

SHARING OUR HOPE



DEVOTIONALS | 2023

INTRODUCTION

As we approach the Lenten Season, we come bringing our own unique set of life's struggles and triumphs. No matter what we are struggling with, we often believe, "Nobody understands me." Inside the pages of our Lenten Devotional, we will discover that the various writers do understand struggle and triumph.

As we journey together through this season of Lent, may we also discover that in our struggles, Jesus is the One who is walking the path with us. May we find encouragement in our faith. May we find strength for our journey ahead. May this Lenten season bring us hope and assurance that even when the way is hard, Jesus is with us, and at the end, there is the promise of resurrection.

As you read through each devotion, also take the time to read the related scriptures, and take the time to pray and listen for Jesus' guidance. May our faith be strengthened because we took the Lenten Journey together with the members of Derbyshire Baptist Church.

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

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

Jeff Raymond

Pastor, Derbyshire Baptist Church



ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 22

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Each of these verses touches on a characteristic of our beliefs, of our faith. They touch on our need to repent, our need to pray, our need to confess, our need to be thankful, and our reason to rejoice.

Joel speaks strongly about our need for salvation and our need for repentance.

Isaiah speaks to us to come humbly before our God seeking to know and do his will.

Psalms reminds us of our need for repentance and our need to offer a prayer of confession. This is one of my favorite scriptures, especially verse 10, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." And following this request, another favorite, verse 12, builds another layer to this prayer "to restore to me the joy of your salvation."

2 Corinthians tells us of our need for salvation and that this salvation is available to all and is available to us today. It is a gift. The scripture goes on to say that the servant does not have an easy life, as Paul demonstrated. No matter what we might face in life, we need to be committed to the Gospel. Despite what suffering we may incur, we can still rejoice because of our faith in God.

Matthew instructs us to pray to God in a quiet, secluded place and our prayers will be heard. He is also instructing us not to build up our

treasures here on earth, but to build up our treasures in heaven, treasures that have a lasting effect.

I challenge you today to be thankful for your beliefs and your faith in Christ. Be thankful for your spiritual gifts and talents that you can use to serve the church. And may you be continually aware of your need for repentance and salvation. In your prayer closet, may you come to God in a humble way knowing your prayers will be heard. May you also be mindful of God to "create in you a clean heart" open to the "joy of your salvation." No matter what trials you face, you face them together with God. You can still rejoice because of your faith that you have in your one true God.

Ted Powitz



FEBRUARY 23

Psalm 51

Jonah 3:1-10

Romans 1:1-7

Gratitude for Family

HAVE YOU SAID THANK YOU TO YOUR FAMILY TODAY? How often and when do you think about family? Who is your family? They are our immediate family, our extended family; we are sisters and brothers in Christ, and close friends feel like family. There are many versions of families that complete our lives each day. What a blessing!

I am constantly reminded how fortunate I am to have a very close family. I have full confidence they will be there when I need them. This year I had a broken arm, and I was amazed at how my family rallied to the occasion to "be there" for me. I was showered with food, lotions, creams, and appliances that helped me move about, transportation to doctors, company while waiting for doctors or physical therapy, visits from the very young ones to the most seasoned ones.

NOTES:

I know schedules are busy, and we don't always spend time together until we are benched in the game. It is when we are most vulnerable that we fill our hearts with appreciation and love. It is in the most challenging circumstances that we come together. At memorial services or at the hospital bedsides, we reflect upon what really has meaning. It is not how much we have accomplished, how much money, property, or wealth we have accumulated. No, in those quiet difficult times we are reminded how important our family really is.

With the turmoil and trials, we forget what we value most. We work hard at home, at our job, yet confess we do not spend time with those we cherish most. We sacrifice the memory makers, the special moments together and caring for those we love. Be reminded that God says of all the commandments, Love is the most important. Refresh your thoughts about His words and make that special effort to tell those you love, thank you. Matthew 22: 37-40; Mark 12: 28-34. I am certain blessings will flow back to you. Thank you to my family for caring for me.

Brenda Robinson



FEBRUARY 24

Psalm 51

Jonah 4:1-11

Romans 1:8-17

Spiritual Resolutions

A new year arrives, and many of us think, "What are my New Year Resolutions going to be THIS year?" Looking back over many years of these resolutions, I remember things like:

eat healthier
exercise more
tackle the attic

organize my closets

I could go on! But we all might agree that the dawning of a new year does provide us with opportunities to look back at what we accomplished, or didn't accomplish, and at the same time look forward to what we see as opportunities to improve ourselves, our relationships with friends and neighbors, and our relationship with God.

As I read Psalm 51, I sensed something like a RESOLVE in David's words -

asking for God to help him along his upcoming journey, seeking God's forgiveness, his wisdom, his mercy:

Create in me a clean heart, Oh God
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Along with David's requests, he offers praise and thanks to God and expresses a desire to reach out to others and share God's love :

Then I will teach transgressors your ways
and sinners will return to you.
My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
My mouth will declare your praise.

The word RESOLVE is an action verb! Just as David asked for God's presence in his life, David also resolved to do his part to show others what the presence of God in one's life can mean.

Many of our New Year resolutions are rather physical and worldly. We do live "in the world" and must be able to take care of life's responsibilities.

Our SPIRITUAL RESOLUTIONS can reflect our desire to become the people God created us to be - including giving thanks to God for His love and grace, reaching out to others to share His Word and His promises, and being the LIGHT and JOY that God has given us and expects us to share.

Great and wonderful God,

As we think about a new year, our hearts are filled with eagerness for the journey with You through the coming seasons. You have promised to be with us, to guide us, to comfort us. THANK YOU! You are our JOY. We can be joyful even when life gets hard because we know that You are more powerful than any circumstance.

The Joy of God in us is our strength!

Amen.

Judy Harned



FEBRUARY 25

Psalm 51

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 18:1-7

Matthew 18:1-5 NIV The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

2 He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

I was taught from an early age to work hard and try to do my best. My parents also instilled in their children that we do not work hard for the rewards, but because hard work, accompanied with humility, is Biblically based and is the right thing to do.

At different points throughout my military and business career, I received some awards and recognition, and it was easy to begin focusing on the rewards that come as a result of hard work, instead of what I had been taught as a child. But don't we all enjoy getting awards and being recognized for our hard work? I think the disciples were similar, and they wanted affirmation from Jesus for their hard work. They were looking for Jesus to acknowledge who was the best among them and for him to sing their praises. So hence the question from the disciples in Verse 1, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus could have rebuked them and answered the question "who is the greatest?" by pointing to himself and calling out all of his great works. But instead, Jesus drew their attention to a child that was close by, and He addressed their question of greatness by telling the disciples that when we are humble like a child, we are then on our way to greatness in His kingdom. Think about Jesus and his life; He wasn't concerned about his status. He didn't have to be the center of attention. He did not deceive and try to be something he wasn't, and He didn't have an intimidating presence. He walked humbly daily, not turning humility on and off as required, but instead this quality was a fundamental characteristic in His daily walk.

These verses teach that in the Kingdom of God, it is childlike qualities that matters most, not social prominence and clout. In our world of narcissism, selfishness, and entitlement, humility is counter-cultural, but it is the bar set by Jesus in this passage.

My prayer during this Lenten season is to get back to the childlike humility that I was taught as a child. Let the characteristics of humility, trust, joy, and wonder speak to me. Let my life be one of humble service in God's name.

Hugh Kitts



FEBRUARY 26

Repentance

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

Repentance is our response to God's boundless grace.

We look for clear direction and firm guidance from God.

Repentance is turning from darkness and walking in the light.

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

Repentance is taking responsibility for our actions.

