face towards God's. Try, try again. The accompanying scripture verse for today is also helpful. It says, "you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do."

Turn your face to God and look to the One whom you admire as a model for living. Hint: It's Jesus. Jesus- the one who forgives and walks with us no matter how difficult the journey we are on.

by Tim Vasant

Psalm 27

Psalm 27 is beautifully penned by David and his trust in the Lord. There is nothing to fear and the Lord will not forsake him. Some scholars believe this was written right before David was to become king. There is self-doubt and dangers both inside and outside of the kingdom. Heavy, indeed, is the head that wears the crown.

I can see the inner monologue playing out as David's speaks with God. He does not fear his enemy. There is nothing to fear as he knows the Lord is with him. Then, at verse nine, you can see a bit of doubt creep in, "Do not hide your face... do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior." This sort of anxiety naturally occurs when we are in moments of stress. Even when we are confident that the Lord is with us, as David shows in the rest the Psalm, we may fear that we are alone at times. The pandemic, political polarization, inequality, and violence give us doubt and fear, even for the most steadfast and faithful among us. Perhaps it is knowing that we will endure hardships, trials and question our faith, but ultimately, we have still won.

Late night comedian Stephen Colbert was recently asked about his relationship to comedy and faith. He responded with, "If there's some relationship between my faith and my comedy, it's that no matter what happens, you are never defeated. You must understand and see this in the light of eternity and find some way to love and laugh with each other." Courage and faith don't come from an unmovable faith that everything will go our way, but in that even when it does not, we are not defeated and we are all in this together.

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Psalm 27

A young priest named Brother Roger understood the need for respite and shelter for those fleeing the second world war, so he set up a community that offered simple food, a place to sleep, and community to all who arrived. He began this community in a small town in France, Taizé, which remains to this day. Taizé is now an intentional community that welcomes thousands of young people from around the world to work, worship, and live with one another. Brother Roger felt this way about intentional community, “Since my youth, I think that I have never lost the intuition that community life could be a sign that God is love, and love alone. Gradually the conviction took shape in me that it was essential to create a community with men determined to give their whole life and who would always try to understand one another and be reconciled, a community where kindness of heart and simplicity would be at the center of everything.” Brother Roger: “God is love alone.”

Taizé is known for its music, which uses repetition to reinforce the lyrical meaning. These songs are like prayers, or mantras, easily learned so one can sing, hum, or just listen and participate fully in the worshipping life of the community. One of the songs of Taizé, *This Alone*, takes its lyrics from Psalm 27, “One thing I ask, this alone I seek to dwell in the house of the Lord all my days.” The link to a video of this song is below. Listen to the words and melody, see if it can become like a prayer for you this day.

<https://youtu.be/-VA2-juTiTA>

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

Psalm 105:1-6 - "Remember the wonderful works God has done."

The act of remembering is a sacred one. On the night before Jesus is killed, he asks his closest friends to remember him. It is a poignant moment filled with grief, fear, and sorrow. I once heard a wife say to her husband from her death bed, "Will you remember me?" She wants to know before her life ebbs away if she will continue to be known.

Memory is a tricky thing. When I look back on my life, I tend to focus on the good moments, the happy days, the beautiful times. These memories give me hope for the day and often inspire me to move forward even when things seem tough.

When the author of Psalm 105 implores us to remember God's wonderful works, he's asking us to find the inspiration we need to take on whatever is before us in life. He knows as well as you and I that life is complicated. The way is rarely easy, but our memories, our sacred and holy remembrances of times we have endured or triumphed with God's help, can give us the strength we need.

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

1 Corinthians 10:12 - “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

The first time I donated blood was in my college gymnasium. I sat in a chair across from my friends, arm extended, until I was covered in cold sweat. My backrest was laid flat. No more smiling faces, just the underside of a basketball hoop.

The next time I donated blood was in April 2020. I told the nurse, “I tend to get lightheaded.” “That’s fine, I’ll take care of you,” she said. “And I’m scared,” I blurted. About the blood donation or the pandemic, I didn’t specify.

Sure enough, the backrest went down. No basketball hoop this time, just the ceiling of Dublin Community Church. Since then, I’ve surveyed ceilings at Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran, Covenant Presbyterian, the UA Library, and our Brownlee Hall.

I try to eat before donating, but it turns out some people just get lightheaded. The key is lying flat, then raising the backrest slowly, sitting independently, then standing. Never am I more aware of my body than during these recoveries. Can I stand now? Am I ready?

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul writes of our ancestors’ trials and mistakes. He warns, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” It’s a plea for awareness: don’t take things for granted, know your history, pay attention.

Lent challenges us to cultivate awareness. Do we think we are standing? How? By sitting up slowly, aware of our connection to God? Are we hopping up too fast, rushing, or taking our lifeblood for granted? Maybe this season we can pause to notice what’s above us, move with intention, and even admit when we’re scared. “That’s fine,” God tells us, sometimes even in voices we can hear, “I’ll take care of you.”

by Rev. David Hett

Luke 13:22-31 - “Taking the Hard Road”

In Matthew’s version of this saying, Jesus says, *For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.*

The pathway of Jesus—the narrow door, the “hard” road—is two-pronged, both dimensions being challenging to enter and to maintain.

