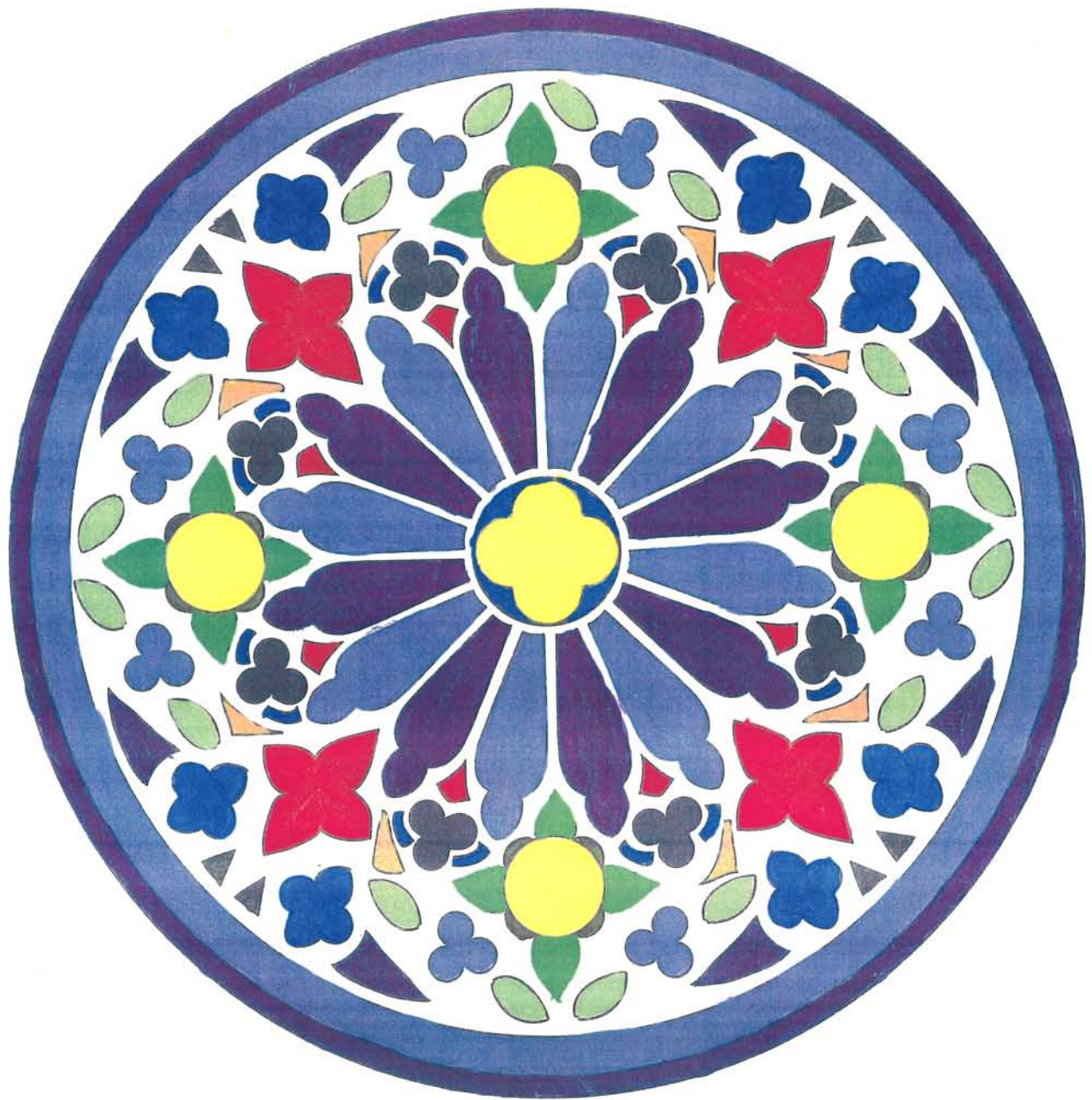


Lent 2009





Dear Friends in Christ,

The thoughts, prayers, and reflections of fellow community members are compiled here for your Lenten devotions. These reflective pieces are taken from the Scripture texts for each day in Lent and Holy Week. They have been created in order to guide us in our prayers. Some may challenge us, some may give rise to questions, some may affirm what we already believe. Though no one of us can claim to know the mind of God, the exercise of articulating the questions and beliefs of the community of faith allows the Holy Spirit to do its transforming work within us. We give thanks to the writers for their submissions. Their names are listed on the back page of this book.

May you be guided and led to a deeper faith.

May your relationship with the Holy One be strengthened.

May you be blessed this Holy Lenten season.

Yours in Christ,

The Rev. Mary A. McCullough

February 25 2009 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 Ash Wednesday

As we prepare, once again, for the time of renewal, the Church invites us to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination through repentance and prayer, fasting and self-denial, and by reading and meditation.

The scripture passages for today give us the opportunity for self-examination and suggest how to establish a personal relationship with the Father. We are to give to others alms; we are to pray; we are to fast. All of this shall be done in secret. That is, just ourselves and our Father, who sees us in secret.

For many of us, this secret private conversation comes easily, and grows into a life-long interior dialogue with our Heavenly Father. For some of us, however, this is not an easy task. How can we even speak of this Father, who already knew us before we were born, who knows each hair on our head?

Years ago, I attended a church-run conference, not knowing that two full days of this would be a silent retreat. My life at that time was in relative chaos, and the thought of being in secret/silence, just me and God, was frightening. So I excused myself and fled to visit a nearby friend for the two days, away from the retreat.

Some time later, looking back on that retreat, I have given thanks that God let me try several more times to enter into this private relationship, eventually with success. After all, he already knew each hair on my head!

We need to remember that renewal is an ongoing process, and this loving Father graciously encourages us again and again and again to seek out this secret, special relationship with him, and allows us the comfort, peace, and joy that this love brings us.

In every example in this scripture passage, we are also told that our Father will reward us! What then are the rewards? Are they the peace and comfort that we find in our secret relationship with God? Are they the inner joy of feeling him present in our lives at all times?

Perhaps these rewards and his never-failing love for us are really the treasures stored up forever, in heaven, where our heart is.....

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will to be arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.”
T.S. Elliot

February 26 2009 John 1:29-34

In this passage, John the Baptist sees Jesus walking toward him and proclaims the Lamb of God is here. John had been baptizing with water in preparation for the day when the Lamb of God would come to take away the sin of the world. Jesus would begin to baptize with the Spirit. John recognized Jesus not by his appearance, but rather by the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove and remaining on Jesus. This was the sign that John was told to look for. By the spirit's appearance on Jesus, John knew the prophecy had been fulfilled.

As I think about this passage, two different themes come to mind. The first, Jesus has now begun his journey that will ultimately lead to his death on the cross as a sacrificial lamb. John immediately calls Jesus, the "Lamb of God." It is this choice of words that foreshadows what is to come for Jesus. The second theme is that John recognizes Jesus for whom he is, the Son of God. When I come into the presence of Jesus Christ, I hope that I too may also know and recognize him as John does. While going through our daily lives could it be Jesus serving us coffee at the local coffee shop, or the person walking down the street in the rain, or maybe that person who cut you off on the way to work this morning.

I pray that we can be like John and recognize Jesus as he walks towards us.

February 27 2009 John 1:35-42

What causes these first five men to follow Jesus?

What causes us to be in Church on Sunday morning?

I suspect the answer may lie in the question Jesus asks of the two men who begin to walk behind him: “What are you looking for?” It is interesting that Jesus says ‘what’, not ‘who’, are you looking for. I try to imagine being one of those men.

Jesus turns, looks me in the eye, and says:

“What are you looking for?”

“I am looking for the way....” I say.

He says, simply, “Follow me”.

So then, if we are looking for the way... we need to follow Jesus. Pure and simple.

One of the Psalms appointed for this day is #43. In vs. 3 the Psalmist prays:
‘O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me.’

John, in his opening paragraphs of his Gospel, refers to Jesus as the ‘true light which enlightens everyone’. The Psalmist’s prayer has been answered – God has sent the light - the truth. The five men in this story choose to follow the light. They, literally, follow him, and in so doing they come to know him more intimately, to know his ways – they become his disciples.

How can we follow him? We can take a page from the disciple’s book and spend time with him – in prayer... listening. We can come to know his ways - through studying Scripture. We can learn from others on the way – from those Saints who have gone before us and from those who walk with us now. If we can do this, then we too will be his disciples.

We will come to know what Jesus told his disciples towards the end of their time together:
“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

February 28 2009 John 1:43-51

When reading this passage two things struck me.