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

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

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

Amen



FEBRUARY 27

Psalm 32

1 Kings 19:1-18

Hebrews 2:10-18

Morning Epiphany

They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. God has come to help His people. Luke 7:16

There's a morning jam on the sidewalk in front of a music store in downtown Galax during the Fiddlers' Convention every year that is one of the highlights of the weekend for Meda and me. A dozen or so musicians playing guitars, fiddles, mandolins, banjos, slap bass, and spoons gather to play some bluegrass and gospel. The small crowd sings along and some take over from the regulars for a song or 2. It always ends with a version of *Amazing Grace* with a few dozen street corner singers that never fails to put a lump in my throat.

During one of the jams this past August there was a man, maybe 50 or so, with a condition that caused his head to shake constantly. He came alone and appeared to be clean and dressed appropriately for the occasion. He sat on one of the weathered benches outside the store listening to the music, alone, weakly applauding at the end of each song. A young beagle lay at his feet, looking at his master occasionally. After about 30 minutes, he struggled to stand and then left, crossing the street cane in hand with his beagle, alone.

I felt pity for the man and began imagining Jesus walking by incognito. What would He do? Would Jesus feel the man's disease and loneliness? Would He feel the pain and loneliness of everyone else in the crowd? Would He stop and speak to the man, offer encouragement, forgiveness, healing? What would it be like to actually hear His voice instead of just reading His

words? For a few terribly brief moments I had an inkling of the nature of Jesus and what it may have been like to walk with the crowds and then see Jesus respond to cries for help or a touch on His robe. All the power and all the love and all the grace consolidated into that one man. And that one man, God incarnate, loves me. That amazing, wonderful, gracious God stoops to offer me wholeness.

Ed Sterrett



FEBRUARY 28

Psalm 32

Genesis 4:1-16

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

The Burdens We Give Ourselves

Guilt and shame and regret – horrible feelings to experience, right? The burden of knowing we have fallen short is difficult and humbling. It can even make us physically ill to hide our sins. Yet, aren't we usually to blame for giving ourselves these burdens?

I LIED TO SOMEONE, now I feel bad and dread getting caught.

I MADE A BAD DECISION, now I am living with the consequences.

I LASHED OUT, now I regret acting on an angry impulse.

As humans, it is so much easier to look out for ourselves in the moment and not to think about later. The easy-way-OUT is almost always the easy-way-IN for the burdens we heap on ourselves. What a lesson we can learn from both Psalm 32 and Genesis 4 (part of today's scriptures). Even as far back as Cain and Abel's story, we see humans fighting off shame and trying to make excuses to God for certain behaviors.

But, as we read in Genesis: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

God wants us to accept the right in order to avoid the burdens of the wrong. Lent is a somber time, yet wonderful in that we can address our shortcomings and take comfort in the Glory that is to come through Jesus!

Natalie Thomas



MARCH 1

Psalm 32

Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28

Matthew 18:10-14

Lost Sheep

Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep to show that the Kingdom of God is accessible to all, even to those who were sinners or who strayed from God's path. He uses the example of a shepherd (God) who has 100 sheep and one goes missing. Every sheep is important to the shepherd. Even if only one is lost, he will search everywhere to find it.

In the same way, people are important to God. He does not want anyone to be lost, either. Every person is important to God. If you are the lost one, you can be sure He's searching for you and never giving up. Just say the word. He's waiting with open arms to scoop you up and carry you home.

You are so important to God that if you leave Him by choosing to live your life without Him, He will follow you to the ends of the earth. He stays by your side, no matter if you acknowledge Him or not. There's nothing you can do that will stop Him from loving you. The moment you choose to turn to Him, He'll open His arms and celebrate your return. His greatest joy is

having one of His lost return home. The moment you choose to turn to Him, He'll open His arms and celebrate your return. His greatest joy is having one of His lost return home.

There are 7.8 billion people on our planet. God created each of His children and knows all of us by name. He knows us so completely that He's counted the hairs on each of our heads! God desires that all 7.8 billion people follow Jesus so they can enjoy the magnificence of eternal life. 7.8 billion people. Not 7.8 billion minus 1. He will go after that 1 until all His children are 'home.'

His message is clear: God's Will is to bring all sinners home to Him. That includes you. He loves you. You matter to Him. Every last person matters to Him.

Joel Williamson



MARCH 2

Psalm 121

Isaiah 51:1-3

2 Timothy 1:3-7

An Expression of Gratitude

I love music. My dad instilled a love of music in me at a young age. I love many genres of music - jazz, hard rock, "classic rock," and of course, sacred music. For most of my life, I've been involved in some kind of choir. Most of the songs I've learned along the way have been by auditory memory, as I never really learned how to read music (shocker!). Songs and hymns are one the last things people who experience dementia can retrieve. Auditory memory can be a powerful thing which gives us joy and strength for the journey. I have quite a playlist of songs in my head.

As I pondered the scriptures for today, especially 2 Timothy 1: 3-7, I thought about one of my favorite pieces of music we have performed with David Schwoebel, "An Expression of Gratitude." I remember singing this piece at friends' departures, celebrating their lives with song.

I thank my God every time I remember you...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

The song is based on Philippians 1: 3-6, the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. Paul echoes this greeting in his second letter to Timothy, remembering him in a similar way.

I thank God ...as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ...I long to see you, so that my heart will be filled with joy.

Paul encouraged Timothy at a time when his steps may have faltered by writing,

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you....for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.

We all have times when our steps may have faltered, or we've gotten off the pathway we are supposed to be on. This happened with the Israelites during Isaiah's lifetime. He shared the vision that although the Israelites were to be exiled in Babylon, this would not destroy them. God was constantly at work in them, and what He had allowed to make desolate, he would rebuild. We can apply that truism to our present circumstances.

We as a congregation have endured many tough times when it seemed as though our sanctuary, our hallways, our togetherness had become desolate. Maybe King Hezekiah felt the same way when he looked at the temple which an invading army had destroyed. I find comfort in the encouraging words of Psalm 121,

He will not let your foot slip - he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Yes, we should remember our past friends and the joyous times we have had, but we also need to remember to pray for the future generations and to "fan into flames," our God given talents and gifts for our children here and now, and those yet to come.

Mike Lawrence



MARCH 3

Psalm 121

Micah 7:18-20

Romans 3:21-31

God Uses Cracked Pots

"A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years, this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. 'I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you.'

The bearer asked, 'Why? What are you ashamed of?'

The pot replied, 'For these past two years I am able to deliver only half of my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you don't get full value for your efforts.'

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, 'As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.'

As they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it somewhat. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, 'Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we have walked back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house.'"

In **2 Corinthians 4:7**, Paul writes "**Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.**" God uses flawed people to demonstrate His grace so that when the victory is won, He alone gets the glory. I came across this story again a few weeks back. It was such a good reminder to me that God is not looking for perfection in me. Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. In this world, nothing goes to waste. You may think, like the cracked pot, that you are useless in certain areas of your life, but God can turn these flaws into a blessing for others.

Christy Holsten



MARCH 4

Psalm 121

Isaiah 51:4-8

Luke 7:1-10

In this season of Lenten repentance, I really appreciate the image in Psalm 121 of “lift[ing] my eyes up to the hills” where “my help comes from the Lord” with a Lord who is our “keeper”. I can’t help but think of all the ways my eyes have been pointed down and/or straight ahead versus up to the Lord. For instance, I think of looking to others such as politicians or social leaders for help with stressors like where I think our world is headed. I also think of looking to my own efforts to make plans or to things like money to address my stressors. While I’m not saying that I shouldn’t care about things like voting or earning and saving money, I have experienced how placing reliance on such things to provide ultimate assurance and peace for my life’s worries leads to even more worries and obscures my mission. I forget that God loves me and wants true good for me, even if my circumstances don’t always feel that way - with no more powerful example that dwarfs any of my circumstances than Jesus on the Cross. I also forget that my mission is to live out God’s purpose for my life (i.e., “love God and my neighbor as myself”) even if the results aren’t always to my liking. In this Lenten season, I pray that I and we will lift our eyes up to the hills to see the Lord through things like time in Scripture, studying Jesus’ perseverance through 40 days in the desert to begin his ministry and ultimately die for our sins; through time in prayer; through observance of God’s creation; so that we may be reminded how our “help comes from the Lord”.