One prong of this pathway is called *kenosis*, or self-emptying. You could call this the spiritual dimension of the path: the loosening of all the naturally developing ego-structures that keep us mired in the self-concerned, survival-oriented, “worldly” way of being. This is the hard road of psychological-spiritual work of transformation towards being “in the world, but not of the world.”

The other prong I’m thinking of is that of being “in the world,” as the truest and fullest expression of Divine Love that we can be. This could be called the “human” dimension of the path; the old sense of it is “the imitation of Christ.” The depth psychologist Carl Jung, whose work and the path of Jungian psychology is really that of the spiritual dimension, also spoke of the confusion of modern Christians around what the actual meaning of “imitating” Christ is:

We [Christians] must sooner or later face this question: Are we to understand the “imitation of Christ” in the sense that we should copy his life; or in the deeper sense that we are to live our own proper lives as truly as he lived his in its individual uniqueness? It is no easy matter to live a life that is modeled on Christ’s, but it is unspeakably harder to live one’s own life, as truly as Christ lived his.

Hard, yes, but the way to abundant life.

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Daniel 3:19-30 - "Walking Together Through The Fire"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." Daniel 3:24b-25

I studied to receive my certificate in spiritual direction while I was in seminary. I haven't completed the certification quite yet, but I've learned a lot. Although the name would indicate otherwise, spiritual directors are not supposed to tell people how to live their lives or fix problems. Instead, spiritual directors are charged with journeying with people as they look for God's presence and seek God's wisdom for themselves. Spiritual directors help point to God's voice or presence in someone's life and ask questions that might nudge a person to explore more deeply.

Many spiritual directors prefer to call this work spiritual accompaniment, because we aren't showing up to change outcomes or fix problems but to provide a contemplative companion on that journey. Most often, people need me to make space to listen, not interfere or offer advice. In times of deep distress, showing up for someone can be the biggest blessing.

The Holy Spirit was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the midst of that fire- this divine presence could have put that fire out! But instead, they walked in the fire with them. That holy presence alone was enough to keep them from harm.

Showing up and journeying with someone is indeed a spiritual practice. If our intention is to not try to fix or interfere, but to be fully and totally present, attuned to God's presence that is always with us, soon enough our journeys will become one and blessed.

by Tim Vasant

Revelation 3:1-6

This letter addressed to the Church of Sardis speaks to the church being dead, despite its great reputation. The church seemed faithful and full of good deeds on the outside, but God knew their hearts. I wonder how often this occurs within our lives? How often do we put on a veneer of kindness with no true love beyond those actions? Our homes, cars, children, and jobs may indicate that we are full of life and success. However, behind the scenes we are devoid of happiness or joy. In life, it is often the feeling or intention of an act that resonates more deeply than the act itself. As Mother Theresa once said, "We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved—they are Jesus in disguise." It is the love that motivates the action that gives us life. Let us all take action that gives us life and share that joy with those around us.



"Church M" - The earliest extant Christian church at Sardis built on the abandoned grounds of the Hellenistic Greek Temple of Artemis on the Acropolis.

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Psalm 63:1-8

There is a direction that we have given as long as I have been taking short-term mission trips, working at Camp Akita, or anything almost any other group activity outside; “You need to be drinking water ALL DAY. It will feel like your body is waterlogged but you need the extra because you are doing activities you typically don’t do. If you feel thirsty, you are falling behind. If you have a headache, feel nauseous, get dizzy, you need to get more water.”

The verses included in this reflection speak of the Psalmist’s thirst for God. Verse 1 says, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” A dry, weary land...

I wonder if this Lenten journey can sometimes feel like a dry, weary land, a land where the refreshing and life-giving well of God can feel far away or absent? What is the spiritual thirst you might have during this journey and how can you find the wellspring of life so you don’t feel like dry and weary land.

Each time you encounter water in your life use it as a time to remember God is always with us ready to refresh our bodies and quench our thirst for interaction with the divine.

by Tim Vansant

Isaiah 55:1-9

Our scripture reading in Isaiah 55:2 states, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”

When Isaiah wrote this passage, I do not believe it was simply about enjoying our diets. Although, who doesn’t love some chocolate cake? Isaiah is pointing out that if we are not spending our resources or time on things that do not enrich us, what is the point? Why do we choose to do the things we do? Is there a conscious decision on our daily routines? Do we have intention in our jobs, free time, or who we spend our time with?

It can become easy to wake up, go to work, run errands, hop on social media, and end the day falling asleep to Netflix. However, we are called to do more, to live with purpose. This is what sustains us and sustains those around us. Not only are we called to do this, but called to delight in these things.