The first is the way that Philip shared his faith and news. When He was met with skepticism and maybe even prejudice from Nathaniel, He responded in a very different way. He didn't explain his point of view, nor did He try to neither convince nor prove to Nathaniel that He was right in his understanding. He simply said; "come and see". I've often been uncomfortable with the expectation of witnessing and sharing the good news. I feel it's treading on other people's right to their person belief or disbelief; those going around trying to convert others and bring them to Christ offends me. I don't feel comfortable "imposing" my faith and belief on others. Perhaps the best approach would be to do what Philip did. Ask them to "come and see". Come and see our Church. Come and see the good works being done. Come and see and experience the fellowship. And maybe, come and see Jesus, experience Jesus, not my view of Jesus, but your own experience. That takes a lot of pressure off me. All I need to do is create the opening and let God do the rest. So don't be afraid to make the offer to others; "come and see".

The second thing that struck me was how jealous I am of Nathaniel and the people in the Bible that got to see Jesus and have "proof" that it was really Him. As soon as Jesus tells Nathaniel He saw him under the fig tree, Nathaniel realizes that this is proof that it's Jesus, "the Son of God; the King of Israel". Jesus goes on to say you believe because I told you this but you will see much more. Am I not able to experience that "proof" because of the age in which we live? Has modern education, science, and good old skepticism kept me from seeing the "proof"? When you think about it, that's a really long stretch for Nathaniel to realize it's Jesus just because He "saw him under the fig tree". Maybe the passage is more symbolic than literal. Maybe he knows Jesus, and Jesus knows him because of his faith. Maybe the real "proof" is just understanding that God knows you, and you can know him. Maybe it's just that simple.....

March 1 2009 Mark 1:9-15

On the inauguration day of Jesus' ministry, an unknown carpenter walks into the water to be baptized. He knows that each step takes Him away from common living and into public ministry. The Spirit descends "like a dove" and anoints Jesus, an act of setting Him apart for a particular work.

But Jesus was about so much more than healings. He was about love and compassion too. The people saw but didn't understand the compassion, just the power, and they wanted to make Jesus an earthly king. Jesus knew that this thinking was way off the mark about who He really was and what He was about, so He took himself away onto the mountain to be alone.

We need to try to see Jesus' whole reason for coming down to earth. We must not miss His love for us, but more His love of God and doing God's will.

We must all be prepared for God's testing of our faith. He will put us into circumstances where we have to trust Him, stand firmly upon our convictions and believe in the Lord.

March 2 2009 John 2:1-12

I would like to think that all of us identify with Jesus in the gospel stories about His life and ministry. There are those stories within I find myself more than others, however. This telling of His first miracle at a wedding in Cana is one of those stories.

First I am happy to find Jesus enjoying the festivities of a wedding. Weddings are happy and hopeful occasions, and I am filled with joy myself imagining Him having fun.

Then His mother turns to him asking Him to be who he is. She asks Him to perform a miracle and provide for them more wine when they have run out. I marvel at Jesus' reluctance... Is it because His own mother asks him to do it? Is it because He lacks the confidence or has too much humility to act readily? Is it because He is comfortable keeping his "secret" identity close to his heart at that point?

But then He acts. And He acts wonderfully, providing even better wine than the best wine that the bridegroom provided. Jesus' abilities, gifts, and acts are perfect. Again this is our example we are asked to follow.

I know that I have been reluctant to act many times. In my youth I was encouraged by my parents and found myself rebelling mainly because they had asked me to step into the limelight. But now I know that they were simply asking me to practice that for which I was given gifts to do.

Each of us has been given gifts with which we are called to act. And when we are called to act, it is to glorify the One who gave us those gifts. Whether it is to uplift and bless a sick or brokenhearted friend or stranger, to offer food to one who is hungry or drink to one who is thirsty; whether we are called to sit quietly and pray or to speak up and be heard. We are called constantly into action. And we must, in faith, know that we have within us those abilities which will allow us to fulfill that which we have been asked to do. And in doing so we will find Jesus with us smiling in His gratitude and appreciation.

March 3 2009 Hebrews 3:1-11

Some new “Jewish-Christians” looked on Jesus and Moses as being equal. In their second generation their faith has waned, and some desire to regress to the comfort of what they were before Jesus appeared on the scene.

The letter to the Hebrews clearly tells them that Jesus is the intercessor for all – including Moses (and all other prophets before and after him), and He is, in fact, the only Son of God!

The message makes no bones about it: It is the voice of Jesus only that must be heard, believed and obeyed.

Today, some churches are sustained because of a superior preacher (or a great administrator), but have lost their focus on Christ and His message. They have become person oriented even though the preacher’s intended message is: ‘Get Christ oriented!’ - And the message is being blurred by an imbalanced attention to church events and the written word. Some of these people have great trouble attending church when the preacher moves on, or the once compelling events become less inviting than before.

The pulpit is sometimes used to broadcast political or governmental problems, and the people tend to drift away from the words of Jesus. A personality or program has been elevated higher than the position reserved for Jesus! It is Jesus who has prepared a plan for each of us to reach the holy place where His presence is forever visible, and His loving word revealed so that all may understand.

However, when these “churches” lose site of Jesus, we are not absolved from the responsibility to seek Him and to hear His word – it is to us that He speaks – it is to us that grace is abundantly stored and immediately available. Making Jesus a personal friend that you meet every day of your life is not that difficult. He is just as eager to have this relationship, and is a willing partner in establishing and nourishing this kinship. He has clearly made this commitment to all people who are willing to come to Him and put Him first in their lives – a part of every living moment. He is not available only when we are troubled, but is available to share our joys and triumphs. He freely gives His love to the needy, and desires to be an important part of our lives even when things are going good and our needs diminished. You cannot find a better friend!

The writer or sermon ends with a picture of Jesus angry with a people who have failed to believe and follow his bidding. My picture is of a Lord so frustrated by the fact that His loving Father’s creation and plan are misunderstood or ignored. And He is almost overwhelmed trying to figure out what other possible method He can use so that they will finally understand and have the courage to stand with the faithful.

He gives a clear warning that failure to love and respect Him, is our only way to separate ourselves from Him – and the separation could last for all eternity!

March 4 2009 John 2:23-3:15

You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."
The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but
you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is
with everyone born of the Spirit." [John 3: 7-8]

The wind. Ruah. The Holy Spirit. The Comforter. The Spirit of Jesus. John the Gospel writer says, "You should not be surprised..." about the Spirit. It is mysterious. It is free. The Holy Spirit travels "wherever it pleases." No walls, no fences, nothing can keep it from moving anywhere and everywhere around the world, around the galaxy, around the universe!

It is unpredictable. "...you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going." For this reason we are challenged to be awake in the moment, awakened to be in the same moment as the presence of the Spirit. And we cannot discern where it will lead us, where it will go (i.e., how the Spirit is and will be working in our hearts and/or in others'). And ideally we will be willing to be led.

"So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." If I could possibly open myself every day, try and see my Lord in every moment, I might actually become aware of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus living inside of me. I might even recognize myself as a "born again" child of God. I might, in the wonder of each new breath, be aware of the Spirit of Christ actually living in my heart. Listen to the Holy Spirit: "...hear its sound"?

Isn't this the pure meaning of the term "born again"? (Rather than being part of an exclusive club, where members have to jump through hoops to be admitted, and where the members think they own Jesus, have Him all figured out!). Isn't it instead an offering made to everyone who cares to accept? This offering is the choice of starting a whole new life in Him, a life being immersed in the life and teachings of Jesus; a faithful life of listening to the beauty of His word; learning more and more about His life, His way, His truth; the blessings of forgiving the unforgiveable, of loving the unlovable.

Living each day feeding on the teachings of Jesus ("Take, eat...") helps us to see Him more easily in the others' eyes. He washes away our tears. He takes our burdens from us. We wake up renewed each morning with great joy, joy to know Jesus in the Holy Spirit is living within us! If we remember to search for Him every day, we will experience moments of heightened awareness of the Holy Spirit of Jesus no farther away than our breath.

Like riding on a cloud, there will be times He accompanies us to a place where we'll experience an unbearable lightness of being. Beauty unspeakable. And there will be times when He will be with us, seeing us through the deepest ravines of our lives, where the waters threaten to overwhelm us. Drown us.

But Jesus is our lifeline. If we look into the eyes of Jesus, we see a glimpse of Heaven. He will never abandon us. And with our new eyes, eyes wide bright and filled with wonder, we are born again.

March 5 2009 Psalm 46

Verses 7 and 11 of this psalm state, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

When I am upset, scared, or anxious, I find myself wanting to be closer to God. I know I do much of my praying at those times. There are other times when I also pray.

As I read and prayed about this psalm, I realized that there is no good or bad time to pray. God is always with us and is always ready to hear our prayers. He may not answer immediately or answer in the way that you expect him to, but there is always an answer.

