

St. John's United Methodist Church – Rock Hill, South Carolina Lenten Devotional 2020

The church needs a healthy theology of lament.

Not an agreed-upon short moment of sorrow so things can get back to normal.

But a season to complain, be perplexed, shattered. To be angry.

Without excuse, without being made to feel broken or weak. Without trying to fix pain and make it behave.

~Peter Enns

Introduction

When I first met D.C. Horne, I casually said, “Lent is my favorite time in the liturgical year.” It’s true. I love the season of Lent. People seem astonished that someone would love Lent, and I do. I love that there is a time of the year where we’re reminded that our human tendency is to avoid pain, shame, guilt, and lament. For me, Lent is less about the sorrow and more about the abundant grace that catches us and holds us through the transformation of our own wretchedness.

For logistics... There are no profound thoughts in these pages. Just my thoughts on the lectionary texts for the week. In fact, most days’ writings feel insufficient and unfinished – pithy depictions of my own experiences with the scripture. Two versions are available: a pdf electronic version and a printed version. If you are using the pdf version and have internet access, hyperlinks are provided for the scripture. Lastly, an accessible version is available for anyone needing to utilize a screen reader.

Each day will include a scripture, a quotation, my thoughts, and a prayer. When I’ve sought an outside source, I’ve referenced it in the text. As a recovering academic, I chose not to use any formal writing style. Sundays are devoted to Spiritual Disciplines that were presented in the scriptures at some point in the week. You may choose to devote as much or as little time to these as serves your spiritual growth. I’ve added an appendix that is really just a list of additional resources. Some I’ve mentioned. Others are spaces of nourishment for me. I’ve used *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* throughout, the New Revised Standard Version. Finally, for logistics, there’s a playlist. Yes, I made a Spotify playlist of the music I listened to while writing. I’ll leave it to Hannah to let us know how you can access it. Additionally, a big thanks to D.C. Horne and Katie Crockford for their editing and notes.

I initiated this project excited to write. It included continued excitement as well as cursing and sobbing. I also found incredible love and grace and mercy as I wrote. There were nights where the heaviness of the season kept me up as I was unable to shake it from my bones. My hope is that in midst of all this you find a companion. Someone offering the

encouragement that being human is hard and that if you can allow yourself to surrender your human armor, there is so much compassion and love to be found. Be soft and gentle with yourselves, my friends. While I love this season, I know it's not easy.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge Rachel Held Evans's influence is all over this. I knew she would be present through this process, but I did not realize just how much until I got done. If you're not familiar with Rachel, she was a Christian blogger, author, and speaker who died last year from complications from the flu. She left behind a husband and two small children. Her book, *Searching for Sunday*, helped me know that there was still room for me on this path we call Christianity and in this thing we call church. Her last blog post was on Ash Wednesday of last year. She wrote – *It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on. Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or your doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called "none" (whose faith experiences far transcend the limits of that label) you know this truth deep in your bones: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."*

Death is a part of life.

My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Rachel died on May 4, 2019. Two weeks after Easter. I am forever grateful for her life and courage.

Lastly, I leave you with these words from Grisel Medina as we journey into this season together-

We need a watershed moment where humanity is drawn into a personally spiritual lament that goes beyond the institutions and church structures.

A lament from a sacred space. An inner cry from the depths of a soul that grieves deeply for the brokenness God sees each and everyday.

Love and grace through this journey,

Marinn

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Week One

February 26, 2020 – Ash Wednesday

Today marks the beginning of Lent, the beginning of our preparation for Easter. While we might attend a service and receive the imposition of ashes, this day will likely look little different than other ordinary days as we go to work or school or attend to our other obligations. It will take intentionality, on our part, to honor this day as holy.

Isaiah 58:1-7

God is unimpressed by a spiritual veneer or our business savvy, either as a faith community or individually as Christ followers. None of us gets to treat people like expendable articles and expect God to look the other way because it somehow advanced His kingdom or had nothing to do with it. ~ Jen Hatmaker

For many of us the practice of fasting begins today, I'm writing this in early January and frankly have no idea what I'll be fasting from at this point. One of my favorite television shows is a British comedy called "The Vicar of Dibley" in which Dawn French (of "French Saunders" or also known as The Fat Lady in the "Harry Potter" films) plays a female vicar in a small English village. It simultaneously delightful, hysterical, and at times, challenging (and I highly recommend you commence binging immediately – unless, of course, you're giving up television). As the first season concludes, the vicar, at the urging of the village council gives up chocolate for Lent. This proves to be quite a challenge and a series of situations occur in which she openly struggles with and sometimes mourns her loss of chocolate.