In vocation, let us enjoy the work and productivity we provide to others. When with family, let us be fully present and fully invested in those we love. What will you do today to live with intentionality and enjoy the fullness of life?

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

Psalm 39:2-3 - “I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me.”

In January, the church staff completed active shooter prevention training. I have (unfortunately) completed several such courses. This one included a video of fabricated security footage from Columbine High School. Although the blurry figures were actors, they reproduced the horrific events overlaid with the real 9-1-1 call from the school’s librarian. Watching it, my pulse beat in my temples and, as the psalmist writes, “My heart became hot within me.” I felt so angry.

Weeks later, chatting with an old friend, I admitted I was still thinking about the video. “The kids were just actors, but what they acted out really happened, to real kids.” I paused, barely able to finish: “Kids who died.” Turns out I wasn’t just angry. I was sad.

All of us replay thoughts that anger, sadden, or scare us. We try to be silent and still on feelings we just can’t hold our peace about. What if we saw such distress not as weakness, but as holy? What if sharing so vulnerably is exactly what God is calling us to do?

In *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week*, Amy-Jill Levine describes Lent as the opportunity to ask, “How could I have been a better *me*? How could we, as a community, have been a better *us*? [...] During Lent you have the opportunity to think about your life alongside the life of Jesus, inviting inward transformation and then outward action.”

As my outward action, I turned my donation to Everytown for Gun Safety into a monthly one. As far as inward transformations, I’m committed to having more brave conversations with trusted friends. The psalmist asks God to “give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears.” Doing so for one another is to be a better *us*.

by Rev. David Hett

Psalm 39:1-3, 12-13 - “The Barometer of Spiritual Maturity”

Psalm 39 begins with this prayer:

*I said, ‘I will guard my ways
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will keep a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked are in my presence.’
I was silent and still.*

“If you want a quick and accurate barometer of your spiritual maturity,” says Rabbi Rami Shapiro, “listen to the quality of your speech. Are you respectful or rude? Are you willing to listen or eager to interrupt and speak? Are your words compassionate and self-deprecating, or are they cutting and hurtful? Are you wise or merely clever? Ther words of your mouth will reveal the quality of your heart.”

The Qur’an says:

*O you who believe,
people should not mock other people,
for these may be better than they are...
And do not ridicule each other,
or call each other by insulting nicknames.
Evil is the name of impiety after achieving faith...
O you who believe...
do not defame each other in their absence.*

On this passage, Rabbi Rami advises us how to determine what to speak:

Gossip is among the most evil aspects of speech. Before you speak, ask yourself this: “Is what I am about to say true?” If it isn’t true, don’t say it. If it is true, ask yourself a second question, “Is what I am about to say kind?” If it is both true and kind, say it. If it is true but unkind, ask yourself a third question: “Is what I am about to say necessary for the welfare of self and others?” If it is, then say it as gently as you can. If it isn’t for the good, even if true, don’t say it.

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Luke 13:18-21 - "Big and Small"

Did you ever get lost as a kid? I remember losing my mom in the grocery store. Tall shelves surrounding me, aisles and aisles, and no mom. I have never felt so small in my life. "Find someone that works there," she always reminded me. So I did. I was brave. My mom came to scoop me up. I held my head up tall, proud of myself. I was a big girl!

It was my first time in NYC. I stepped off the metro into Penn Station straight into a crowd of people quickly headed one way, another crowd going another. There was music playing from the corner, sounds and smells from the street wafting down the stairs, and a thick, hot, breeze coming from the movement of the train as it pulled away. There it was, that familiar feeling... I am so small. But it was a good small feeling. I am just one of many, one of God's children.

The parable of the mustard seed seems so straight forward. God's kingdom is like this tiny seed that grows into something big and beautiful with healing properties and provisions for shelter and sustenance. God's kingdom is abundant, yet unassuming. It is strong, yet also fragile. It is small, yet also big. So are we.

May we remember that we are small- that it isn't all about us, that there are billions of God's children out there, and that we don't have to do it all or be it all.

May we also remember that we are big- we are strong and capable of affecting change, we are worthy of respect and love, and we are brave-ready to take on whatever comes our way on this journey of life knowing that our God is by our side.

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5 - “Therefore we do not lose heart.”

I love this reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. It is a reminder of the promise of the resurrection. Note, when you read it, that it is full of metaphors. Paul has no more idea of what the life to come will be like than you or I do, but he believes, he hopes in the promise that someday we will all be made new.

Some days I doubt that this is true. I realize this may surprise you. After all, I declared that I believe in the resurrection on the day I was ordained. I still do, but some days are easier to believe in this teaching than others.

My faith is strongest when I open my eyes wide enough to see resurrection happening all around. Where have I seen resurrection? In a marriage seemingly broken but renewed when the couple finds the strength to face hard truths about each other. Where else? In the simple act of a child realizing that they are indeed worthy of love, maybe for the first time.

Look around. Do not lose heart. Resurrection is everywhere. If God can make it happen now, I believe (on most days!) will make it happen in the life to come.