Set aside a time today and for the rest of Lent to pray. After you pray, sit quietly and think about your prayer. Perhaps you will feel the Lord of hosts with you. If not, remember that the God of Jacob is our refuge and there will be an answer at some point. Be watching and listening!

March 6 2009 John 3:22-36

In the gospel of St. John, Ch3:22-36, John the Baptist is warned by concerned followers that Jesus was baptizing more people than the Baptist. The alarm of these followers stands in sharp contrast to the Baptist’ own reaction: “He must grow greater, I must grow smaller.” That’s the kind of simple answer that just settles the matter immediately, no ifs, ands, or buts. Their concern was not John’s concern. John understood his role perfectly. What a great example of humility for us all. We tend to get caught up in our own self-importance, most often not realizing that it’s happening.

In explaining Jesus’ primacy, the Baptist says, “The Father loves the Son, and has entrusted everything to Him.” Here John the Baptist not only reaffirms Jesus’ role as Redeemer, but overflows with confidence that with Jesus, all is attended to, all the necessary elements of our salvation are present.

How wonderful, that a brief passage in St. John’s gospel can make so much so clear; and how relieving that we need go no further into more complicated explanations.

God Our Father, our Brother Jesus, Holy Spirit font of our understanding, help us to stay close to Sacred Scripture as the source of all the understanding we need to fight our way through this often confusing lifetime. Amen.

March 7 2009 John 4:1-26

Is the water of salvation offered to everyone? The answer according to John 4:1-26 is most definitely yes.

As Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well and asks for a drink of water she is taken aback that He, a Jew, is speaking to her, a Samaritan. This is something that doesn't ordinarily happen.

We see as we read on that the living water Jesus is offering is for everyone, Jew, Samaritan etc. Jesus explains to her that if she knew what God was offering and who was saying to her "Give me a drink", she would have been the one to ask, and she would have been given the living water. He tells her that the time is coming when she will worship the Father.

As Christians we are blessed to receive the living water at Baptism. Are we really aware that we are being offered eternal life?

In this season of Lent we should take the opportunity during these five weeks to reflect on this gift of living water. How are we living our lives? Is it as Jesus would want us to. Are we living lives and worshiping the Father in spirit and truth? Let us use this time to examine through prayer and reflection our spiritual lives and ask the Father to help us each day to worship Him in spirit and truth. Only by being close to Him can we reach eternal life and be worthy of the gift of the living water.

Dear Lord,

Day by day I pray for your continued guidance in helping me grow in love, humility, and understanding of those close to me, and those far away as well, so as to become a person worthy of your gift of living water. Amen

PRAISE BE JESUS CHRIST!

March 8 2009 Mark 8:31-38

The Cost of following Jesus

Part of the cost is having to live with truth. Truth can be terrifying to face. We all see the world around us from our own perspective - the ego-centric point of view that makes us the hero of the story. Peter identified Jesus as Messiah but later denied the description given by Jesus of what was coming. That wasn't Peter's idea of what should happen to his Messiah. In fact, Peter wanted to be the hero and come to Jesus' rescue at that time.

Jesus tells us that if we want to follow Him, we must take up our cross. I hope this is a metaphor for living life the way he did - walking with God, speaking the truth, loving the unloved and unlovable, giving everything we are and have to God.

But, Oh My! Carrying the cross to my death - my termination in a most painful way - am I ready to do that for my God? It's a question I can't answer, not yet. I have not been put in that position. Could I? Would I? God alone knows.

Jesus doesn't ask a lot of us - He asks everything. How lightly can I hold what I have? Lightly enough to have it all taken away? For some of us this is a real possibility - frightening - but this is what we are called to. Can we support one another as we are asked to lose everything? Can we keep those going through great loss close to us, without judgment, without fear? By the Grace of God, Yes We Can!

Following Jesus through Lent and Holy Week is a trial run for what may ultimately be asked of any one of us. May it be a holy Lent for us all.

March 9 2009 John 4:27-42

“The disciples were amazed that Jesus was talking to a woman.” During the first century, a teacher would not normally have spoken to a woman, and a Jew wouldn’t have spoken to a Samaritan. But Jesus does speak to her. And this isn’t the only time that Jesus speaks to a woman. It’s not the only time in the gospels in which a woman is used to give important information.

How often do we ignore what someone says because of our prejudice toward the person saying it? Does that person drive me crazy? Has that person often been wrong? Is that person just one whom I don’t really like? If so, then maybe I don’t want to hear what that person has to say. But in this passage we find that Jesus and the Samaritans did listen. They ignored the fact that in the first century this person was not important. They ignored who she was and listened to what she had to say. The message from this woman was the important part, not the messenger.

After speaking to Jesus, this woman ran back to tell the people about Jesus. The Samaritan woman, although initially uncertain, not only ends up believing in Him but also goes and tells everybody in town about the encounter she had with Jesus. And they listened to her. They listened and went to see Jesus for themselves. This is yet another time in the gospels in which a woman gives information and the people not only listen to her but act on her information. Listening to this lowly woman results in many Samaritans coming to Jesus, hearing His word, and making the affirmation, "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world". The faith of the Samaritans is no longer because of what the woman said, but because they themselves have encountered Jesus personally. God sometimes uses very weak and unlikely instruments for beginning and carrying on a good work. Our Savior, by teaching one poor woman, spread knowledge to a whole town.

March 10 2009 John 4:43-54

In John 4: 43-54, Jesus has returned to Cana, in Galilee, the place of his first miracle. Many of the people here had seen Jesus perform many miracle sin Jerusalem and when a royal official asked Jesus to heal his sick son, everyone thought that they were going to SEE another miracle. But Jesus sent the father home telling him his son would live. And indeed when he returned home the child was well and he and his household believed. The miracle happened and the child was healed and people believed, without actually witnessing the event take place.

Certainly I like most people want to see the miracle or answer to our prayers, illness or situations, and we would prefer it sooner than later, but we must all wait for Jesus to show us the outcome, of all we ask of him, in his time, which is sometimes much longer than we have the patience to wait and start to get angry and question him. But time is what many things in our lives take and eventually, maybe, I will learn to be patient and just wait quietly for him to show the answer.

As I am looking out of my window today writing this the sky is blue, with fluffy clouds. The air is definitely warmer and we had rain last night not snow or ice; and soon the grass will be green and those buds on the trees will bloom and our gardens will grow. And especially, the birds will join me in my early morning prayers, and the miracle of spring will occur once more.

March 11 2009 John 5:1-18

We humans can be incredibly short sighted. Instead of seeing the wonders of God's grace at work we refute it by making excuses. What is it we fear? Is it the loss of control? Is it the fear of the unknown? Is it only accepting God's grace when it fits our rules, laws, or convenience?

But Jesus reminds us that God's grace is always at work. Man cannot dictate a schedule within which God should follow. God's work does not follow man's agenda. What we need to hold close to our hearts is that when we place our faith in The Father we have nothing to fear, we have nothing to lose. We have only things to gain. We gain spiritual health. We gain love and empathy. And we gain understanding to the amazing certainty that is God's grace.

March 12 2009 John 5:19-29

Today's Lenten reading in John presents one of Jesus' responses to persecution. The Jews as the passage says, likely his Pharisee opponents, were condemning him for healing a sick man on the Sabbath. To the Jews this break of practice was a great offense.

In response to the persecution, Jesus turns and teaches his followers something about His Kingdom. He starts off by perhaps justifying his actions. He says, "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does". It is as if Jesus is saying "the Father doesn't rest from healing and giving life, and neither do I!"

One hermeneutical key for this passage may be Jesus' sermon on the mountain. In the sermon Jesus spells out what it means to live as a member of the Kingdom of God. He tells his followers to do difficult things, like give everything they have to the needy, turn the other cheek, and love their enemies. What reason does he give them to do these things? In Luke he says "be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful" and in Matthew he says "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect". In other words, do these things because God does them; be as God is. "Whatever the Father does the Son also does". We're presented with a pattern. God is this way, therefore Jesus is this way, so we should also be this way.

In today's passage Jesus continues to explain that soon the Father will let him see even greater things than healing of the sick and lame. What greater thing? The fullness and completeness of life that His followers will receive for living in the Kingdom. Following the steps of Jesus provides 'life eternal' or in other words, life to the fullest. Those who are dead to sin will soon be made alive in Christ!

Often in Lent we are reminded of death: our death in sin and the death of Christ on the cross. This is important because in order to receive and appreciate the grace of God we must first see the awfulness he is saving us out of. However let's not forget that amidst the death of sin the life and love of Jesus abounds in us!