Fasting is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as "the voluntary abstention from an otherwise normal function – most often eating – for the sake of intense spiritual activity". The prophet, Isaiah, provided us with some important understanding regarding our fasting in today's scripture, and he didn't mince words! In fact, some scholars described this passage as mocking those he's addressing. He is writing to a community in conflict and is urging them to focus on an ethical vision of community, one focused on unity and solidarity with those in need. We are reminded that our fasting is of little worth if done for the wrong reasons, that fasting and worship without public ethics focused on solidarity with those on the margins of society is no worship at all!

Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? -
Isaiah 58:6

I don't know about you, but I find these to be beautiful words! As we enter into this season of lament, I hope you'll join me in the difficult exploration of the ways we've not been in solidarity with those in need. Do we share our bread with the hungry? Do we bring the homeless poor into our homes? Do we cover the naked? These are the ways we're told to be in solidarity, to break every yoke! What yoke needs to be broken for you to more fully engage in God's public ethic of solidarity?

Prayer:

Merciful God, look upon us as we enter these Forty Days, and bless our journey through the desert of Lent. May our fasting be hunger for justice; our alms, a making of peace; our prayer, the chant of humble and grateful hearts. All that we do and pray is in the name of Jesus, for in his cross you proclaim your love for ever and ever. Amen. (Author unknown)

February 27, 2020

Psalm 32

Grace is the most therapeutic factor in emotional and spiritual healing. A doctor who works in a mental hospital put it this way. 'Half my patients could go home in a week if they knew they were forgiven.' ~Barry Pearman

Have you ever had an experience where grace was the most desperate desire of your heart? Have you ever encountered life in such a way that the only balm was grace, real grace? Not the "I'm going to get all caught up in a highly emotional experience and 'give my life to Christ'" kind. No, the kind where you feel like you've been left stranded, with all your faults and wounds and ugliness laid bare for all the world to see, and the only thing you need in that moment is for someone to see and acknowledge your humanity. That kind?

Those moments are scary. I spent most of my life actively working to avoid the long, hard look in the mirror at my faults and failures and shortcomings. I created rules and plans and gathered achievements and degrees. The psalmist described this as silence and deceit, this fear of laying bare. This leads to a struggle with life, a groaning, a lack of energy and strength. For most of us, something happens in life that forces us to stop hiding and truly acknowledge our sin (at least that's been my experience!). That vulnerability is terrifying. We fight it with all our might. What if we truly had faith in grace? What if we truly believed that if we laid bare our suffering, sorrow, and shame that grace would appear? That's exactly what the psalmist says happened – and the entire last half of the psalm is a rejoicing in beauty of that forgiveness!

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. -Psalm 32-10-11

This psalm is one of instruction and meditation. There are a total of twelve psalms identified as such. It is intended to give us guidance. As we enter into this time of lament and repentance, the prospect of truly coming face to face with our vulnerabilities may feel terrifying yet we are instructed to do so and told that God forgives the guilt of our sin and holds us close in our sorrow. I invite you to join me in pausing to rest in the reality that after we confess our sin, God forgives!

Prayer:

Give us honest hearts, O God, and send your kindly Spirit to help us confess our sins and bring us the peace of your forgiveness; In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (from "Common Worship" of the Church of England)

February 28, 2020

Romans 5:12-19

Grace is alarming – Grace isn't fair. But since most of us want God's grace for ourselves and God's justice for everyone else, there's bound to come a time to confront a third error of grace, there is nothing transactional about it. ~Barbara Brown Taylor

Confession time. I struggle with Paul, and I particularly struggle with the book of Romans (and Hebrews), and I probably should have taken a closer look at just how much of Lectionary Year A contained Romans (and Hebrews) before I started this project, but I didn't, so here we find ourselves. Grace, that's what it's about, right?