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Luke 1:26-38



This painting, *The Annunciation*, was painted in 1898 by Henry Ossawa Tanner and now hangs in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Mr. Tanner was born to a preacher and former slave who escaped via the underground railroad. He was the sole black student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and became a pioneering black artist who chose to live in France where he was felt his work would be judged on its merit, not on the color of his skin.

In this painting, the Angel Gabriel is portrayed as a shaft of light, and Mary a teen awoken by something she doesn't quite understand. It's at this precise time, however, that she learns she'll be carrying a baby, the Son of the Most High, and she says, "Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

As you look at this image, how do you think you would have reacted to the request from Gabriel? Even more, how can we all say "Here I am," to God in our own way, today?

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

Luke 15:4 - “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

In 2007, Camp Akita campers brought costumes for the theme, “What I want to be when I grow up.” My camper Maggie clutched a well-worn notebook. “I’m an author,” she announced, proudly. My other campers wore black eyeliner and fishnet gloves. “We’re Avril Lavigne,” they said, referring to the pop-punk singer. Surprisingly, Maggie and the Avrils got along, sharing giggles and high-fives. But most of the time, Maggie sat to the side, writing in her notebook.

Camp culminated in a dance party. I sang along to “Sweet Home Camp Akita” until I noticed Maggie wasn’t there. The lost camper protocol sprang to mind. Step one: don’t panic. Step two: check common areas. I checked the lodge deck and infirmary. I ran to our cabin. I ran to the bathroom. I ran back to the cabin. I peeked down at the lake: no ripples (was that good or bad?). Mind spinning, I imagined a line of flashlights, shouts in the dark, sirens. Step one: don’t panic. Step two...

I ran to Vesper Hill. There was Maggie, sitting on a bench in the dappled sun, writing in her notebook. “Maggie,” I panted, tears in my eyes. “I was looking everywhere! I was calling your name!” Maggie looked surprised. “You were?”

In the lost sheep story, I wonder if the shepherd heard her own heartbeat, louder than a kickdrum. I wonder if she did, in fact, panic. I wonder if the lone sheep was surprised to see her. I wonder if the sheep then offered to read the story she was writing. I wonder if the shepherd said, “Yes, please,” as they walked back to the flock. I wonder if the shepherd never worried for a second about the other sheep, because they had each other. I wonder if the sheep learned she was worth being found.

by Rev. David Hett

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 - “Our Essential Human Task”

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Contemplative teacher Cynthia Bourgeault says we should read Jesus’ life and his “passion” as a “sacrament: a sacred mystery whose real purpose is not to arouse empathy but to *create empowerment*.”

In this wilderness season of Lent, writes Bourgeault, “Jesus is not particularly interested in increasing either your guilt or your devotion, but rather, in deepening your personal capacity to make the passage into unitive life.”

Unitive life is Oneness, oneness with the Beloved and through oneness with the Source, being One with all creation. The author of *Wisdom Jesus* continues:

The path he walked is precisely the one that would most fully unleash the transformative power of his teaching. It both modeled and consecrated the eye of the needle that each one of us must personally pass through... to die to self. I am not talking about literal crucifixion, of course, but I am talking about the literal laying down of our ‘life,’ at least as we usually recognize it.

The laying down of our egoic lives—“dying to self”—is the process of transforming into “a new creation” in Christ.

Bourgeault concludes with this statement that is a powerful word for me to meditate on throughout Lent and beyond, and I offer it for your contemplation as well:

Our only truly essential human task here [i.e., in our lifetime on Earth], Jesus teaches, is to grow beyond the survival instincts of the animal brain and egoic operating system into the kenotic [self-emptying] joy and generosity of full human personhood.

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Revelation 19:1-8 - “Hallelujah!”

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Let us rejoice!

It’s Monday. I know. But if the Bible tells us to celebrate, then celebrate we must!

I was nannying in college and the mom came home early carrying a cake and all the fixings for grilled cheese. The three girls came in with eyes as big and as round as that chocolate cake saying, “It isn’t anyone’s birthday!” “It’s beautiful!” “I LOVE grilled cheese!”

They were right on all accounts. It wasn’t anyone’s birthday. It was indeed a beautiful cake. And grilled cheese is a gift from God. Mom said, “I saw the cake while I was at the store and I decided that we didn’t need a reason, we just needed to celebrate.”

We had 3 meltdowns already that day. An art project got trampled on. The blueberries weren’t sweet enough. And it was too hot to play outside. But it was time to celebrate. Just because.

It doesn’t have to be a cake or a party, although grilled cheese might do the trick. Take a moment to celebrate today, just because.

Live every day as if you were going to live one hundred years. Live as if you were living the last day of your life. This Proverb is attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi, 12th-13th century.

by Tim Vansant

Revelation 19:9-10

We all have people around us we consider to be great. This could be someone in your family, a friend, or a celebrity that isn't physically in your life that you admire. You may fawn over their talents and abilities. You may think to yourself, "I could never do what they do".