David Guion



MARCH 5

Humility

During Lent, we reflect on the meaning of humility.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amen.



MARCH 6

Psalms 128

Numbers 21:4-9

Hebrews 3:1-6

A couple of years ago, I discovered the book My One Word by Mike Ashcraft and Rachel Olsen. The idea of praying and picking just one word as a New Year's resolution equivalent made sense to me. However, I found that I was just as inconsistent in keeping up with one word as I was with keeping up with many.

In discussing that with God, the word that came to me this year was the word *consistent*. My first thought, after thanking God for being cool and ironic, was that would be doable. Certainly, I can be consistent in devotional and prayer time and exercising. Right? Done! Let's get 2023 started.

But, I've had a daily devotional and prayer time for quite a while so that wasn't really a fair goal. Okay, maybe God just really wanted me to focus on my health this year by exercising regularly. Here's the thing, though, about those prayer times. God does answer and quite clearly at times. Being consistent is actually, a really, really complicated word that can and should apply to many areas of my life, not just praying, exercising, and eating healthily.

This year I will be consistent in listening, (using the Hebrew Shema listening), thinking before I speak, being patient with others and myself, trying to see a situation through someone else's eyes, being kind, thinking positively, enjoying moments of happiness and beauty, and letting go of moments of strife and grief. I will continue to be consistent in praying and studying God's Word. As for exercising, Yoda said, "Do. Or do not. There is

no try." That may not be a scriptural quote, but God does speak in many ways.

Oddly, while I was almost finished writing this, the computer ate it, and it was just gone. (I'm sure it didn't happen because I hit a wrong random key.) What a great opportunity to practice being consistent in patience! Ha.

Dear God, thank you for the many ways you speak to us. How wonderful to know that you are always consistent in your love, care, and guidance. Amen.

Denise Dysert



MARCH 7

Psalm 128

Isaiah 65:17-25

Romans 4:6-13

God says to "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

To be pulled in many directions is part of the Human Condition, and so are fear, anxiety, stress, and anger. These are the body's ways of protection when feeling under attack. It's also a sign to us that something is out of balance, including the ability to shut down and block out all emotions all together.

I recently had an event that caused me to act out of character. My emotions got the best of me, and I found myself with feelings that were out of place and foreign. Instead of resting in the Word of God, I wallowed in my own story and chose to "handle" things on my own. That lead to emotionally disconnecting, becoming very task driven, and isolating my "process" to what I could control. Truth is, almost nothing is within our

control. We are all so interconnected that the cause and effect of human relations, actions, inaction, have impact on our lives. Learning to slow down, look up, breathe, and dwell in the Lord's House means to also allow God to work in you! Being deliberate about our relationship with God takes work, vulnerability, and trusting that God offers a strength and peace that passes earthly understanding. "Fear not, I am with you."

Gerald Hemphill



MARCH 8

Psalm 128

Ezekiel 36:22-32

John 7:53-8:11

As I read through the verses from today's passages, the one that intrigued me the most was Ezekiel 37. I don't spend much time in Ezekiel. Did you know that Ezekiel spoke words from God that turned a valley of dry bones into living, breathing people again? How could I not want to research this a little more and find out what this means? So, I googled it!

I'm not sure how reliable what I read was but from "gotanswers.org" I read that "Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones came to him after God had directed him to prophesy the rebirth of Israel in Chapter 36. God announced, through the prophet, that Israel will be restored to her land in blessing under the leadership of Jesus Christ. However, this promise seemed impossible in light of Israel's present condition. She was "dead" as a nation, deprived of her land, her king, and her temple. She had been divided and dispersed for so long that unification and restoration seemed impossible. So, God gave Ezekiel the vision of the dry bones as a sign."

Wow – a nation divided and dispersed for so long that unification and restoration seemed impossible. Why does that sound so familiar to

much of what we hear and feel in our world today? Division as a nation? Expectations of restoration and unification? Is all lost in our world today? Should we despair and be fearful and hopeless?

Heading back to gotanswers.org, "The reviving of the dry bones signified God's plan for Israel's future national restoration. The vision also, and more importantly, showed that Israel's new life depended on God's power and not the circumstances of the people. Putting "breath" by God's Spirit into the bones showed that God would not only restore them physically but also spiritually."

I don't know about you, but this gives me tremendous hope in our future. No matter how divided and despondent our world may feel today, God has a plan. He will restore and unify his people. Who knew that a bunch of dry, decaying bones in the desert could bring such good news for our future? God knew - and knows - and uses these verses as hope for believers.

May you find hope and peace in the story of Ezekiel and the dry bones as you reflect during this Lenten season.

Edwina Word



MARCH 9

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:1-8

Colossians 1:15-23

Considering My Pridefulness

In 50 A.D. the Apostle Paul visited the Colossian Christians. His reputation had preceded him. Some members in the church had heard of Paul's recovery of sight after his Damascus Road experience, and of his recovery from the bite of a poisonous snake on the shores of Malta, and of his singing with Silas in a Roman prison as angels visited them. When Paul arrived, some planned to greet Paul as if he were divine and considered his preaching about Jesus and their relationship to the Lord as being of less importance.

When Paul heard the rumors, he immediately wrote to the church and magnified Jesus as "pre-eminent" above all others (read Colossians 1:15-23). When Paul speaks of himself to others, he humbly lowers himself and becomes the "servant" (v. 23), or the "messenger", not the Message.

In the year 1267 AD St. Thomas Aquinas lists the "seven deadly sins." We should note that "pride" is first and foremost of the seven. Pride is seen as the one sin that spawns all other sin. Because of our pride we cannot know the Presence of Christ among us. Therefore, the major work of Lent is to be transformed of our pridefulness.

When Jesus came to the Jordan river where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing there could have been a mighty struggle between these two giants. But instead, they each sought to play the role of the lesser (see John 3:30). Jesus says to John, "I have come to you to be baptized by you." Afterwards John says of Jesus, "I must become the least so that he

may become the greater.” John’s spirit was baptized in humility, the opposite of pride. Jesus showed us the ultimate act of humility when he willingly chose to go to the cross for us.

Someone wrote, *“I must become nothing in order that the nothing-but-ness of God can become everything for me.”* Lent is a wonderful time to ponder this truth. We must act with humility in all our relationships.

The dictionary defines “Pride” as 1 “A feeling of deep satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements, or from having qualities or possessions that are widely admired.” 2 “Having a higher opinion of oneself than is deserved.”

As we walk through this season of Lent, we should ask ourselves, do we secretly yearn to be more worthy of praise than others? Do we feel jealous if we do not receive the recognition that we feel we deserve? Do we always want to be the center of attention? Paul would not allow the Colossian church to worship him above his Lord. Compared to Jesus, he called himself “merely a servant” (v. 23). Paul had fought his own painful battle with pride. He knew the challenge. He understood that true growth in the spiritual life is only achieved by “walking humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8). It is the work of the cross.

Bill Hardison



MARCH 10

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:9-21

Ephesians 2:11-22

We live in an ever-changing world that sometimes seems to be spiraling out of control. We look at our own lives and despair at our

circumstances and the things that happen to us and those we love. As I look back at my own life and at the times that seemed darkest, I am amazed at the ways that God uplifted me, comforted me, and saw me through.

In Exodus 16 we read of the Israelites grumbling against God because of their circumstances and complaining that they were better off in Egypt where they had plenty to eat. He devises a means to provide them with what they need and Moses reveals His plan to the people with the conditions they must meet to receive his blessing. They are provided with quail to eat at night and manna in the morning along with instructions concerning the amount they are to gather. Greed took over and many of them took more than they needed. God and Moses had to step in and give more direction to the people. Sound familiar? How many times do we ask for a need to be supplied and after it is, we still want more. The Israelites were in this situation due to their own actions and wanted God to bail them out and after he does ,they continue to grumble. Sound familiar?