March 13 2009 John 5:30-47

In this season of Lent; it is a time for reflection, repentance, and preparing ourselves. It is fitting that in the beginning of the passage that Jesus is transitioning from self-affirmation to his testimony or a reflection of who he is. Jesus admits that he can do nothing by himself, just as we should. When Jesus makes this opening statement, we should recognize that Jesus spoke with confidence, humbleness and not arrogance. Jesus' authority was constantly being questioned, so Jesus takes this opportunity to witness to his authority. Witness, in this case, means to attest to Jesus' character and power. Jesus testimony is truth, but because he was only one person it would not hold true in Jewish courts. That is why he says that is testimony is not valid. In the Jewish court system, in order to prove something true, more than one person had to verify the claim that was being made. However, Jesus says another testifies about him. This refers to John the Baptist or his Father. John the Baptist is the more likely one Jesus is referring to because he is an identifiable, comprehensible person.

Jesus then says that John is a witness to him. Even though John's witness is good, Jesus responds that human testimony is only good for a short period of time and that human testimony is not accepted. On the other hand, Jesus said that he mentioned human testimonies so that we may be saved. Another witness that testifies to Jesus is his works. The deeds of Jesus reveal his Divine nature. Deeds show the quality of one's moral standards, skill, and personal competence. In the book of John, Jesus' deeds were known as signs and there are seven of them. The signs are significant because they were usually followed by confession of belief from many of the spectators. The fourth witness that attests to Jesus is the Father. Even though Jesus did disclaim the Father earlier because He was not visible or audible; there was the audible voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism. To Jews a voice from heaven meant approval from God. This means the hearers did not apprehend God's revelation that God sent Jesus. Often, we still fail to recognize God's revelations to us.

The final witness for Jesus is Scripture. Jesus claimed the Law, Prophets, and Psalms as a witness to his person and claims. This is why Jesus rebukes people for not studying Scripture well. People were incapable of interpreting and applying Scriptures. Reading and studying Scriptures is not meant as an academic discipline for the scholarly; it was meant for all people. However, those who know their Scriptures well are supposed to help and teach those who do not know their Scriptures well. Jews did not give praise to Jesus because they were spiritually unable to make the connection between Scriptures and Jesus the Savior. Even though Jews did not praise Jesus, he would not have accepted their praise because he states that he does not accept praise from men. Praise from men can take our focus away from God and can enhance our prideful image of ourselves. This blinds us from being the humble sinner that we should be and detracts us from giving all glory and honor to God.

Jesus expresses disappointment with people not accepting his credentials. Jewish obedience to the Law that Moses gave them was their pride. They thought that their hope in securing God's favor was in their relationship to Moses. Jesus is our hope and the only one who can secure God's favor for us. However, Jesus told the Jews that the Law of Moses would condemn them because it led to their rejection of Jesus. Even Jews had beliefs and views that hindered them from seeing God's redemptive work in process. We still face this problem of having blinders to see God's love and redemptive that is continuing on in the world through us. Let us take this time to ask God to take off our blinders so we can see His work. In addition, let us be thankful to God for what He has done through Jesus and continues to do through us.

March 14 2009 John 7:1-13

Jesus Goes to the Feast of Tabernacles

This passage written by the Apostle John can lead us to evaluate our fear of man and our fears in general and how they might impede and obstruct our ability to fully, comprehensively and totally accept and appreciate Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and as the precious Son of our Lord GOD. It was fear that had the crowds whispering. That fear got in the way of them fully appreciating Jesus Christ and that he is the one and only Lord and Savior sent from Heaven above as our Lord GOD's only son. It can call on us to evaluate how our fear of man or woman might get in the way, impede our ability to practice and acknowledge our faith, to worship our Lord GOD and Jesus Christ, to appreciate our blessings and to act in service and love according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed it – fear of man and our other fears - can impede our truly accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior. These fears can be reflected in many ways, do we stay in an unhealthy relationship because we fear being alone rather than trust in the Lord GOD and Jesus Christ who assures us we are never alone. Does fear of those who don't look like us or attend our Church or who dress in a manner different than how we dress impede and obstruct our ability to reach out to them in Christian love and to extend a hand and maybe find a truly loving spirit underneath the covering. Does our fear of not having enough- enough money, enough clothes, enough dinners out, movies, the latest model car, the right home with its right fixtures impede us from taking time out to provide service to others or contribute our time, our talents, abilities and at times our monies in service to others out of our love and faith for our Lord GOD and his son Jesus Christ and their teachings.

These are only questions that we can personally answer no one can do that for us – but we also have hope and the help of a friend someone who loves us unconditionally, who can guide us not only in determining that fear but also in defeating that fear by faith, that is our Lord God through whom we come to through his son Jesus Christ our only Lord and Savior, in whom which we have eternal hope, for His love endures forever. This understanding of fear and how it works in our lives might not be a simple task –in all likelihood it might be very challenging but that doesn't mean it is not something we can take on for we know the Lord GOD never gives us anything that we with His help can't handle and that if we come to him, if we ask of Him, He always answers.

This passage also reminds us that accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, not doubting, and fully appreciating who he is and what he does provide might not always be easy. In this reading even his brothers did not seem to fully understand why he didn't want to speak publicly, they did not seem to fully appreciate or believe he was the one, the only one, the Lord and Savior sent by the Lord GOD himself. Do we as we go through our daily lives not make the effort or find it difficult or even take the time to appreciate who Jesus Christ is and do we doubt how he can affect our lives, so extraordinarily and wonderfully affect our lives, affect our minds, affect our bodies, affect our spirit by his teachings, his love and by his ultimate sacrifice in giving us forgiveness and access to the LORD GOD. Let us reflect on how we might better by the minute, by the hour, by the day, by the week, appreciate the Lord GOD and his son Jesus Christ and how we might be letting our fears get in the way.

In this passage we further are given insight into how important timing and patience can be in our lives. Jesus states "... BECAUSE FOR ME THE RIGHT TIME HAS NOT YET COME" He knew the time was not right for him to reveal himself publicly at the Feast. Do we question our timing and when it is right to do or not do something, do we wait patiently on the Lord GOD to show us the way. Jesus quite certainly did wait on the Lord GOD. Let us take this time in Lent --- a time for reflection ----to reflect on our appreciation of Jesus Christ and the Lord GOD and how our lives, our fears, our understanding, our doubts and our ability to wait on the Lord GOD affects our walk with Jesus Christ.

Let us pray during this season of Lent and always for faith and to have no fear, to have a clean heart and a right spirit and for the ability to wait patiently for the Lord GOD. These are things we can truly receive from our Lord GOD through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior and by the Blessing and Grace of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus Christ name we pray. Amen.

March 15 2009 John 2:13-22

Imagine, for a moment, that one Sunday morning, as you approached the church, you were greeted at the door, not by the Greeters, but by a booth, erected by the Stewardship Committee. At this booth, you were informed that the church no longer accepted U.S. Dollars, but rather only Euros. Of course, for a small fee, they would gladly change you U.S. Dollars into Euros, so that you could place them in the offering plate.

You then proceed to the doorway of the nave of the church, were upon you are informed that in order for you to receive communion, you would need to purchase your own bread and wine. Oh, there were several options available, from a small crust of bread with some grape juice, on up to freshly baked baguettes and a fine aged French vintage wine. All you need to do was purchase your personal bread and wine to be offered as your personal sacrifice for sanctification at communion. Of course, you'd need to pay in Euros.

This was the situation that presented itself before Jesus at the Temple. There were money changers to convert your funds into the acceptable currency used at the Temple. Further, there were vendors of all types, selling animals as small as doves, on up to lambs and calf, which you could purchase to be sacrificed to God on your behalf. In need, the Temple courtyard had become a marketplace.

Jesus, nearing the time of his crucifixion, and still being alone in knowing that the cross was his ultimate destination on this journey to Jerusalem, experienced a natural, quite human emotion – anger.

Indeed, the God made flesh had experienced the full range of human emotions while with us on earth, but he had never demonstrated the anger and disgust he exhibited at the Temple.

And yet, it is difficult to say that his anger was truly directed solely at the moneychangers and the vendors of the Temple. No, rather, his outburst at the Temple may be more deeply rooted in his anguish over what he knew needed to be done... even on behalf of those who some may have believed did not deserve such magnificent forgiveness. And perhaps, in the lack of understanding of what lay ahead for him by those around him didn't help matters.

While Christ may have “lost his temper” at the Temple, he went on to provide the ultimate forgiveness to all of us, forgiving our sins and allowing us to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The next time you feel outraged, angry or upset, remember that while even Jesus may have displayed these most basic of human emotions, he provided the ultimate in forgiveness.

March 16 2009 John 7:14-36

In today's reading Jesus has gone alone from Galilee to Jerusalem to teach in the temple. The time frame is during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles is one of the 3 great pilgrimage festivals of the Jewish faith. The Feast of the Tabernacles is where Jews went to the Temple for a weeklong celebration to give thanks to God for the fall harvest and for God providing for them while in the desert. It occurs in September / October time frame.