One day, when we were children, my brother informed my mother, quite matter-of-factly, that nothing is free. My mother was quick to respond, "That's not true. My love for you is always free. There's nothing you can do that will make it stop." While each of us have tested the limits of that statement, she has proven herself true to her word. Is her love perfect? Of course not. She's human. Is it always there to the best of her ability to offer it? Absolutely.

We live in a transactional world. We give something to get something. That's been true for all of recorded history. We literally cannot escape the economy we live in which makes the economy of grace all the more foreign (and harder for us to have faith in). Paul reminds us that this agony of sin that we work so hard to ignore is literally nothing compared to the gift of grace offered in Jesus Christ. Here's the kicker. Grace is free. There is not a single thing we can do to earn grace, and there's also nothing that grace cannot overcome. It's literally sitting there, waiting for us to confess our sin and take hold of it, and there is no sin great enough to overpower the grace of God!

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through one man's trespass, much more surely has the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. -Romans 5:15

My friends, grace wins! How might our lives be different if we truly believed this? How might our interactions with another be different? In what ways can you live deeper in grace?

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your abundant, abounding grace. Thank you that we don't have to earn a drop of the mighty river of grace that flows freely for us today. Thank you for the unexpected, unmerited favor you've showered on my life. Help me put myself in the path of love and grace. Help me not neglect the disciplines I need to meet with you regularly and to from the water of life. Thank you for your rich love. Amen. ("How to Put Yourself in the Path of God's Grace" by David Mathis)

February 29, 2020

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

To want to admire, instead of follow, Christ is not an invention of bad people; no it is more an invention of those who spinelessly want to keep themselves detached at a safe distance from Jesus.

~Søren Kierkegaard

Accepting the grace offered us by God does not make one a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple is a student, and in the time of Christ, disciples were advanced rabbinic students who had completed seminary and chosen to yoke themselves to a specific rabbi to learn his teachings and midrash (Midrash is defined by the *Britannica* as "initially a philological method of interpreting the literal meaning of biblical texts. In time it developed into a sophisticated interpretive system that reconciled apparent biblical contradictions, established the scriptural basis for new laws, and enriched biblical content with new meaning.") of the scriptures. The term yoke is used because these students would literally follow the rabbi everywhere. In fact, there are stories of these students following their chosen rabbis to the bathroom! The purpose was not only to glean as much information from the teachings of the rabbi but to observe and learn how he embodied and enacted those teachings in the world. In other words, how were his behaviors and choices influenced by his teachings? That's what it means to be a disciple. Therefore, a disciple of Jesus Christ dives into the ways in which Jesus embodied his teachings in the world, so we may, in turn, do the same.

I offer all that because today the scripture presents us with the first of two recorded times in which Jesus is tested. This one occurs as his ministry is just beginning. He is led into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days (If you were curious why Lent is 40 days, it's a

reflection on this fasting of Jesus.). After this period, he faces a series of temptations from the tempter or the devil, temptations that only the Son of God could face (I don't know about you, but I don't have the power to turn stones to bread!). Despite that, there are important points for those of us striving to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

While these temptations required miraculous abilities, they ultimately were focused on selfishness and Jesus's self-protection. I'm not sure many of us would have questioned Jesus getting some food after fasting for 40 days. It seems a reasonable response. That's part of the craftiness of the tempter. Frequently, the temptation can be justified! Not only that, the tempter employs scripture for his cause in verse 6.

So often when we read these stories, we look for the things to admire rather than the things we can follow. This story is titled *The Temptation of Jesus*, and verse 1 tells us that Jesus went to be tempted. *Temptation* is defined in *The Oxford Dictionary* as "the desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise". This means that for some moment in this series of interactions Jesus desired the things presented to him, otherwise there would be no temptation and the story has no power. To experience temptation or desire for things that are wrong or unwise makes us like Jesus. Where we're different and where we are challenged to change is in our responses to temptations. Jesus sifts through the craftiness of the tempter's propositions and resists them. He resists actions of selfishness and self-preservation despite their justification. This is part of what we're called to as Jesus's disciples.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. -Matthew 4:1-2

We've just begun our forty days, but I believe we, too, are led by the Spirit into the wilderness during this time. We will, not doubt, be tempted. I invite you to a more intentional interaction with temptation, remembering that Jesus, too, experienced desire but learned to flesh out the deceit. What needs to happen in your life for you be more apt to flesh out the craftiness of the tempter when he appears?