I must confess that I have been at times like the Israelites in my own life. Losing sight of the fact that I have been blessed beyond measure in so many ways that I don't deserve. In this Lenten season when we are reminded of the greatest blessing of all, I hope we can focus on the good things in our lives and the world even when they seem hard to find. Many of you reading this are blessings to me and have enriched my life more than I can say.

In Psalm 95 we read that we are to *"sing for joy to the Lord, the rock of our salvation... Let us bow down in worship and... know that we are always in His care."*

Rick Ivey



MARCH 11

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:27-35

John 4:1-6

Parenting Is Hard

Aiden: "Can I play on my iPad when we get home?"

Me: "No. You spend too much time on your electronics, and we need to get some exercise and practice reading."

Aiden: "Awwwww, but I'm tired."

Me: "Aiden, I'm exhausted. I don't particularly want to go shoot basketball in the freezing cold either, but I wouldn't be a good mom if I allowed you to play on your iPad all day. And you NEED a good mom."

That is the exact conversation I had in the produce department of Food Lion yesterday afternoon. Seems innocuous enough, right?

So, why was I so exhausted? Because PARENTING IS HARD!!!! When we had premature twins in the NICU, the nurses warned us that the two of them would tag team us with medical issues. If one of them was having a good day, the other one would take a turn for the worse and vice versa. And they were right. It was a roller coaster ride from day one.

What they didn't tell us, though, is that the tag teaming wouldn't stop when they came home from the hospital. We had to duct tape LJ's diaper on him, or he would play farmer with the "mud" he found in it. Laura loved to use my walls as a canvas for her crayons and markers, and they both preferred the backyard to our bathroom while potty training.

As the two of them got older, we created structure and rules and set parameters for them, but as children often do, they pushed the limits and broke those rules. As a teenager, Laura would regularly have her cell phone taken away for one reason or another. And then there was the time that LJ came home after an evening out with friends to find the cables to his video games were “missing” because he had been disrespectful earlier in the day. There were always consequences for their actions.

As things were starting to settle down in our home, along came Aiden. Wow! Who knew that such a dynamite personality could be contained in such a cute little package?!? And notice I said dynamite, not dynamic. Aiden is a firecracker and has stumped not only us but FOUR behavioral therapists. Again, parenting is hard.

No one knows this better than God. Since Adam and Eve, He has created structure and rules and set parameters. And since Adam and Eve, we have chosen to shatter that structure, break those rules and bulldoze through the parameters. There are always consequences for these actions - abolishment from the Garden of Eden, wandering through a desert for 40 years, captivity – either by a foreign nation or a guilty conscience or a lustful spirit.

But our story doesn't end with punishment; it begins – because along came Jesus. Jesus is proof that no matter how poorly we behave or how much we test His patience, we are still loved. Just as my children are still loved regardless of how exhausted I am.

Michelle Rauppis



MARCH 12

Suffering

During Lent, we reflect on the meaning of suffering.

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

All around us we see sorrow, brokenness and pain.

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

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

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

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

Through suffering, we deepen our faith.

We cry out helplessly when our burdens seem unbearable.

Through suffering, we learn to comfort others.

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

Amen.



MARCH 13

Psalm 81

Genesis 24:1-27

2 John 1-13

God is There for the Sandwich Generation

It was an amazing week at work! I had gotten everything done by Wednesday for Sunday worship and had time to start working on some projects that I had been needing to get to. I even thought about resting on my laurels for a split second, and then, within the hour, the Family Hurricane hit!

All of the following things happened within the same hour: Call Number 1 was from 18-year-old son Joseph, a freshman at JMU, trying to figure out what he needed to do in order to drop a class and add another, of course only after the Drop/Add deadline had passed maybe 3 days before. He could not get his Faculty Advisor to email him back; utter desperation had set in! Call Number 2 was from 22-year-old daughter, Madelyn, who is preparing to graduate from ODU in May. She had completed all of the questions on her Application for Graduation/Housing Release, uploaded all she needed to, etc., but then the Registrar's office wanted her to do the same things all over again for some unknown reason, so here we go, more utter desperation! After escaping work, which had been a pretty peaceful place for a few precious moments prior to those 2 calls, I headed home to try and engage in plans of attack, pulling out my best words of wisdom for the kids, trying to help them find ways to figure these things out on their own. On the way into the driveway, I got the mail out of the mailbox only to find a letter from my Mom's Memory Care facility saying that her cost of care was going up \$1100 per month, in

addition to the rent increase of \$350 she had just received a month before. Talk about "Calgon, take me away!!!!!"

A wise staff member told me a few years back after hearing about having the "two kids in college" year coming up and after asking how my Mom was, told me (with a slight grin, might I add), "YOU ARE IN THE SANDWICH GENERATION!" He went on to explain that he had heard this phrase and that it applies to me now since my kids were not exactly out of the nest and also due to the fact that I have an aging parent with a health issue. I was in the middle of the bread. Well, it was sticky that day, so it must have been a peanut butter sandwich!

We are reminded in today's reading selection that sometimes God has to remind his people of all that He has done for them, and that HE IS STILL HERE DOING THINGS FOR THEM! "In distress you called, and I rescued you.... I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...."(Psalm 81: 7-10). When I was telling Madelyn about my day after talking with her about her situation, it dawned on me what God had done for me that day. I had time. God had enabled me to get my office work done early that week so that I would have some time to devote to each of the 3 situations (and beloved people involved) mentioned above. He prepared me for the challenges that I would have that day by helping me get ahead in another area of my life. These situations seem pretty minor now in retrospect; however, God is with us in the small things, too. He was reminding me of WHO HE IS, the God of the sandwich generation...and every other generation for all time.

P.S. All 3 of the situations have been resolved and are at least better than they seemed to be at the time. The Earth is still spinning, and all is well!

Greta Satterfield



MARCH 14

Psalm 81

Genesis 29:1-14

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Dust on the Bible

Most of you probably don't know this about me, but I am a sucker for early 90s country music. Don't get me wrong, I love all types of music and I mean all, but there is something about lyrics of that generation of music that really draw me in. I think most of what I know came from some country lyric from the 80s and 90s. On a normal day if I had to choose, I am going to listen to some old school Alan Jackson, Clay Walker, George Strait and Reba. One of my favorite all time country songs is called "Dust on the Bottle" by David Lee Murphy. To summarize this song, it is about a young man who is getting ready for a date and an older neighbor has just what the young man needs for his date...you guessed it, a bottle of wine with some dust on it. It is a cute little love song and has a catchy tune that has me singing loudly every time I hear it.

BUT, here is the real reason why I love this song. The first time this song came on the radio when Rob and I were dating, we both began to sing along. When we got to the chorus, "dust on the bottle", I heard Rob sing, "dust on the BIBLE". Being that we had just begun dating, I let it go and wondered if I had been singing this wrong my entire life. A few minutes after that song was over, I couldn't let it go. I asked Rob, "did you say dust on the Bible"? He said yes very confidently and said, "those are the words right"? I said, "I think it is bottle". We began to laugh and question the lyrics. We both agreed it actually sounded better with the word Bible, especially this verse.

"There might be a little dust on the bottle (BIBLE),
But don't let it fool ya about what's inside.
There might be a little dust on the bottle (BIBLE),
It's one of those things that gets sweeter with time."

To this day, we have changed the lyrics and sing and laugh when this song comes on. It has a much deeper meaning to us now. And knowing when we pick up the Bible, the lyrics on the inside get sweeter every time we read it.

As we approach this Lenten season, let us remember that Ash Wednesday is a day of Hope. Without Christ, the words "remember that you have to die" are hard ones. But with Christ, they are a reminder that, though our bodies will one day return to dust, we have already been given the hope with his resurrection.