By this time Jesus was well known throughout many parts of Israel and was already despised by the Jewish authorities. Prior to this event are the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of the paralytic on the Sabbath by the Pool in Jerusalem and the walking on water during the storm.

Jesus teaches a number of things in these verses.

- 1) In verse 17 Jesus identifies the source of spiritual blindness of some of the Jews that do not understand his teaching. That blindness being caused by an unwillingness to do the will of God. They cannot see God's will because they are too interested in doing their own will.
- 2) In verse 23 Jesus implies that the healing of the paralytic man on the Sabbath is a greater obedience to the will of God than circumcising on the Sabbath. In other words love and mercy and compassion outweigh the formalistic rules of religion.
- 3) Finally he tells the crowd in verses 26-29 that those who are calling him the Christ that He and his Message does indeed come from God and is a new teaching.

During his teaching he attracts many followers and the Pharisees fearing these words send the guards to arrest him but they are not able.

It is truly ironic that during a holy festival celebrating God's compassion and love by providing food and substance for the people of Israel that Jesus' message of love and compassion for God and ones neighbor is of greater value to God than rituals is rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. What is more ironic if not truly sad is the cause of the Jewish leaders' blindness to the truth of Jesus' teaching is their own unwillingness to do God's will instead of their own. If they would forget about what they want and focus on what God desires, which is love compassion and mercy then they could see that He (Jesus) and His teaching are truly from God.

A prayer from Psalm 90: 12 "Lord, teach us to number our days that we may apply our heart to wisdom."

March 17 2009 John 7:37-52

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”

If one is thirsty, one suffers from dehydration, a deficiency in moisture and is desirous for relief. Because water is essential to our very existence, the significance of drinking water cannot be underestimated. Symbolically, Jesus offers himself as the well of life. Through Jesus “the heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Water purifies, hydrates, decontaminates. Water baptizes, purifies and sanctifies. There are so many gospel stories about water – Jesus is baptized in water, Jesus turns water into wine, Jesus walks on water, Jesus drinks water with the woman at the well.

Water is essential, the primary cosmic element from which life has emerged. Jesus invites us to drink Him into our lives so that we may be continually refreshed and renewed, thereby allowing us to share that living water abundantly with all we encounter.

March 18 2009 John 8:12-20

I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness
but will have the light of life.

Light is a crucial element for life. When Jesus says he is the light of the world, we can take that to mean that our lives are filled with life-giving power when we follow the Light.

Light draws our attention. Think about how we are drawn to watch fire, or our affinity for lighting candles. Even Genesis opens with God proclaiming “Let there be light”. Jesus is the light of the world, the light of love that draws all things together for good; the light that guides us toward what is holy and true; the light that rests in our hearts when all else seems dark.

How has the light of Christ made a difference in your life? Today, notice all the places where you connect with light – the splendor of a beautiful sunrise, the sun’s rays on the trees, the light in your home. Notice where you are enlightened today. Where are the “aha” moments that spark an idea? Where have you been illuminated? Has your heart been set ablaze?

The light of life, Jesus, desires nothing more than to ignite our hearts on fire with God’s light.

March 19 2009 Luke 2:41-52

Parenting has never been an easy job...simple, but not easy. Mary and Joseph were dedicated to teaching Jesus about their faith. Jesus was nearing the age of 13 and would soon be expected to understand the Passover Feast and much more. But even then, Mary and Joseph were not alone in raising their families. They were blessed with an extended family of relatives, neighbors and friends who make parenting possible. His parents must have trusted those relationships to wait a full day before checking up on Him.

Jesus had not missed the bus, though. His place was with the spiritual leaders of the temple. Even as a youth, Jesus understood the larger picture of his earthly mission. Those who heard him recognized the spirit of his understanding, not just that he had the correct answers.

This season, may we see the larger picture. Hopefully, we will recognize that we too are in the extended family of Jesus. Perhaps one of our family could use a hug today or simply our undivided attention while they vent. Be there for them.

March 20 2009 John 8:33-47

IS FAITH STRONGER THAN SIN?

Have you ever been tempted in your life by sin? Sin can capture, enslave and abuse us. If sin were to take hold within you, it could not only be addictive, but also destructive. Faith will help you hear the words of GOD. When you hear the words of GOD and fix your mind on him and his spirit, you will have new life and he will set you free. By being free you will be able to turn away from sin.

You can make a commitment to eliminate the power of sin. Follow the mission of Jesus and by the power of his word, you can help to free all enslaved people of sin and death. You must have faith, and with God's help you can make the commitment to leave sin behind.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, please strengthen my faith so that I have the power to leave sin behind and the strength to follow your words and have eternal life. Amen.

March 21 2009 John 8:47-59

Upon reading and rereading this passage I had a great deal of doubt on what "I" could write. All of a sudden two words reached out to me, "I am."

What were those words trying to communicate as I doubted myself? Was I a non believer as those who were questioning Jesus?

I remembered in EFM when we discussed Exodus 3:14. Moses asks God who he is and God replies to him "I AM who I am." In John 8:47-59 Jesus uses the words again. The Jews who do not believe him question him and he finally says, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." Those who still were not satisfied with his answer and had no faith threw rocks at him so he ran and hid. Do we doubt those two words and their power? I doubted myself and realized it takes faith, not words to believe in what we cannot always comprehend. Also, it takes a lot of faith to ask your own self who "I am."

"I am" a believer and "I am" a child of God. Today I suggest we think of who we are, "I am" Sometimes it is hard to sit and just be. Today I will be me, and will think of who "I am." I plan to write a listing of the answers I hear in the quiet of sitting with God, being me. I know "I AM" a child of God and follower of Jesus Christ. I may find other "I am" meanings that are in my life. Try to be quiet and listen and just be who "you are" Jesus and God only stated "I AM" and those two words brought together followers and believers that were satisfied with that answer and built a faith in them.

"I AM . . . "

March 22 2009 John 3:14-21

"Oh my!" I thought, when I first read this passage. This is one of the most famous passages from the New Testament, the absolute summation of Christianity. How can I distill this into two or three paragraphs when philosophers, theologians, and others have been debating and discussing the meaning of this for centuries?

After reading and re-reading this passage, the following phrases kept capturing my attention:

"And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world....But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

For me, this is the passage's meaning--God brought light into a dark world when He made this ultimate sacrifice for us. That light is hope and goodness, truth and beauty, love and forgiveness.

That light is also freedom. We have been liberated to become our best selves, in the knowledge that when we truly strive to do so and allow Him to work through us, whatever we do will be good enough in the eyes of God.

March 23 2009 John 6:1-15

It came to me as interesting that Jesus came to John to be baptized, and then was launched on His way to His ministry to us sick folks. Jesus' first step.

When Mary accepted her role as mother of Jesus and went to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, Elizabeth's son (yet to be born, John) leaped for joy, as Mary entered the room, thus starting an unusual relationship between John and Jesus. So it seems so normal for John to be the one to start Jesus on his "WAY". God was very pleased.

Now Jesus was always a human so He was put to the test in the wilderness for 40 days. I can't imagine the Satan didn't use all of his power to try to trick Jesus and make Him fall. But Jesus wanted to do God's will and bring us God's message, "Repent and Believe." This is still the message we should be hearing, "Repent and Believe." Amen.

March 24 2009 John 6:16-27

"This is your Captain speaking," said the pilot

The passengers and crew of flight 1549 were en route to South Carolina on a clear, yet bitter, January afternoon. Suitcases, cell phones, and electronic notepads filled the gigantic carrier – mothers held their children with casual inference toward fellow cabin mates. "Please Lord let them be quiet until we land" The pilot, in control of their destiny, exited the runway with proficiency and ease. Minutes later – the commercial flight struck a flock of large birds resulting in an immediate loss of both engines, knocking their initial path into an element of the unknown – terror and anxiety.

"It is I", said the Christ.

The disciples too departed from the shores of Tiberius, leaving their passengers . . . their pilot . . . only to be hit by a sudden tempest in the Sea of Galilee. 'The position of the lake makes it liable to sudden storms, the cool air from uplands rushing down the gorges with great violence and tossing waters in tumultuous billows. Such storms are fairly frequent, and as they are attended with danger to small craft, the boatmen must constantly be on the alert.' The chaos that ensued drew terror and anxiety . . . cries of helplessness. They were doomed – why had they left without their teacher?

I can only imagine both the disciples and passengers finding themselves in the same boat – fully cognizant their lives were in the hands of someone else. Teacher, Christ, Jesus, Allah or Yahweh . . . death was imminent. The loaves and fishes were a thing of the past. Oars would not keep them from being thrust into the frigid waters. The USB drive filled with tomorrow's presentation was immaterial compared to the moment each faced right now.