In our scripture reading, in John's vision, he finds himself in the company of an angel. Now, I have never personally met an angel, but I am assuming it is a humbling and awe-inspiring experience. I would have a tough time hanging out with this angel and thinking, "yeah, I could probably do that".

John had a similar experience in his vision. He kneels at the feet of the angel. However, the angel says to him, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters". The angel recognized that we are all on the same footing. That the only worship we should be doing is the worship of God. We are all siblings regardless of wealth, fame, or ability. This message drives home that we all have value and worthy of love.

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Psalm 53

A haiku is a Japanese poem that consists of 3 lines with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five again in the third line. Margaret D. McGee wrote a book entitled: *Haiku-The Sacred Art: Spiritual Practice in Three Lines* and encourages the use of this ancient practice as a spiritual discipline, something that can be done every day to center oneself in the world.

This haiku is written in response to Psalm 53. Read the Psalm in your Bible and try your own haiku. Could a daily short poem be something that would help ground you on your Lenten journey this year?

They act like God isn't

Like justice doesn't count today

God will restore us

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

Philippians 2:19-24 - "I hope in the Lord..."

One of the more powerful stories in the Bible is the mentorship of a young pastor named Timothy. Paul could be a tough old dude. He railed against the Corinthians for being arrogant and the Galatians for being foolish. He used some words at times that would sound shocking on the lips of a pastor today.

Yet, he could be as kind and as gracious as a loving, doting grandparent. Some of his finest work was the advice and guidance he gave to Timothy. In his letter to the Philippians, he lets them know that Timothy is the real deal, a kind soul, a genuinely caring pastor.

When the world seems overwhelming, when it appears there are too many arrogant fools dominating the airwaves and the public discourses of our culture, it is good to recall that a kind and gracious act will do more to help our world than anything else. Like Paul, Let's hope in the Lord that each of us will find the ability to let kindness and grace guide our every step.

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

*Psalm 126:5-6 - “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”*

Recently at Crossroads, I told our youth that I don’t subscribe to the idea that “everything happens for a reason.” To me, the phrase calls to mind a puppeteering God who dispenses hardship so we might “learn.” This theology is a great comfort for some; that God knows a reason for loss can bring much-needed peace, and I hold no judgement toward those for whom this works. It just doesn’t work for me.

I told the youth that, instead, I believe “good can be found in the midst of anything.” During a crisis, there are helpers. In the wake of loss, there is love. After failure, a new opportunity. Sometimes the “good” is hard to find. Often it takes a while to show up. Many times, the “good” doesn’t fully eclipse the “bad.” But I have faith that “good” is always there, and God, walking beside us with a map and magnifying glass, helps us find it.

Unfortunately, my belief doesn’t explain the “why” we yearn for in the face of struggle. But it does answer the “What now?” or, “Where is God?” Psalm 126:5 reads, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” The psalmist issues a blessing: instead of drying our tears, may we embrace them. Instead of guessing what God’s up to, may we become co-creators. Together with God, may we cultivate what’s next.



That day at Crossroads, youth and leaders wrote personal disappointments on strips of paper. They put the paper in plastic baggies with wet paper towels and beans. As the beans began to sprout, we remembered even our biggest challenges become “compost” for new growth. Faith means believing that new joy can grow from (not because of) hard things.

by Rev. David Hett

John 11:45-57 - “Ugly Religion”

This passage has the section heading, “The Plot to Kill Jesus.” As Christians, when we get to these parts of the passion story, we must be diligent in reminding ourselves that it is the religious hierarchy of the day, colluding with the Roman Empire, who want to have this “threat” to their own power and control removed. The “Jews” did not kill Jesus; the Empire crucified him aided by the religious establishment in Palestine.

Is this ever any different? Martin Luther King, Jr., was harsher on white Christian leaders and preachers than on the obvious bigoted political hierarchy. His famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is even addressed to “My dear fellow clergymen:”

I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership... So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound... an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

One reason I love Rabbi Rami Shapiro's wisdom in his churchwide study book, *Holy Rascals*, is in defining “good, bad, and ugly” religions:

Religion... either liberates or it enslaves; it either empowers or it disempowers. A good religion liberates, empowers, and points beyond itself toward the greater Reality no religion can own. A bad religion enslaves, disempowers, points only to itself, becoming, not a means to an end, but an end unto itself. An ugly religion enslaves, disempowers, points only to itself, and breaks the fingers of those who point anywhere else.

This Gospel story points to the qualities of “ugly religion;” any “brand-name” religion can get ugly.

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Isaiah 43:19-21 - “I Am About To Do a New Thing”

Frank Butler and Annie Oakley sing, “Anything you can do, I can do better. I can do anything better than you.” God sings, “Anything I can do, I can do better!” God reminds us that God has already done awesome things and God is about to do something even more awesome-er (yes, that is definitely a word.) Anything God can do, God can do better, and backwards and upside down as well!