Prayer:

Lord, if you could resist the temptation to be anything other than suffering servant, how can I not resist the promises of this world, look to you and follow in your footsteps. Amen. (from John Birch faithandworship.com)

March 1, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Confession*

How naturally do those who experience such a change imagine that all sin is gone; that it is utterly rooted out of their heart, and has no more any place therein!... But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return, and sin revives; showing it was but stunned before, not dead. ~John Wesley

Confession is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as “sharing our deepest weaknesses and failures with God and trusted others, so that we may enter into God’s grace and mercy and experience his ready forgiveness and healing.”

We are called to confess our sin before God and before one another. Through prayer, we confess our sins before God. John Wesley utilized bands for the purpose of confession to one another. These were small gatherings of people who met weekly for the purpose of confession. They started with the question, “How is your soul today?” He outlined five additional questions that each member answered during their meetings:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be a sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

I invite you to take some time today and reflect on these questions. While we have gotten out of the practice of accountability as designed by John Wesley, I hope you will consider to whom you might confess as well, and I challenge each of us, myself included, to take up the regular practice of confession before God and others.

Week Two

March 2, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4a

I bow my head over these sacred words that I love all the better for the wrestling to release them from the prison I built for them. ~Sarah Bessey

I wrestled with this passage... like full on fought with it and then totally avoided it... only to come back and fight again... and who knows how many times I've read this passage. But I don't think I've ever read these three and a half verses alone and certainly not with the intent to write some Lenten reflection on them. So I wrestled.

I realized how easily God's promises to Abram could be mistaken for promises of grand prosperity – wealth, riches, mansions, ease, comfort. I just kept feeling like I was missing something important. I'm grateful to Frank Yamada's commentary on the *Working Preacher* for providing some context...

This story is essentially God's call to Abram. It follows the story of the Tower of Babel and several sections of genealogy, and basically, God calls Abram to leave everything he knows, all of his people, and go to this place that God's going to show him. I recently listened to theologian, Peter Enns, talk about how he's stopped using the word *faith*. Rather, he prefers the term *trust*. Faith requires only belief. Trust requires action. That's what God is asking of Abram here – trust. Abram isn't called to believe in God, Abram is called to action, to pick up and go, to trust God.

From here, God offers Abram a blessing. This blessing is what I wrestled with and what Frank Yamada's commentary gave me some insight on – this was not a unique blessing. In the cultural context of the time of the writing of Genesis, this type of blessing was common from a god or divine being to a favored human. Yamada stated these are blessings, not agreements, contracts, or treaties. They are unilateral meaning the divine entity gives them unconditionally. Sound familiar? It's like grace.

The second thing about this blessing is that is not just given to Abram. Rather, God says all the families will be blessed. Everyone! This unconditional, unilateral blessing is given to all. There is nothing anyone had to do to acquire it. It was already available.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." -Genesis 12:1

I'm compelled by this distinction between faith and trust. I wonder just how often I actually trust God. I suspect my acts of courage and stillness might look very different. There was nothing "safe" for Abram in leaving his family. There was no guarantee that things would

work out, but he went anyway. He trusted, even if it was just enough. What comes up for you when you reflect on your own acts of trust? Do you trust in God's unconditional blessing?

Prayer:

We arrange our lives as best we can, to keep your holiness at bay, with our pieties, our doctrines, our liturgies, our moralities, our secret ideologies,

Safe, virtuous, settled. And then you- you and your dreams, you and your vision, you and your purposes, you and your commands, you and your neighbors.

We find your holiness not at bay, but probing, pervading, insisting, demanding.

And we yield, sometimes gladly, sometimes resentfully, sometimes late... or soon.

We yield because you, beyond us, are our God. We are you creatures met by your holiness, and by your holiness made our true selves.

And we yield. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann, 1998)

March 3, 2020

Romans 4:1-5

By definition, grace is the extension of God's hand even though we don't deserve it. It is the transcendent, ever-existing expression of the divine's love, and like the sun, it spreads its rays impartially. ~Radhanath Swami

"I hope you don't take offense, but we just cleaned out the pantry, and there's some food here the kids won't eat anymore."

"I want to give you something."