We can only imagine their thoughts as the plane crashed into the icy waters . . . as the back door was opened and the waters started to flood inward. The image that sticks in my mind is the last passenger being called up by the Captain. Motioning for him to come to him – follow me. The passenger listened to him – walking towards the Captain, towards the light. All 155 passengers and crew made it out alive. The disciples too were calmed by the very presence of Christ as he came to them – walking on water.

"It is I," said the Christ.

March 25 2009 Luke 1:26-38

In reading this passage about the annunciation, my first reaction, why Lent? I was associating this passage with Advent. Of the four Gospels, only Luke provides this account of the angel Gabriel directly addressing Mary - that she has been chosen by God to bear a son, and that she will call the child Jesus. Why was Mary chosen to carry God's son? We do not know her initial reaction to the announcement other than the mention that she is troubled. And we must not forget Joseph, who supported Mary and her unborn child.

Consider the era of this event. Mary is a young girl, a virgin, engaged to be married. We know so very little of her family or life to this time. Why was she chosen by God to carry his son? To learn that this son was to be called Jesus, to carry on the lineage of David, and to be a ruler of all nations? How would we react to this pronouncement in this day and age? With disbelief, a prospect of great power and wealth? Provide this offspring with the best education possible? Make sure he was aware of his destiny? But God, in his wisdom, always seems to have a different plan for us. God chose Mary and her husband-to-be Joseph. I believe that Mary must have come from a very loving, caring family and in turn instilled in Jesus the importance of faith and family.

Throughout the ages, think about all the women who have nurtured their children, from birth through adulthood, through joy and sorrow. Did they question their role, or accept it as Mary did? Did Mary ever wonder when Jesus started his ministry what the outcome would be? Did she waver in her faith? We can only surmise the depth of her feelings in losing her first born son. To lose a child (no matter their age) is one of the most heartbreaking aspects of life. Our faith is tested to the limit, but even in the darkest times, God is always there. He knows what we are experiencing. Did he not lose his only son? Like Mary, we must keep the faith and know that one day we too will have the joy of being reunited with God, Jesus and our loved ones.

March 26 2009 John 6:41-51

As I read this passage I hear the hymn “I am the bread of life” with its stirring refrain of “And I will raise them up on the last day” playing in the background in my head. The words of this passage are so powerful that they are repeated verbatim in that hymn and many others.

The other thing that strikes me about this passage is the “grumbling” of the Jews. They are interpreting Jesus’ words too literally and are basically saying “Are you kidding me? We know you mother and father and where you came from. So how can you say you have come down from heaven?” Jesus responds by encouraging them to think more abstractly about His words and encourages them to believe so that they will have eternal life. Bread in this context is not what you eat for physical sustenance. Jesus says, “Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died”. The manna is physical or “earthly” bread. The bread that Jesus is talking about is the faith in God that nourishes you spiritually, “heavenly bread”.

Jesus tells the Jews “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them”. I take this to mean that they have been taught to prepare for the coming of the Messiah and Jesus is basically saying that now the Father is drawing them to believe that Jesus is His son, the Messiah. They need to get past their literal interpretations and believe what Jesus is telling them so that they will have eternal life. They need to consume the “spiritual food” that Jesus is offering in order to be “raised up on the last day”.

It is not difficult to understand why the Jews doubted Jesus and were literally interpreting his words. They had difficulty understanding the depth of His words because they viewed him as one of them. They did not look beyond the face value of what He said in order to interpret its deeper meaning.

For many of us, faith is difficult because we crave evidence or tangible proof of something before we believe. But Jesus is being quite clear, if you believe in Him you will have eternal life. We have to take these “leaps of faith” all the time in our daily lives. Some leaps are easier than others but if we don’t take them, we fail to learn and grow.

Jesus was challenging the Jews to connect the dots between what they had been taught to what he was saying – to take that “leap of faith”, to believe in Him to ensure their eternal life. We challenge ourselves to find the deeper meaning of events in our daily lives. If we take the time to think more abstractly about things, we can find God in the simple events of our lives. We just have to broaden our minds and hearts so that we can find the “spiritual food” to nourish our souls every day. To me, that is the broader message of this passage.

March 27 2009 John 6:52-59

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you.” This is a powerful statement. It is so important that Jesus repeats this or a variation of this seven times in this eight sentence reading.

The language that Christ uses is direct. It allows for no argument. Unless you eat His flesh and unless you drink His blood, you will have no life within you. He is saying unless you believe in Him, you will not be saved and will not live forever. He is the way to everlasting life. Believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, or you will have no salvation. He has the power to forgive you for your sins. He will raise up only those who believe in him.

It is by faith in Jesus that one participates in His salvation. It is by faith that one receives his gift of everlasting life. Christ draws us into direct participation with Him. He invites us to take his life into the very center of our being. We live in Him and He lives in us. The life that He offers is the very life of God himself.

Jesus reiterates this by saying his flesh is the true food and His blood is the true drink. By using the word true, Jesus is saying he is the only way to eternal life. Christ lives because of the Father. The Son has the power of God to give life. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ will live because of Him.

This is the center of our Eucharist. We participate in Christ’s offering for us. He reconciles us with God. He gives us the gift of new and unending life in him.

The message in this passage is one of the most important in the Gospels. Indeed it is basis of the Christian religion. The way to salvation is through Jesus and only through Jesus. Believe in Christ. Be a part of Christ. He will sustain all those who believe.

March 28 2009 John 6:60-71

Two passages stand out for me in this long reading. They are 1)- Vss.62-63: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”, and 2.)Vss. 68-69 “Simon Peter answered Him ‘Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God.’

In the previous reading, Jesus has told the disciples that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood if they want to have life in them. This apparent cannibalism would be anathema to the Jews, as it is to us. Ritual cannibalism in primitive societies symbolizes the absorption and indwelling of the attributes and spirit of the consumed victim. However, the actual eating of the flesh and blood of another human being is repulsive and sinful to almost every culture in the world. But in verses 62 and 63 chapter 6, Jesus explains to the disciples that it was not His actual flesh and blood that was to be eaten, but that His Holy Spirit and teaching of unconditional love as contained in His words and life were to nourish their spirits and be incorporated into their very life and being. if they were to be in true communion with God .

Many of the disciples turned away from Jesus at His statement that no one could come to Him unless the Father granted it. But Peter realized that there was no other way to go--- that Jesus’ words and His spirit were the true path to communion and union with God---- that, indeed, Jesus was sent by God to lead them in the path to this salvation.

And these things are as true for us today as they were for the Disciples---- We, too must open ourselves to the indwelling and nourishment of the Holy Spirit, and a life of unconditional love, if we want to be in communion and union with God. We, too, have come to believe that He is the Holy One of God--- that his words are true and that there is no one else to whom we can go.

March 29 2009 John 12:20-33

Jesus continued to do miracles and made claims to be the Good Shepherd caring for His sheep. Jewish leaders were divided in their opinion of Jesus. Many believed He was possessed, “Why listen to him?” Others did not believe He was possessed because a man possessed by demons cannot open the eyes of the blind.

Jesus declares himself as the Good Shepherd of as many as will accept Him. A beautiful metaphor is of Jesus’ as the Good Shepherd and His loving care of His “sheep.” Because the Jews were not sheep of His flock they did not believe – His own sheep listen to His voice and are known to Him and they follow the Good Shepherd. No one can take them from His care. “My Father and I are one.”

Jesus had been in Jerusalem for the Tabernacle Ceremonies (7.2) and He preached in surrounding towns, before He returned to Jerusalem for the Dedication. The Feast of the Dedication kept in remembrance of the restoration of the services in the Temple in 165BC by the Maccabees after three years of desecration under a Syrian king. The feast began on December 25 and lasted for 8 days. Today it is called “The Feast of the Lights” or Chanukah.

A claim to do as the Father did was regarded by the Jews as blasphemy. An attempt to stone Him was made. Jesus makes a claim that His good works confirm His claim, that “I and the Father are one.” Jesus asks the Jews what miracles they are stoning Him for and they reply not for His miracles but for blasphemy in stating He is a mere man and yet claims to be God. The Jews wanted Jesus to tell them plainly if He was “The Christ.”

Jesus leaves and goes to Perga where John is baptizing many of the people who followed Him. They soon realized that John gave them no miracles as Jesus did, but everything he said about Jesus was true. At that time, many came to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

The Good Shepherd cares for us as sheep of his flock, as long as we hear His voice and follow Him, for He knows each of us and cares for us as we are.

March 30 2009 John 9:1-17

We often see people disabled from birth, just as in the case of the blind man in this passage. It is interesting that nowadays, as in New Testament times, people continue to make the assumption that (1-genes from parents/relatives must have contributed to the condition or (2 that someone sinned against this person or his/her parents. Believe it or not, these perspectives still exist among some less educated groups in the world.