What a refreshing claim. My most audacious hope, God can bring about even more audaciously! We all need the reminder of the great mystery of God- that what God has in store for us is beyond what we could think to dream up. That ear has not heard, nor eye seen, nor human imagination envisioned, what God has prepared for those whom God loves.

Take a moment today to bask in the mystery of God. Wait with bated breath to see where God makes a way out of no way, refreshing us with the water of life and love and hope.

by Tim Vasant

Hebrews 10:19-25

We all have meetings in our life, be it at work, at church, with our families, or with a volunteer opportunity. These meetings may be in person or Zoom (especially in these days of Covid-19.)

Meetings can be laborious. We may be rehashing the same issues repeatedly. The meeting may be clouded in negativity. However, meeting with each other is a profoundly human endeavor.

Today's scripture states, "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another." Perhaps we can change the tenor and attitudes when in the presence of one another, even when we don't want to, if we actively choose to encourage each other.

Rather than shooting down an idea, we can praise the provider of the insight for their creativity, even if that idea is not feasible. Encouraging attitudes can be contagious and are a force multiplier for a loving environment. Maybe at our next meeting or gathering we can be that encourager even as we find ourself in disagreement?

DAY 35 _____ TUESDAY, APRIL 5

by Rev. Kate Shaner

At this point in our Lenten journey, there are some questions to ask, which may not relate to a specific text but relate to our overall wellbeing:

Have you eaten anything today?

Have you had any water today?

Have you stopped to sit and take a deep breath?

Are you able to find a quiet place to pray and listen to God's voice?

May you be kind to yourself today. You matter.

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

Psalm 20 - "Your heart's desire."

What is your heart's desire? At the end of the day, what do you want more than anything else? Is there something you really, really want more than anything else?

When I was in high school, my heart desired to make the varsity basketball team. I was timid back in those days (seriously, I was!). I was confident that making the team would make me popular. When Coach Poulan announced the list of players on the varsity team late in the fall of my junior year, amazingly, my name was on the list. Perhaps you can guess the rest of the story. I was still shy. I did not exactly become as popular as I had hoped. I loved playing ball, and the guys on the team were my best friends for sure, but the hoped-for result never came true.

At the end of the day, when I'm as frank as possible, my deepest desire is to love and be loved. My hope more than anything else is to be a part of a community of friends who will be there for each other no matter what. I suspect most of us, if not all, desire the same simple gifts of love and belonging.

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

***Psalm 31:12, “I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.”***

Psalm 31 is a heartfelt and poetic lament to God. Maybe you, like the psalmist, have experienced moments of feeling broken. Perhaps you have felt empty, drained, shattered, useless, or as though a crucial piece is missing. I certainly have. “I have become like a broken vessel” is a painfully accurate description for grief and loss of all kinds.



There is a 400-year-old Japanese pottery technique called Kintsugi in which broken ceramic is repaired using gold. Instead of concealing cracks, the Kintsugi artist highlights the pot's fault-lines as part of the design. The ribbons of gold now crisscrossing the pot, dish, or bowl not only make it functional again, but stronger, more valuable, and more beautiful than before.

Kintsugi challenges us to think about brokenness differently: not a fault, but a blessing. The Jesus story does the same. Throughout the Gospels, the word “broken” binds people together: at the Last Supper, bread is “broken” and shared; at the feast of the five thousand, the disciples gather “broken” pieces of bread to redistribute until all are fed; at Bethany, Mary “breaks” a jar of costly ointment to anoint Jesus. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes what was once hostility between Jew and Gentile, saying that Jesus is the one who has “broken down the dividing wall,” thus making “both groups into one” (Eph. 2:14).

These examples, like Kintsugi, challenge us to reconsider our own “broken” parts. Perhaps we can be bound back together by the pure gold of community, acceptance, and love. But first, the Kintsugi artist must decide the fragmented bowl is worth time and effort. Jesus knows this to be true of us. Lent dares us to believe it for ourselves.

by Rev. David Hett

Psalm 31:9-16 - “The Song of a Soul Alive”

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also. (Ps. 31:9)*

I think the “laments” in the Bible are so very important for us in this historic moment. I could speak about it collectively as a nation, that we as a people have never confronted our grief (often not even the history) over the indigenous and enslaved peoples who have been desecrated and decimated in the course of our supposedly “righteous” endeavors.

But I don’t think we can take that step until we confront our personal grief over deaths, losses, failures, and harm we may have consciously or unconsciously caused others and our Earth.

Francis Weller writes, “Coming home to grief is sacred work. Grief is the work of mature adults. It is our responsibility to source this emotion and offer it back to our struggling world. The gift of grief is the affirmation of life and of our intimacy with the world.”

And he points to the necessity of allowing ourselves to be in touch with the emotion of grief:

It is risky to stay vulnerable in a culture increasingly dedicated to death, but without our willingness to stand witness through the power of our grief, we will not be able to stem the hemorrhaging of our communities, the senseless destruction of ecologies or the basic tyranny of monotonous existence... Grief, instead, stirs the heart, is indeed the song of a soul alive.