"I'm bringing you some soup tomorrow. I'll text before I leave." (Shows up with soup, cornbread, and fruit)

"Here take all the leftovers."

These are all statements of grace I've heard in the last week and a half. You see, I'm in the middle of a job transition. Money's really, really tight at the moment as I start a new business. People are giving me food, and I'm grateful. I haven't earned these gifts. They're just freely given.

Paul brings us back to the challenging thing about grace. We can't earn it. Just as Abraham couldn't earn the blessing he received in our scripture yesterday. We can't earn God's grace – we trust that it's there (Notice the word trust here!). The other amazing thing about this

passage is that Paul reminds us that God justifies the ungodly, not a particular group of the ungodly. All of us are justified.

But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. -Romans 4:5

Righteousness is defined in *The New Oxford American Dictionary* as “the quality of being morally right or justifiable.” Paul tells us that part of this blessing that we receive makes us justifiable! No pious acts or church attendance or community service or advances or positions held make us justifiable... God’s grace does. Take a few moments for a little honest inventory. What are the ways you strive to make yourself justifiable through works, money, status, or other things? What would happen if you simply trusted that God’s grace was sufficient?

Prayer:

God, of your goodness give me yourself; for you are sufficient for me. I cannot properly ask anything less, to be worthy of you. If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In you alone do I have all. Amen (Julian of Norwich)

March 4, 2020

Romans 4:13-17

We are all wretched, and we are all beautiful. No one is beyond redemption. May we see in the hands of the oppressor our own hands, and in the faces of the oppressed our own faces. We are made of the same dust, and we cry the same salty tears. ~Shane Claiborne

My ancestry is about as Scotch-Irish as they come. My pasty white skin, blue eyes, and brown hair. I once had a Scottish friend tell me I looked like I stepped out of the Highlands of Scotland. On top of that, “Pierce” is a well-known Irish clan. I had the opportunity to stay in Pearce Hall at Trinity University one summer. My Great-Mamaw’s family was from the Wallace clan. Going to a Scottish Highlands festival shortly after the release of *Braveheart* was exciting! Needless to say, my people and I, by relationship, would not fall into the category of one following “the law”.

I have a friend who is an Orthodox Jew. Her devotion to the law is exquisite. It is truly remarkable to watch the ways she navigates eating arrangements and her practice of Sabbath inspires me! We’ve had beautiful discussion about her practice, and it is just that, a spiritual practice that draws her closer to G-d. As the early church was growing and the inclusion of Gentiles (Those of us not following the law.) was increasing, Paul was writing here to provide a reason they could be part of this new covenant people. The purpose here is

to justify the inclusion of all people in the family of God, not just those who obeyed the rules of the day, so he reminds us that we are justified, like Abram, through our faith in God rather than our obedience to the law.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham. -Romans 5:16

“This passage is also about why we dare to trust God. The answer is that this God does not create, make promises to and abandon a people. God binds Godself in the promises God makes. This is very good news for us, now in the twenty-first century who continue to long for God’s shalom in the world. It is also very good news for us, although challenging, to think about what other peoples God considers to be part of the family of Abraham by faith... What would surprise us, were we suddenly able to see who all is in God’s family?”
~Sarah Henrich, workingpreacher.org

If we were suddenly able to see all who are in God’s family as Henrich suggests, who might surprise you? Who are you imagining doesn’t belong in the family of God? Who are you treating as though they don’t belong in the family? What are these thoughts and behaviors based off of – rules and laws or God’s inclusion of all people? How might our relationships and our church be different if we believed God’s promises over rules and laws?

Prayer:

God, remind us of the times we have chosen hierarchy over community, disposability over value, and division over unity. Encourage us to prioritize collective care at every level. (Sojourners)

March 5, 2020

Psalm 121

I imagine Lent for you and for me as a great departure from the greedy, anxious antineighborliness of our economy, a great departure from our exclusionary politics that fears the other, a great departure from self-indulgent consumerism that devours creation. And then an arrival in a new neighborhood, because it is a gift to be simple, it is a gift to be free, it is a gift to come down where we ought to be. ~Walter Brueggemann

Whenever I read or hear this Psalm, I hear the Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music* – “I lift up mine eyes unto the hills...” It is her first encounter with Maria after her return from the von Trapp family home, and I won’t review the entire film for you, but Maria is about to end her postulancy and leave the abbey. A new and unknown journey.