Kendra Copeland



MARCH 15

Psalm 81

Jeremiah 2:4-13

John 7:14-31, 37-39

Psalm 81 is saying to the world today as it was in olden days, "Sing for joy to God." "Shout joyfully to God". We call out to him when we are in trouble and in need and he tells us now as he told them then, "Listen to Me."

How often as parents we told our children, "Listen to Me." But we today just like in the past and like children, "Do not listen."

He has told us that if we would just listen and put aside our stubbornness and walk in his ways that he would "Subdue our enemies."

Jesus says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink."

Friends, we live in a troubled world. You don't have to look far. The lawlessness, murders, suicides, divorce rate, abortions, rapes and the list goes on and on. The storm is raging and the boat is taking on water. But the one who calmed the sea is alive and well and can still calm the waters today. Prayer and faith in the anchor, Jesus Christ. "The Anchor Holds."

Gary Ringstaff



MARCH 16

Psalm 23

1 Sam 15:10-21

Ephesians 4:25-32

As we look at the Scripture passages for today, we see how in 1 Samuel, Saul disobeyed God's instructions by only doing part of what he was told to do.

The Ephesians passage tells us how to live as Christ's children.

Psalm 23, a passage most of us memorized as children, tells us that the Lord is our Shepherd and that He cares for us and meets our needs.

Not only is He our loving Shepherd, He is also the Lamb of God, sacrificed for our sins. His resurrection on Easter as our risen Savior gives us eternal life with Him — the greatest gift ever given! Have you accepted this gift?

Beth Powitz



MARCH 17

Psalm 23

1 Sam 15:22-31

Ephesians 5:1-9

22 And Samuel said,

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the LORD?**

**Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.**

**23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.**

**Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.”**

Faithfulness can be defined as responding in God’s way to everything that happens – both big and small. Another way of looking at faithfulness is by staying true to God in your thoughts, words, and actions.

But far too often we find ourselves like Paul in Romans 7 when he said, “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”.

We try to do what the laws says; we try asking, “What Would Jesus Do?” and we try to live our lives using the idea of “love your neighbors as yourself.” At the end of the day, we look back and see that we have fallen short of our desires.

Saul, as the king of Israel is an example of someone who failed to be faithfully obedient to God. Even though Saul tried to explain to Samuel that he tried to complete the God given tasks he was assigned, yet his refusal to obey all the commands of God led to his rejection as king.

Samuel summarizes Saul's sin when he admonishes him by saying, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft (divination) and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king." (I Sam. 15:22,23)

The key to Samuel's message is that God wants his followers to obey His commands with a right attitude, motive, and selfless spirit. Our challenge is to dedicate our lives to follow Him.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father,

Help us to keep our eyes fixed on your ways. Help us to follow the will of our hearts. Fill our heart and mind with your wisdom and understanding of your teachings of your good news. Instill in us the fear of Your blessed commandments, so we may lead a spiritual life, both thinking and doing to please you.

Amen

Carl Brown



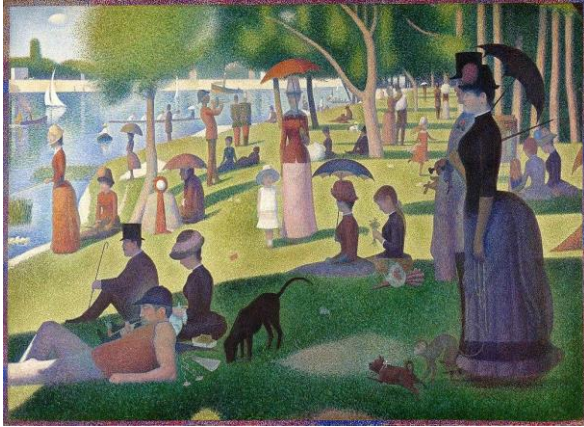
MARCH 18

Psalm 23

1 Sam 15:32-34

John 1:1-9

Connecting the Dots



A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte

(1884-1886) by Georges Seurat

Georges Seurat is known throughout the art world as the inventor of Pointillism, a style of painting after Impressionism which used color theory, visual perception, and tiny dots to create a masterpiece. When Seurat was experimenting with this technique, the art world was using brush strokes to create paintings. The painting he is most known for, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, took over two years to complete and used an estimated 220,000 dots of paint on the canvas. This masterpiece is huge, almost seven feet by eleven feet, and when the viewer looks up closely, you cannot really determine what the subject of the painting is. It is only with the use of visual perception, or distance, that you

can really see the literal big picture. The viewer needs to stand back to connect the dots.

At first glance, the scriptures selected for today's reading seem to not have much in common. If you read them chronologically, they start to make more sense. In I Samuel 15: 32-34, Samuel brings a **Word** from God to then King Saul that because of Saul's disobedience, he will no longer be Israel's king. Samuel carries out the **Word** that Saul was supposed to do. Years later David, who would become God's new king and Saul's successor, writes the familiar Psalm 23. The **Word** was there too when David was faced with peril and feared death, that God had made a covenant with him and would not abandon him. Finally we read from John 1:1-9, the apostle John reminds us that since the beginning of time the **Word** was with humanity. The Greek meaning of this **Word** means reason and was significant to the Greeks. The same **Word** was significant to the Jews and meant God. Clearly, **the Word** is meant to connect the dots in God's handiwork, his plan for us.

How can we connect the dots in our lives? Clearly **the Word** is with us in this world. He was present in the world with Samuel, David and the apostle John. We can trust that God and his son Jesus will keep their **Word** with humanity, never making a mistake, never abandoning us, and being present with us in our journey throughout life. Looking at the big picture, we can see that Jesus' atonement for our sins on the cross was all part of God's plan, meant to bring us closer to God for all eternity. I'm so glad **the Word** connects us, the dots, to God.

Sue Lawrence



MARCH 19

Lament

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amen.



MARCH 20

Psalm 146

Isaiah 59:9-19

Acts 9:1-20

Psalm 146

1 Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul.

2 I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

These verses echo some of the lyrics of *10,000 Reasons* by Matt Redman (and specifically are taken from Psalm 103). *10,000 Reasons* holds a special place in my heart, as it reminds me of my beloved father-in-law. While he passed 9 years ago, he lived this until his final earthly breath.

On the surface this seems straightforward and easy, if not simple. However, as life unfolds and throws twists and turns, a pandemic, or unforeseen medical diagnoses, let us remember the simple words of David and follow his example – “Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, my soul.” Uncertainty creates doubt, and doubt creates fear, but let our foundation in Jesus sustain us in uncertain times while we Praise the Lord.

James Moss



MARCH 21

Psalm 146

Isaiah 42:14-21

Colossians 1:9-14

We know prayer is important. We agree that we should Faithfully pray for one another and the Church as a whole. But do we practice this? How often is good enough? When should we pray? What is the focus?

Prayer is the divine telephone of communication. It is a direct line up to Christ. Prayers are precious. Prayers are sacred things... We talk so flippantly about prayer when things are going wrong or when disaster strikes; we seldom stop to think about what we're actually doing when we say we're going to pray or when we actually take the time to pray.

We should pray continually for ourselves and others that we would increase in knowledge, fruitfulness, and strength and give thanks to our Father. Can you imagine, if we were committed to praying these things over each other? If our genuine desire for ourselves and one another was that we would be filled with the knowledge of His will, that we would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, that we would bear fruit in every good work, that we would grow in the knowledge of the Lord, that we would be strengthened with Holy Spirit power?!

Prayer: Father, today as I walk with you, help me to live a life worthy of you, pleasing you in every way and bearing fruit in every good work. Help us to constantly pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ in all circumstances that we together might increasingly see you as our everything.

Valerie Williamson



MARCH 22

Psalm 146

Isaiah 60:17-22

Matthew 9:27-34

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.