Reading psalms of lament can open our hearts to the life-giving power of “a grief observed.”

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

Luke 22:1-13 - “Go and Make Preparations”

The festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread were probably originally separate nature festivals with springtime rituals, one for nomadic ranchers that included the sacrifice of a lamb, and another for farmers that celebrated the annual barley harvest by eating unleavened bread. Ancient Israel merged these festivals and their rituals and rather than rooting them in the cycles of the seasons, they rooted them in a historical and foundational event: the exodus from Egypt. The lamb symbolizes the sacrifice made by the Israelites that saved them from death from the final plague- the killing of all firstborn boys whose homes were not protected by the blood of the lamb. The unleavened bread symbolizes what was available to them as they fled their life of oppression to the promised liberation in Canaan. By the time of Jesus, Passover had become a national pilgrimage festival centralized in Jerusalem.

To summarize- Passover was and is a pretty big deal! There is a lot of planning involved. And if there's one thing holidays, fancy meals, and travel all have in common- it's preparation. When reading the scripture for today, I found myself stuck on the word “prepare.” I found myself imagining the day and realizing that it is unlikely that Peter and John did all that preparation themselves. There were most likely plenty of other players at work in the preparations for this very important meal on the pathway to salvation. It reminded me that not everyone needs to have a starring role in order to play a crucial role. However you are preparing your home, your heart, and your body for the day of resurrection is an important and worthy task. Let us continue to prepare together- see you in church!

by Tim Vansant

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Psalm 118:24 contains one of the most popular Bible verses. Perhaps you sang it in your youth. When I read it, I sing it in my head as if I was back at church camp, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

However, what about when the world seems to be falling apart around us? What about when we are heading into our third year of the pandemic? What about when division and hate seem to be engulfing us? However, I think rejoicing in the day that the Lord has made is less about giving thanks for what is good on our lives (although that is important) and more about realizing that one day can make all the difference.

Each day is a blank slate that can be used to change the circumstances of those around us. It gives us hope that our compassion, love, and effort are not in vain. So, what shall we do this day that the Lord has made?

by Rev. Kate Shaner

Psalm 36:5-11

At the very beginning of this pandemic, when everything was locked down, there was a rise in the adoption of dogs and cats from shelters across the country. It seemed the loneliness and isolation of those quarantined in their homes alone were too much to bear, just as it must be too much to bear when your owner feels like you're too old and drops you off at the pound, unwanted and afraid, or you got lost and ended up in a strange noisy place in a cage. None of these options are life-giving and help us feel worthy and loved.

Yet, during this crisis, we found community in any way that we could, and everyone seemed to benefit. Verse 5 of this psalm tells us that God's steadfast love extends to the heavens and goes on to say that love saves "humans and animals alike."

Are there animal connections that give you peace and love? Have you felt a loneliness that only a beloved animal can cure?

As we proceed into Holy Week, let us remember that all creation needs each other, and all creation is loved by God.

by Dr. R. Glen Miles

John 12: 20-36 - "Now my soul is troubled..."

The gospel accounts of Jesus' death agree that Jesus was "troubled." Luke says that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, asking God to find him another way. He was frightened and worried. Luke says that Jesus was so filled with fear he sweats drops of blood.

Sometimes I want to skip ahead to Easter morning. These texts and stories are too painful, too sad, too reflective of humanity at its worst. Why focus on the pain when we know there is a great end to this terrible story?

I heard an exceptional preacher one time say, "There can be no resurrection without a death." As hard as that is to hear, it's true. In the hours leading up to his arrest, torture, and execution at the hands of the ruling state, Jesus is as overwhelmed as any of us might be.

Amazingly, I find great hope in the reports of his anguish, his sweat-filled with blood. In his death, Jesus becomes one with all of humanity. When he is laid in the tomb, he is as dead as any of the rest of us will be when our lives are over. It's a sign that we don't have to fake bravery or pretend everything is OK. Like him, we can be honest about fear and worry, our sadness and sorrow.

Is your heart troubled? The good news of this story is this: you are not alone.

by Rev. Sarah Kientz

John 13:26 - “Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.”



Last Supper, Fra Angelico (1450)

An odd part of the Last Supper story is when Jesus identifies his betrayer by saying, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” All the disciples can witness this act. Why not just say, “Judas”?

Have you ever fed someone? A child too young for a spoon, a loved one weakened by illness, or a spouse with wedding cake? If so, you know you need to come close. Your hand bearing the food becomes slow and careful. As you tell the person to “open up,” you might instinctually open your own mouth. You mirror each other. The spoonful is delivered; your eyes meet. It’s incredibly intimate.

The word “companion” comes from the Latin *com-*, meaning “together with,” and *panis*, meaning “bread.” A companion is “one who breaks bread with another.” I always thought Jesus extended bread to Judas as a theatrical element, meant to somehow teach the other disciples. Now, I think it was an intimate act just for Judas. “Remember,” Jesus seems to say through action, “you are my companion. We broke bread together and fed thousands. We looked into each other’s eyes and shared a vision. Nothing you can do will change that. I will nourish you until the very end.”