During this Lenten time of reflection, we should ask ourselves how many times we question the occurrence of good things that happen to us or others without being suspicious of the cause of a seemingly miraculous event? Could it have been divine intervention? Or just a rare occurrence? Perhaps, scientific knowledge at work? Or, it was just meant to be! Do we seek the answers in prayer to our Lord? And give thanks for the blessing? Where is our true faith at these times?

What is so profound about the healing event in this passage is that Jesus addresses a negative misunderstanding of onlookers by offering a positive way to observe this man's blindness... "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him". The positive perspective of this man's blindness is that many caring people helped him obtain food and clothing and perhaps invited him into their homes during inclement weather. Their acts of kindness reveal the existence of God's works of love through people.

The skepticism of the Pharisees versus the transformation of onlookers to believers as a result of God's grace represents a timeless, ongoing situation in the world. The Pharisees decided to view the molding of mud with spit as a form of work that was not according to their understanding of the Law on the Sabbath. In comparing their strict adherence to Temple Law to today's adherence to church doctrine and dogma by groups of various denominations in given situations, we ask ourselves, when are we going to look at the "gift being given"?...whether it is freedom of worship according to one's own belief...or the thanksgiving of water during baptism on non-feast days or in the Episcopal church?

The Lenten season offers us a time to look within ourselves and how we respond to these issues when they occur and .how we respond to those in need. It offers us a time to be thankful for the gifts God has given us.

Collect: From the New Zealand Prayer Book

O God, giver of life and health
Your Son Jesus Christ has called us to hunger and thirst to see right prevail;
Refresh us with your grace that we may not be weary of well-doing;
For the sake of him who meets all our needs
Our Saviour Jesus Christ.

March 31 2009 John 9:18-41

“There are none so blind as those who will not see.” . . . “Seeing is believing.” . . . “I see, said the blind man.” Our language is filled with phrases that allude to two interwoven definitions of the word “see”: 1) visual sight and 2) understanding. This reading from John highlights the relationship between these two definitions.

Jesus had quite a task in front of Him: convincing others He was the Son of God. He was trying to teach a message to people who were accustomed to dealing in cold, hard facts. By giving a visually impaired (blind) man sight Jesus was able to demonstrate His point in a very concrete, irrefutable way. Once He got the attention of the people, He was then able to use this man’s sight as a metaphor for the more subtle points of belief and faith. “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” The Pharisees had difficulty with this comment, for they were taking Jesus literally and were confused because they still had visual sight. Jesus goes on to further explain that the blind are without sin, while those who claim sight are still sinners.

By linking blindness and sight to sin (or a lack thereof), Jesus extends the metaphor of sight/blindness beyond simply “seeing” versus “understanding”. He is telling us that our will plays a role in belief. If we are UNABLE to see, then we are without sin. However, if we are capable of sight and we CHOOSE TO BE UNABLE then our sin remains. We must possess the will to believe if we truly want to see.

During this Lenten period, as we reflect on the sacrifices Jesus made for us and for our salvation, we must remember that it is not enough to simply go through the motions of our faith. We must truly BELIEVE in Jesus if we want to SEE. In today’s vernacular, “BELIEVING IS SEEING”.

April 1 2009 John 10:1-18

In a few short days we will be entering Holy Week. As Jesus enters ‘triumphantly’ into Jerusalem, what better time than today to reflect on Jesus’ words from John 10:9 – “I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will come in and go out, and find pasture.”

What does it mean to ‘enter through Jesus’? I think it means that when we live our lives as Jesus did – when we put the needs of others above our own, when we ‘love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves’ – it is at that moment when we will “find pasture”. Jesus is the door for us because of the life he lived and the death he died. “I lay down my life for the sheep” (verse 15b) and in doing so shows Love Incarnate.

My prayer for today:

Lord of love and unselfishness, you humble and astound me. Your grace and mercy put me in awe. Though unworthy, your love redeems me. Thank you for the promise of your pasture, which gives me strength and courage. Walk this day beside me, forever. Amen.

April 2 2009 John 10:19-42

These verses bring to mind the never ending efforts, by many Jews, to challenge Jesus' claim to being the son of God. They were conflicted though because of His deeds, His miracles. The dilemma was, how can a human claim to be the son of God. This was just unthinkable and blasphemous to many Jews. As a result they sought to destroy Him. They were thwarted though by the many miracles He performed.

While there are many directions to go in analyzing, or attempting to interpret these verses, one in particular leaps into my mind. What a glorious gift to us it was, that Jesus was human. He provides us with someone with whom we can identify. He was just like us in having to cope with the problems and challenges that face us every day. Getting up in the morning, facing the day, feeling good or just so-so, deciding what to do and how and when to do it and on and on with the same concerns that we have. Yet, this man could show and demonstrate a love and compassion for his fellow man that sets a goal for us that we can never quite match. We can strive for it however. Were He not human though, if we were to believe Him to be a God would mean we could never hope to identify with Him. He would be so far beyond us. We would think, sure a God could be like this and feel and act this way, but we're only human and don't have God-like powers. But Jesus shows us that we do have these powers. Oh, not the dramatic ones, the miracles, but the human ones. We can care for our fellow man. We can be caring and we can love our neighbor as ourselves. There is no way we can match Jesus love for our fellow man, but He surely shows us a direction to follow. Jesus, being human, is for us, the greatest gift we could ever have been given. Jesus, a human among us, though God gives us a direction in life and a goal for which we can ascribe, in our own modest way, with the talents given us by our Lord.

April 3 2009 John 11:1-27

...“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die...”

2008 was a tough year for me. It was the year I received the diagnosis, like so many others, that I had cancer. It is stunning to hear those words. That’s for other people. You never think it’s going to happen to you. Your mind races; you are full of questions. How bad? How long? Surgery? Treatment? Etc., etc. To so many of those questions the only reassurance you get from the doctor is, wait. Wait for surgery to see how bad, wait for biopsies, wait to see how one treatment works out before another is decided upon, wait, wait, wait. It is a time when your mind cannot find peace with waiting. You want instant answers. You want reassurance.

This is the time when most people, even those who don’t consider themselves “religious” turn to payer. I have always considered myself a spiritual person, yet all of a sudden I couldn’t pray at all. It was like my mind was frozen. Do I beg God to save me? What about all the other sick people, why should God save me over them? Does God have anything to do with it at all? It is a time of confronting your mortality. It is a time when you confront your beliefs. I could talk the talk. Could I now walk the walk?

Gradually, as I accepted my diagnosis, I began to calm down. God is with me. I know that deep down in my heart. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me...will never die.” I have heard those words so many times. Now as I faced surgery I really accepted those words in an internal way. I would be ok. There was no question about it. It didn’t matter what actually happened to my body in that surgery. I would be ok. God is with me. He who believes will never die. Now I had my answers, my reassurance, my security. God is with me and will be forever. It doesn’t really matter whether I live in this body or not, God is still with me. What a marvelous feeling! What a blessing!

I have survived my first year post cancer. I’d like to believe it was for a reason. Perhaps the reason was so that I could say out loud, “God is with me.” “Emmanuel.”

April 4 2009 John 11:28-44

Today's reading describes the miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This is probably one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. For context, in the previous chapter Jesus openly declares that He is God by stating that "I and my Father are one" which so offends the authorities that they want to kill Him then and there. This is followed by today's reading in which Lazarus, after being dead for four days, is resuscitated by nothing more than the command of Jesus. In all of recorded history, no human has ever been brought back from the dead (after being dead for four days, no less). Today's reading is followed by the story of the authorities being so nervous at this turn of events that they determine to have Him removed at all costs in order to maintain their political position, which leads in short order to His execution.

So why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and why are we in the 21st century told about it? One of the arguments that I often hear is that we are told so that we may believe that Jesus is God. But this argument doesn't seem to hold much water. Ask an atheist what he thinks of the story of Lazarus and he will tell you that it is either a fairytale, or that it involved trickery, or perhaps the poor man lay comatose for four days and happened to awaken at just the right moment. But certainly not that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, because no one has ever come back from the dead. Miracles have never convinced those not wishing to believe.

Could it be that this miracle is documented for the aid of strengthening the belief of one who already has faith? While this may have some validity, it doesn't seem to be the main reason for telling us this. How many people have you heard say that they believe that Jesus is God based on the fact that he raised Lazarus from the dead? On the other hand, there are many people who believe that Jesus is God and who view this miracle simply as minor supporting evidence of that which they already believe.