One of the greatest struggles I ever experienced was losing my paternal grandparents to a senseless murder. The rage I felt at the person responsible was consuming, and I struggled with what to do with that rage. I struggled with fear for my family while the murderer was still at large. I struggled with worry that he would not be convicted when he was caught. I struggled with knowing he was alive, and my grandparents were not, when he went to prison. I struggled with my faith that God would allow any of this to happen. My aunt, who lost her parents in this horror showed me a different way to deal with my struggles. She acknowledged that the situation was beyond her and clung to God. I could cease struggling and be held by my LORD. I could still look at life with hope and with gratitude. I could honor my grandparents in how I live and allow God to keep my heart from being yet another victim of that awful event.

Every day we are presented with an opportunity to struggle with something, often with many things. Some are struggling today with the horror of war in their land, or famine, gang violence, domestic abuse, poverty, or sickness. Some of us are struggling with making sense of these terrible situations and how the reality of these tragedies can be reconciled with our belief in a loving and all-powerful God. Some of us are just struggling to get out of bed, or to smile, or to face the day without the presence of someone that was important to us, lost now to death, or to distance, or to a broken relationship. Some of us are near frozen in our anxiety that we will succumb to illness, or be a victim of persecution, or just

that someone will find out how broken we are. To be human is to struggle, but in our struggle, God offers hope.

God offers us what He gave Jacob when Jacob ceased to struggle with God and just clung to Him. Jacob was changed from the inside out and so much so that God said Jacob should be called by a new name – Israel. God already had a covenant relationship with Jacob, but it was not life-giving and life-altering to Jacob until Jacob struggled over it directly with God. This Psalm tells us about the God of hope. We are reminded of how another struggled and was changed. We are also told that hope comes to us when the God truly becomes our God - The LORD your God – the psalmist says. Hope comes not from an unknown creator but from the One you call by name, that you acknowledge as Lord and master and decide to cling to. May you admit your struggles this Lenten season and take those struggles directly to the God of hope, who struggled on the cross for you.

Tom Medley



MARCH 23

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:8-3:3

Revelations 10:1-11

Like most people my age, growing up as kids you learned to eat the food put before you at mealtime or you went hungry. Fast food was a luxury, and you had no idea what delivery service was. I was blessed to marry someone who not only likes to cook and try different recipes but who also is a fantastic cook, so my challenge is not over-eating now, which I tend to fail at often. In the Bible food is often mentioned. From the Old Testament telling you what was unclean to eat to the New Testament, feeding the multitudes with just bread and fish, food is everywhere. There are two sections of scripture that share the food theme in an odd way. Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 and Rev 10:1-10 both have the interesting command to eat a

scroll and it will be as sweet as honey. In Revelation we have John enjoying the taste of honey as he eats but it turns sour when it hits his stomach because of the prophecies he is going to have to make. Scriptures should be like that with us as well. It should always be sweet as we study God's word, and we should always be looking for others to share the sweetness with. This does, however, mean there could be times we need to make a stand for Christ, and hence, we would encounter the bitterness John encountered. We should enjoy food for the body but food that feeds the soul is where we all should dine regularly.

Andy Cole



MARCH 24

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 33:10-16

Revelations 11:15-19

Among these 3 passages, a common theme is dependability: God's love is unfailing, always rely on the Word, and so forth. Certainty is something that we have become less and less acquainted with in the past 3 years. When will we return to in-person school? What is this sniffle: cold, flu, or COVID-19? Will I be able to see my family this holiday season? As someone who needs rigidity in her schedule and plans, this has been a nightmare: canceled performances, postponed meetings, and the like. I feel uneasy living with unexpected turns and twists.

Something unexpected happened in the winter of 2021; my teacher of 3 years passed away. She had been my role model and friend, as well as one of my greatest supporters. The last time I ever spoke to her was over zoom, which made me feel even more disconnected from her. Grieving her was equally unpredictable - grief is not linear. At our school memorial service for her, I, along with a few other girls, sang "Lord of All Hopefulness." The last verse begins: "Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,

whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm." I think this is God's response to our feelings of uncertainty, pain, and grief. Our Lord is the Lord of peace, of calm - the opposite of those feelings of anxiety or sadness. This is not to say that those feelings are not valid - they exist to be felt. But when it is time, you can remember that our God has dominion over all serenity, and it is waiting for you. When life becomes unpredictable, unbearable even, "put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption" (Psalm 130:7). What greater assurance is there?

Pender Raymond



MARCH 25

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 36:8-15

Luke 24:44-53

That Was Then, This Is Now...

44 Then he said, "When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. 46 And he said, "Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. 47 It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' 48 You are witnesses of all these things.

49 "And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven."

The Ascension

50 Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. 52 So they worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy. 53 And they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God.

This story represents one of the great 'pivot points' in scripture. In the verses leading up to this passage, Jesus appeared to his people, shows his wounds to prove it was really Him, and joins in their meal, further illustrating his reality and resurrected humanity.

Then, Jesus proceeds to recap two really important points and goes on to describe what's next.

The recap:

1. He was the Messiah, the fulfillment of all prophecy and scripture.
2. His suffering, death, and resurrection were the pinnacle of that prophecy.

What's next:

1. His message would now go throughout the world to all groups of people.
2. There is forgiveness, for those who repent.

So, this is where it gets interesting, and this is where it applies to us, his people today:

1. You (his people then, his people today) are witnesses to his grace, his love, his power.
2. The Holy Spirit, if we are open, fills us with the same grace, love, and power.

Then Jesus ascended into Heaven. The work of his time on earth was done. The work of the Savior going forward into eternity had just begun.

So, where do we fit in? Look in verse 47. Where it says "*this message would be proclaimed...to all...*"— that's us. That's our job. Not to just enjoy the peace and forgiveness we know when we are in right relationship to God, but **to proclaim**. Not to just hold onto the amazing things we have seen God do in our lives, our families, our church, but **to bear witness**. And these things are not to be done in our own power but as the Holy Spirit prompts and guides us.

Van Payne



MARCH 26

Sacrifice

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

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

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

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

We relinquish our desire to cover up our own unrighteousness.

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

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

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

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

Amen.



MARCH 27

Psalm 143

1 Kings 17:17-24

Acts 20:7-12

So many thoughts ramble around in my head as I try to write something significant about Lent. I'm not sure I have anything new or profound to say. A hymn we sang last Sunday, actually one of my favorite hymns, speaks to me loudly about how I should feel about God's love outpoured to us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. It was written in 1864 by Frederick W. Faber, a Church of England pastor who later became a Catholic priest.

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

*There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
But we make His love too narrow by false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness with a zeal He will not own.
For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more simple, we would take Him at His word;
And our lives would be more loving in the likeness of our Lord.*

This is a lovely poetic expression of Frederick's understanding of God's love, and it mirrors mine. The "wideness" of God's love is beyond our mind's ability to comprehend, but let us spend our lives trying to love like Him.

Carol Turner



MARCH 28

Psalm 143

2 Kings 4:18-37

Ephesians 2:1-10

Philippians 4:6-7

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

1 Peter 5:7

"Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you."

Prayer: Dear God, I confess I am a worrier. I sometimes doubt what You can or will do. But You are the creator of the universe, and You conquered death. There is nothing you cannot do. Please hear my prayer as I ask You to strengthen my faith and help me trust you today and every day. Please reveal yourself to me in mighty ways.

Amen.

Robin Kitts



MARCH 29

Psalm 143

Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41

Matthew 22:23-33

In a Bible study years ago, we reconsidered the concept of lamentations or prayers of lament. Until then, I had always associated a purely negative connotation to the word lament, thinking it was only about suffering or complaining about my suffering or pain. However, a truer

definition of these prayers is that they're a conversation with God – yes, to tell him about the suffering and pain, but also trusting him with the situation, whatever it is. Lament partners with hope – hope that the season we're in is just a season, hope that God hears us and will be with us through any pain or grief.

The Psalm for today is one of David's prayers of lament – we don't know for sure what situation he's in at this point, but he's clearly in pain:

“3 My enemy has chased me.