Maybe your acts of feeding have, without words, communicated similar messages. Holy Week beckons us to say aloud what we feel has gone unsaid and to examine our actions. Have we accompanied and nourished our loved ones? Or have we, in ways big or small, lied and betrayed? Holy Week offers the opportunity to reread our own narratives. Who needs us to “come with bread” once again?

by Rev. David Hett

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; John 13:1-17, 31b-35 - “Thanksgiving Sacrifice”

O Lord, I am your servant.

You have loosed my bonds.

I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice. (Ps. 116: 16-17)

Often celebrated as the Last Supper, John makes it the ceremony of “washing feet.” In either case, it acknowledges the Jewish Passover Feast, a “thanksgiving sacrifice” offered the One who liberates us.

Christians like me understandably reject the misunderstood notion that “Jesus died for our sins” and have no idea what “the lamb of God” really is, so John Shelby Spong explains the symbol:

In Jewish worship, the lamb was a symbol, not of a sacrifice that an angry God required, but of the human yearning to achieve the fullness of our human potential. The lamb, chosen carefully for the sacrifice [being physically perfect], represented our longing to be all that God created us to be.

Thus, this “sacrifice”—to make sacred—enables us to participate in the oneness of the Holy One, or as Spong often said, “to become all that God wants us to be.”

Bishop Spong also concluded in his final book, *Unbelievable*, that “substitutionary atonement theology (which is the late-blooming, flawed understanding of “Jesus died for our sins”) must be abandoned if there is to be a Christian future.”

And perhaps it is better on this Holy Thursday to simply focus, like the psalm and John’s Gospel do on the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples—the model for us all to be servants of one another:

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (John 13:14)

by Rev. Mary Kate Buchanan

John 19:16-18a - “Then Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him.”

When I had extensive knee surgery as a teenager, I was so surprised by how many people showed up bearing gifts.

A friend brought over coloring books and fancy new markers. My pastor's wife brought over one of my most favorite meals that she makes. A neighbor brought over some DVDs to help with the monotony of daytime TV. Netflix would have been a lifesaver back then!

There was a common refrain, “Thank you! You didn't have to do that!” And I meant the gifts, but also the showing up in my cave of intense pain, frustration, and embarrassment because I couldn't take care of myself.

I used to think that Jesus' death was remarkable for its brutality. That's what I thought Good Friday was all about- the point is that God dies in the most horrific way possible and *that's* what makes redemption work.

My colleague, Rev. Vince Amlin, helped change my mind. He said, “It didn't need to be the cross. It didn't need to be violent at all. Jesus could have died in his sleep, and it would have meant just as much. Because God didn't have to die at all.”

Sounds rather heretical right? But hear him out. “The remarkable, the redemptive, thing is that God showed up. Unexpectedly bearing the gift of human flesh. Which can be flogged, and crowned and killed... The power of the crucifixion was present as soon as God showed up- unnecessarily- in this place where others were suffering.”

Dear God, You didn't have to do that, Thank you. Amen.

by Tim Vasant

1 Peter 4:1-8

Our scripture reading in 1 Peter begins with, “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention”. This doesn’t exactly provide warm and fuzzy feelings to start out our day. When considering this scripture, it is important to remember that Jesus was a revolutionary. He turned societal structures upside down. He communed with those not considered respectable in society. He preached love and not tribalism or war. He challenged the establishment. This led to ultimate suffering. If we are to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, we will be challenging these same structures.

Recording artist Grandson sings a powerful lyric that asks, “Do you have enough love in your heart to go and get your hands dirty?” Are we willing to suffer alongside those that are hurting or oppressed? Can we go beyond charity and be willing to find ourselves uncomfortable and risk something of value to love our neighbor as ourselves? Are we willing to truly challenge the suffering around us that is caused by systems that may benefit us on a personal level? To do so, we may have to arm ourselves with the intention to suffer.



by Rev. Kate Shaner

Reflection for Easter Sunday

He is risen, He is risen indeed! The miracle of our Christian faith; the empty tomb, the WOMEN who announce that Jesus is no longer there, and the Good News that death is not the final answer in our lives is finally here. Church, lilies, trumpets, baskets, brunches, all the traditions that make Easter memorable in our minds is finally here, we made it. Even those who tread a path not filled with celebration but with tragedy made it, because the promise of new life is for all of us, no exceptions.

So, when the celebrations have dimmed, the chocolate has been eaten, the eggs have been found, we are left with the task of figuring out how we follow this resurrected Jesus; the Prince of Peace, Son of the Most High, Mighty Counselor, the one who will make us fishers of people, and what it looks like in our own lives. What does this miracle mean to each of us, and will it affect how we live?

This is a question we can wrestle with, together, as a community of faith, as we sing our Alleluia's to the world, and proclaim He is risen, indeed!