So, again, why were we told of this miracle at all? Perhaps this miracle (maybe all of the miracles described in the Bible) is recorded for the sake of instruction. Could it be that miracles are recorded for instruction on how we are to act, how we are affected by others, and how the Divine acts upon us? Might it be that the miracle described in today's reading is meant to demonstrate that when we are spiritually sick and die, it is only the Lord Jesus Christ that can bring us back into that spiritual life? But this is just my thought. What's yours?

April 5 2009 Mark 11:1-11 Palm Sunday

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem—it conjures up so many images, and so many questions! First of all, can you imagine being one of the two apostles asked to go and virtually steal a donkey from some strangers? (and why did it have to be a donkey that had never been ridden before?) What if you were the owner of said donkey, would you be satisfied with the “he needs it and we'll bring it back” response? I'm thinking probably not.

Then we get to the even weirder part. All of a sudden the crowds are throwing down their cloaks onto the ground and waving branches in the air shouting “Hosanna” (which I've learned is a Hebrew word meaning “please save” or “save now”). Why was this? Here was a man riding a donkey. What was it about him and the circumstances that caused such acclamations?

And finally, these crowds are the same people who less than a week later are shouting “Crucify him!” How did things go so very wrong so very fast? Why is it that the herd mentality always seems to lead to bad things rather than good? Are we still so easily swayed?

A prayer:

Lord Jesus we come before you on this Palm Sunday and give you thanks. We remember how you set your face firmly towards Jerusalem, with a single eye and pure intention, knowing what lay ahead but never turning aside. We remember how you rode into your city in triumph, we thank you that you enjoyed the Hallelujahs and Hosannas of ordinary people, living fully in that moment of delight, and accepting their praise. We thank you that you went into the heart of our evil, and pain, along a way that was both terrible and wonderful as your kingship became your brokenness, and your dying became love's triumph.

(from <http://www.thisischurch.com/intercession/inter020324.htm>)

April 6 2009 John 12:1-11 – Monday in Holy Week

John 12:1-12 tells of Lazarus' dinner that was held for Jesus. Lazarus hosted the dinner after Jesus had raised him from the dead. As it is today, inviting someone into a home is seen as a kind gesture and an extension of friendship. However, sharing a meal during the time of Jesus and Lazarus meant becoming as close as family. Also, Martha's cleaning of Jesus' feet with expensive perfume shows her willingness to honor him as a servant would honor his master. Judas objects to such treatment, for the cost of the perfume could help the poor. Truly, he wanted to use the money to his own advantage. Instead, Jesus knew that Martha was showing true love and gratitude in her selfless act.

Lord, as we remember the final days of your Son Jesus Christ, help us remain steadfast in our devotion and worship through the example of Martha. Help us also to share our thoughts and minds with you as Lazarus did with Jesus. Please remain patient with us as we work to understand your lessons and teachings, even if we feel frustrated and lost. Open our hearts so we can receive your love, all while helping us act with humility and selflessness. Finally Lord, be with us as we keep watch during this Holy Week, waiting for the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ.

In His name we pray,
Amen.

April 7 2009 John 12:20-36 – Tuesday in Holy Week

The heading in my Bible for this passage reads “Jesus Predicts his Death.” Jesus was with Andrew and Philip when He met with some people and likened his life to that of a kernel of wheat – when that kernel dies, only then will it produce seeds. The kernel of wheat has to give up its life so that more life will come. Jesus says he could go to His Father and asked to be spared from what is to come, but He says it is for this very reason that He comes to this time. And His time is coming soon.

But there is more. During this walk toward darkness in Holy Week, Jesus, at the close of the scripture passage, talks about the light. “Walk while you have the light before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going.” I was instantly reminded of the verse (Ps 119:105) “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” And then my mind right away went to John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God.” Jesus is the Word. He is the lamp to our feet and the light to our paths. Matthew writes about letting our light shining before men. And Jesus says in John, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

What a promise we have! Despite Jesus predicting His death, He tells the people, tells us, that there is life, there is light, in the darkness. We just need to follow Him, let Him be the light on our path.

Lord, the light of your love is shining, in the midst of the darkness shining, Jesus Light of the world shine upon us, set us free by the Truth you now bring us. Shine on me. Shine on me. Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory. Blaze, spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire. Flow, river flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy. Send forth the word, Lord, and let there be light. (Words by Graham Kendrick)

April 8 2009 John 13:21-32 – Wednesday in Holy Week

I wonder what it was like for Judas. Knowing that he intended to betray Jesus, to give Him up to the authorities so that He could be captured, disgraced, mocked, beaten and crucified; I wonder what it felt like?

I wonder what it felt like for Judas to have his feet washed by Jesus.

I wonder what it felt like when Jesus took the first foot into his hand, holding it firmly and yet gently washing away a week's worth of dirt and grime. I wonder what it felt like when Jesus finished the other foot, drying them both with a dry scratchy towel and then kissing those feet. I wonder what it felt like.

I wonder what it felt like at that dinner table, when the bread was dipped and the time had come for him to do the deed, to leave the table, to betray the Savior. I wonder what it felt like.

I wonder if Judas believed with all sincerity that Jesus was on the wrong path. I wonder if Judas listened to and trusted the religious leaders who opposed Jesus and believed what he would do was for the good of all God-fearing people.

I wonder how many times, I have, you have, spoken or acted against someone; convinced we were right, forgetting the command to love. To love like Jesus. To serve even the one who would betray us.

April 9 2009 John 13:1-17, 3b-25 - Maundy Thursday

On this night Jesus shows us how He wants us to act.

He shows us a way to live.

This isn't a sign your name on the line – join my club – invitation, where you carry around a membership card that says you belong. I'm not even sure that Jesus cares that my name is written in a baptismal register.

Choosing to serve another for the good of the other is what we are called to do.

I don't see this as a sentimental going away event. For me it's one of the most teachable moments about servant-hood and agape. It's not about feelings, it's not about good desires; it's deciding to act for the benefit of someone – and in this case it's really for the benefit of all humanity. Jesus chooses to live and die for all humanity and here is Jesus in a last pre-crucifixion time with the disciples being servant to them.

It's caring at its deepest level. Jesus wants us to live in His example, not just claim His name or wear Christian symbols.

This causes me to have a different kind of love, an additional love; a caring grateful emotion attached love toward God and the gift of Jesus. It strengthens and aids me in my daily choosing to act for the good of others for whom I may not feel so kindly or sentimental.

April 10 2009 John 18:1-19:42 - Good Friday

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Pilate asked Him, ‘What is truth?’”

Truth is not simply linear, logical and propositional. That’s what our mind likes – something clearly understood. On the contrary, Jesus, the truth, embodies the ultimate reality that is humbling, honest, and united with love, present in pain, hardship, sorrow, loss and even death.

Pilate, in his frustration as a political leader in the midst of a disturbance he views as inconvenient, stands before “the truth” asking “what is truth?” He can’t see it standing in front of him. He’s used to people claiming to know the truth, ready and willing to bargain with him for political gain. Jesus is an enigma to him. But so caught up in a system that is wearied and worn out because of prevailing dishonesty in action, because of its revolutionary underpinning and its hunger for power, Pilate is blind to truth that stands before him in all humility. Jesus says “I am the truth.” Here “...God is present, unveiled, undistorted, in His infinite depth, in His unapproachable mystery. Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is.” (Paul Tillich, *The New Being*)

Do you belong to the truth? Jesus claims to be the truth. And the truth is God’s son, Jesus, came into the world to proclaim the ultimate truth of God’s love; a that love asserts itself in death; death on a cross. In the seeming absence and abandonment of God amidst the pain and horror of the Friday we call Good, somehow, paradoxically, God is especially present. That is the truth.

April 11 2009 John 19:38-42 – Easter Vigil

Come out, come out, wherever you are!! Remember those words? I do. I associate them with the game "hide and seek." The words usually meant that the game was over, and that all the players had to come out from their well chosen hiding places.

These words come to my mind when I think about today's scripture choice. We know that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were secret disciples of Jesus. They came to Him at night out of fear. For the writer of the Gospel according to John, night is not a time of day. It is a state of being. It refers to the realm of sin and death, where the truth is overshadowed by lies, justice is obscured by greed, compassion is clouded over by self-centeredness, and trust is eclipsed fear. Jesus' death brought Nicodemus and Joseph to a crossroad. They could no longer remain on the sidelines. The choice: to remain in the cold darkness of fear, or to "come out" into the healing light of God's unconditional love made unmistakably clear in the person of Jesus.

You and I have those choices before us every day, to a greater or lesser degree. Every day we are faced with choices of fear or trust, isolation or communion, cold indifference or compassion, vengeance or mercy.

Daily, the Risen Jesus who came out of the darkness of the tomb invites us, his sisters and brothers: "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Thanks to all who contributed to the creation of this Lenten Devotional Booklet.

May your words inspire us,
your thoughts intrigue us,
and may our hearts be moved
to love and serve our
Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer more fully.

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