He has knocked me to the ground

and forces me to live in darkness like those in the grave.

4 I am losing all hope;

I am paralyzed with fear.”

We've all been in some level of this situation – where we feel knocked down or are afraid of what's next. But here's where we can learn from David's words – the next verse is:

“5 I remember the days of old.

I ponder all your great works

and think about what you have done.

6 I lift my hands to you in prayer.” (Psalm 143:3-6, NLT)

While David is in a place of losing hope – he stops and thinks about where God has been there for him in the past. He remembers pieces of his past where he saw God's hand in his life, and he remembers he can still come to God in prayer today.

The scriptures are full of reminders of where God has been present in His people's lives – in the passage from Jeremiah today, we see another example, where God made a promise to His people in a time of uncertainty, giving them hope and reminding them that He “will find joy doing good for them.” (Jer. 32:41, NLT)

As you go through the last week and a half of Lent – continue to look for ways to remember God’s unfailing love and remember he invites us into prayers of lament where He will hear our pain, but also give us comfort and hope.

Jen Payne



MARCH 30

Psalm 31:9-16

1 Sam 16:11-13

Philippians 1:1-11

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Everybody is a product of the past, but you do not have to be a prisoner of the past. Paul said to forget the past by means of forgiveness and repentance. Grow in the knowledge of God by concentrating on your relationship with him. Realize you are forgiven, and move on.

But, what is the prize to which Paul refers? It is eternity with Jesus, and eternity is a long time. The prize is worth the price.

The late D.L. Moody once said the Bible can keep you from sin, but sin can keep you from the Bible.

Adding all of this together, "What is the battle plan?"

1. Going to church an hour per week and putting some money in the collection plate is not enough.
2. Prayer, reading the Bible, listening for God is needed.

3. Accepting Christ as your Lord and Savior is mandatory.
4. Leading others to Christ strengthens your own faith.
5. Asking for forgiveness is a must.

And then, leave the rest to God.

Neil Steverson



MARCH 31

Psalm 31:9-16

Job 13:13-19

Philippians 1:21-30

A few weeks ago, while handwashing some dishes, I broke one of our Fiesta Ware soup bowls. I knew my wife would not be happy to hear about this broken bowl because, as she had told me before, Fiesta Ware no longer makes the soup bowls with a handle. We both like using these larger soup bowls with a handle, and I understood her disappointment. A couple of days later, my wife began the pursuit of trying to find a replacement for the broken bowl. And, thanks to eBay, my act of breaking the bowl and the disappointment it caused was relieved.

During the season of Lent, we examine our own brokenness and think and pray about our sin and repentance. In Psalm 31, a psalm of David, the psalmist writes of distress, a life consumed by anguish, and strength failing because of iniquity (guilt). Verse 12 expresses a realization of brokenness by the psalmist. A reading of various translations has different words but these two seem to express, poignantly, this realization.

I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel.
(King James Version)

I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery. (NIV)

Brokenness can leave us feeling alone, mired in a sense of despair and guilt. Another psalm of David, Psalm 51, was written after the prophet Nathan came to David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. In this Psalm, verses 3-4 state:

For I know my transgressions,
my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight; (Psalm 51: 3-4 NIV)

Should brokenness leave us feeling hopeless? Words found later in Psalm 51 talk about the brokenness as a "broken spirit" and a "broken and contrite heart." Ultimately, the brokenness of our spirit is the path to being repentant and having hope.

Near the end of the passage for today from Psalm 31, the psalmist writes,

But I trust in you, Lord; I say, "You are my God."
Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love. (Psalm 31:14,16) NIV)

In the midst of our brokenness, we, too, can have this hope of being saved by God's "unfailing love."

Paul Haynes



APRIL 1

Psalm 31:9-16

Lamentations 3:55-66

Mark 10:32-34

I live with teenagers. (I will pause here for you to lift a prayer of supplication on my behalf.) For those of you who have not recently had close encounters with this species, let me remind you that developmentally, teenagers can be a bit self-absorbed. They leave dirty dishes stacked in random places around the house and then ask for money for new shoes. They roll their eyes and respond with sass but then want gas for the car.

Because we tend to read scripture through the lens of our current circumstances and stations in life, I imagine God's tone in this text as similar to a parent speaking to an unappreciative teen.

God is saying, "I love you, but I'm not very happy with you right now."

The problem is that they are acting like spiritual teenagers. They can't see past themselves. They are doing what the *letter* of the law requires – fasting – but they are making it all about *themselves*. God recognizes that their fasting is all for show, while in other areas of their lives they exhibit a complete disregard for others.

Isaiah reminds them that God expects more than just empty ritual. Instead, God expects them to confront injustice; to provide food, clothes, and shelter; to stop speaking maliciously of others.

There is nothing inherently wrong with our rituals. But this text reminds us to examine the sincerity of them. Do they spur us on towards being "repairers" and "restorers"? Or are we behaving like spiritual teenagers, caught up in ourselves and neglecting the work that God expects of us?

Consider:

Looking inward is just half of the equation of a spiritual life. God calls us to turn our eyes outward as well. Find one or two small ways that you can be a repairer and restorer today. Do them. And then find two more tomorrow.

Pray:

Forgive us, Lord, when we are self-centered. Make our worship pleasing to you. Show us opportunities to care for the needs of others and then make us bold enough to act.

LeJeanna Raymond

**APRIL 2**
Death

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

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

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

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

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

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

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

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

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

NOTES:



APRIL 3

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalms 36:5-11

Hebrews 9:11-15

John 12:1-11

Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

I remember as a child watching a video of these verses. Abraham hiked with Isaac to a very lonely place, stacked wood for the fire, placed Isaac on the wood, and was ready to sacrifice his son. Even as a child, with no children I could see the pain on Abraham's face and the disbelief that God would want him to do something so cruel. However, Abraham was still going to go through with the sacrifice. Following God's instructions was more important than anything else, even more important than Isaac.

While I have never had a moment in my life like this one. Every day, I have several small ones. Last night I was asked to write a Lenten Devotional. I squirmed and did not commit. Well, that was really the second time in three days. I have gotten very good at squirming and not committing.

So, this morning I woke up and thought, writing this devotional is the most important thing I can do today, and I am going to write it first thing this morning at work! I am going to put writing this devotional before everything else!

I get to work at 6am, so no one can bother me. I sat at my desk and avoided looking at e-mail. If I look at it, I will be distracted for an hour. And then, a lady also shows up to work very early. She comes to my office talking about the accounting problem that we have been working on for months. All I can think about, is how am I going to put the Lenten Devotional first, if she wants to talk about this problem now. What does God want me to do right now? Am I supposed to look for some wood—kick her out of my office. I squirmed and didn't commit, and she left.

That seemed like a little test, and I was thinking about it, and all of a sudden my phone rang. It is my daughter. Another test! I failed the test and answered it, because not many daughters call at 6:15am, and I worried that she had something going wrong. It was a good call. I did not squirm, and she shared good news.

During the whole call, I realized how hard it is to keep God's instructions first. It is also hard to know how to prioritize God's instructions. He wants us to be helpful with His kingdom—help write Lenten Devotionals...before the due date. He also wants us to be loving and joyful in our interactions. I am pretty sure God would like us to commit and stop squirming.

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

We act and think we live very busy lives. Help us know what is important. Help us know how to prioritize tasks in our lives for You. Amen.

Robert Holsten



APRIL 4

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalms 71:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 12:20-36

Servants from Heaven

As you might imagine, I get a lot of questions from the preschoolers at Chapel Time. Sometimes, the questions are related to the story. In the case of feeding the 5,000, one child asked, "How did Jesus break the fish?" The friend beside him quickly answered, "Because Jesus is really strong!" Sometimes the questions veer off the subject to other things like, "Who's going to win the Super Bowl?" (I took an informal vote, and it seemed like a tie between the Chiefs and the Eagles, though one little boy really wants the Giants to win!)

Some questions aren't questions at all like "I'm three years old!" And, sometimes, I ask the questions. One particular day, we were talking about how Jesus was born in a manger. I talked about how most babies today are born in hospitals or at home. "Where were you born?" I asked. One little girl raised her hand and replied, "Mommy said I came from heaven!"

We forget sometimes that we came from heaven, don't we? Our passages today from Isaiah 49 remind us that we belong to God and that we come from God. "Before I was born, the Lord called me to serve him." Sometimes we also forget that we are called to be servants. We are called to put God and others before ourselves.

To be a servant, people often have to give up what the world believes is important – money, fame, importance in societal circles, etc. In 1 Corinthians 1, we see that following and serving God may seem weak and silly to the world, but God's power and wisdom far surpasses the strongest and smartest person that we could name here on earth. "Even the foolishness of God is wiser than men. Even the weakness of God is stronger than men."

As Jesus talks about his death in John 12, we are reminded that we are to serve as Jesus taught us to serve. "Whoever serves me must follow me. Then my servant will be with me everywhere I am. My Father will honor anyone who serves me." What a wonderful promise from Jesus!

Even when it's tough, we are called to serve, to put others' needs ahead of our own, to look at the world in a way that others don't often see it – to serve the one who served us in the most sacrificial way possible! After all, we are from heaven, and we belong to him!

Elizabeth Tuck



APRIL 5

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 70

Hebrews 12:1-3

John 13:21-32

Do you have friends you know who would have your back no matter what happened to you? We all need friends like this, so what about Jesus as he neared His awful execution on the cross? We are told that while sharing what would become the last meal with His disciples, Jesus said “very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” We are reminded that as Jesus faced the worst days of his life, He was **betrayed, denied, and abandoned** by His closest friends – His disciples. What happened to make His friends act this way?

Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, is often given a bad rap by those who read what he did. One has to wonder why, after three years of public ministry, Jesus would need Judas to point Him out to the soldiers who came to arrest Him? Had not Jesus been followed and worshipped openly for a long time? And what would prompt Judas to agree to plant the betrayer’s kiss on Jesus? Was it only the money? Had he decided Jesus was a fraud who needed to be arrested and tried for blasphemy? Or could it have been that Judas was hoping he could speed along the moment that Jesus would declare himself the Messiah? We know Jesus had a keen sense of timing – He was on God’s time, not man’s time. His own mother was reprimanded by Jesus for trying to force Him to perform the miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Did Judas actually think he could force the hand of Jesus and make Jesus “let the cat out of the bag”? I suppose we will never know.

But what about us? If Jesus were present at our Wednesday night dinner and declared “very truly I tell you, some of you will betray me,” what

would we think? Of course, our betrayal does not involve helping the authorities identify who He is. However, do we betray Him when, bearing the name "Christian," we behave in non-Christian like behavior? Is misrepresenting Jesus not a form of betrayal?

As we approach Easter Sunday, we should consider in what ways we, like Judas, are betraying our Lord for whatever reason. We can be thankful that Jesus on the cross, witnessing betrayal, said "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." We do not have to punish ourselves like Judas did. Jesus is daily forgiving us, but we seriously need to move from betrayal to openly proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Savior – God's chosen Messiah, who gives us abundant life and freedom to serve Him with our lives. If Judas had realized how forgiving Jesus is, he would not have had to take his own life. We do not have to die for Him – we just need to live for Him.

Bob Turner



APRIL 6

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

Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

During Holy Week of 2008, there were several personal learning experiences that culminated in a greater understanding of my faith. In Sunday School, we were studying the "Baby Boomers Guide to the Bible." While I am one generation removed, the text approached learning the Bible in a way that the high school History teacher in me enjoys; there were maps, charts, and graphs! One takeaway from that text helped solidify my understanding of the Old Testament need for a blood sacrifice, an idea that

had never made set well with me before and one that I didn't want to linger on. The concept comes from the Hebrew word *kaphar* which means "to cover over" and is often translated as atonement. The blood of an animal would help "cover over" or atone for sin, an important ritual that the Hebrews used during Passover.

At the same time I was studying the Baby Boomers Guide, I participated in a Messianic Sedar. The Passover Sedar is a celebration of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt, involving rituals such as dipping bitter herbs like parsley into salt water to remind participants of the bitterness of the Hebrews' time in Egypt and the tears that were wept. Also in the Sedar, four cups of wine are present to represent the four expressions of God's redemption (Exodus 6:6-7). Sedar participants "lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord" (Psalms 116:13).

Participating in the sedar helped me connect the story of the Old Testament to the New Testament and have context as to why Jesus would take the cup and say "...this cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25). We can be reassured of God's love for us, since Jesus was sent to atone for and "cover" our sins. Jesus is the final sacrifice and fulfills Gods promise to his people!

Brennan Guion



APRIL 7

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

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

John 18:1-19, 42

Over the years, I have had the privilege of participating in and attending the Tenebrae service that we have had at Derbyshire Baptist Church on Good Friday. I remember one of the members of the Chancel Choir reminding us of our service. We prayed after a rehearsal to prepare for this service. Since then, I always try to reflect, sing, and pray to prepare for this meaningful time in Jesus' life.

REFLECT:

John 18:4

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, **'Who is it you want?'** Jesus in this question defines the words sacrifice and service to me.

SING:

How can I serve? *Were You There* ([Celebrating Grace Hymnal for Baptist Worship](#), page 192), an African American spiritual, reminds me as a Christian that we are to remember Jesus' ultimate sacrifice. There is also a beautiful rendition on YouTube by Pegasus, you might enjoy singing along with.

1. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

NOTES:

4. "Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?"

PRAY:

Dear Lord, I'm grateful for your service and sacrifice. Please show me the ways I can better serve you and bless others. Amen.

Laurie Shelton



APRIL 8

Job 14:1-14

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

Psalms 31:1-4, 15-16

1 Peter 4:1-8

John 19:38-42

Matthew 27:57-66

It was a dark and stormy night.... Usually that brings to mind something mysterious and often notorious. For me, I am reminded of an event that occurred many years ago. During my junior year in high school, I had a part time job working in a music store in downtown Richmond. I really looked forward to "getting out of the house" as I was learning and earning my independence. Most Saturdays, I had to rely on Mom or Dad to take me to work in the mornings, but when the store closed at the end of the day, I rode the city bus back to the West End. That was often the highlight of my day; truly on my own, requiring me to be responsible, independent and trustworthy.

This was one of those winter days that would make you wish you were at home sitting by a warm fire. It wasn't a long walk to the bus stop on

Broad Street, just one block from Grace Street, but the chill in the air and the rain in my face was made more uncomfortable by the darkness of the winter evening.

Huddled at the bus stop with others, strangers to each other, we watched as the bus continued to draw closer to us. It was quiet, no conversations, no one was talking about their day, only rain drops hitting the sidewalk. It was then that one of these strangers tapped me on the shoulder and reached out his hand. Suddenly I was frozen, not by the chill in the air but the fear in my head. I didn't want to look at him. I didn't want to react. I didn't know what to do. In that moment, a stranger handed me a piece of paper without a word spoken and then disappeared into the darkness.

Dad picked me up at the West End bus stop that night. I was cold and tired from the day, so I was in bed quickly having no more thoughts about what had happened at the bus stop. Sunday morning as we were heading to church, I found that piece of paper, a little crumpled and wrinkled from the damp night in my coat pocket. I unfolded it and started reading. It began with the words, "I would like you to meet a friend of mine..... his name is Jesus."

That stranger had no face that I would ever recognize. That stranger never asked for anything in return. That stranger will never know the impact of that brief encounter.

May we be that still, small voice that speaks through our deeds and words, our invitations or prayers without expectation of anything in return. We may never know the impact of our encounter with a stranger or a friend, and that's okay.

Joe Fielden