Psalm 121 is called by some scholars the Psalm of the Sojourner. It was part of a collection of psalms called the assents, psalms for those on a journey. It is believed this psalm was meant specifically for those journeying to Jerusalem, which is certainly what we're preparing for during this season, Jesus's arrival and eventual arrest, torture, and crucifixion in Jerusalem. We also began this week with God's call for Abram to journey to places unknown.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. -Psalm 121:8

This is a psalm for those facing an arduous journey. It seems a fitting psalm as we, like Abram, begin a journey away from things known to parts unknown. Despite the unknown, we are promised to be kept in both our going out and coming in. While we are early in our journey, have you any awareness of those things you are journeying from? Allow some moments of silence for God to speak as you reflect on your going out.

Prayer:

Self-giving God, call us to walk the road of newness- a new self, a new society, a new world, one neighbor at a time. May we have traveling mercies this Lenten season. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 6, 2020

[John 3:1-17](#)

So often, doubt is talked about as something to get through or leave behind, rather than something to sit with for awhile as it marinates in us and transforms us. ~Traci Smith

I just sent a pastor friend of mine a message... It went something like, "I just listened to this podcast! Can we have a nerdy theology chat over beers?" The podcast was truly incredible (If you're curious, Peter Rollins, episode 8 of *The Deconstructionists*), mainly because the guest put words to things I've been wrestling with. Sometimes, I feel like there's this misconception out there that we have to have it all figured out, that we're not supposed to wrestle with scripture, that to question scripture means we're not faithful people of God. If that's the case, I'm out because I have a ton of questions! Recently, I've come to encounter scripture as a relationship, something to be sorted out and sorted through, something to just sit in silence with – whether it stirs my soul to glorious awakening or makes me want to throw my Bible against the wall. That's why I love Nicodemus!

Nicodemus has all the questions! First, he comes to Jesus "by night". Whether this is a literal nighttime or a metaphorical dark night of the soul thing or both, doesn't really matter, at least to me. It's dark, and Nicodemus can't see the light. That's all we need to know. So

he comes to Jesus with all his questions, and honestly, he doesn't get the most straightforward answer. In fact, sometimes when I read this passage, I feel Jesus getting a little annoyed with Nicodemus. I can remember those times in the classroom when my students wanted me to give them a concrete answer, but I knew the best way was for them to work through it. Sometimes, I was annoyed, and they were frustrated just as I get frustrated reading scripture. We don't actually know what happens to Nicodemus as a result of this conversation. He reappears in chapter 7 of John's gospel, but even though he's filled with questions (for which he probably never received a satisfactory answer), he makes a final appearance in chapter 19. Nicodemus, the man who came to Jesus in the darkness, meets Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus's body for burial. Some suggest that somewhere along the way, Nicodemus "came to the light". I'm not so sure. Nicodemus meets Jesus in the darkness of a tomb, when his other friends were absent, reminding us that doubt and darkness are not void devotion.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. -John 3:16-17

Many of us could probably quote, at least the first half of, this scripture from memory. Read it again for a moment. Put yourself in Nicodemus's shoes. Can you imagine all the questions this might raise for him? The phrase "eternal life" is used, throughout John, in the present tense. While we often talk of eternal life as some point in the future, in this gospel, in these verses, it is referencing the present. What questions or challenges does that raise for you as you reflect on your understanding of these verses?

Prayer:

Faithful God, the strength of all who believe and the hope of those who doubt: We thank you that you call us to faith not certainty, and pray that you will remind us that you have faith in us even when our heads and hearts are full of questions. May we, who question, still have faith, and so receive the fullness of Christ's promised blessing. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who keeps coming back so that no-one need be left out. Amen. (adapted from Virtual Methodist)

March 7, 2020

[Matthew 17:1-9](#)

"I'm a Christian," I concluded, "because the story of Jesus is still the story I'm willing to be wrong about." ~Rachel Held Evans

Last year, Transfiguration Sunday fell on the Sunday after General Conference 2019. I remember feeling as if you could cut the tension in the sanctuary with a knife. Everyone was one edge, and no one was quite sure what was happening, where we were headed, what to do next. We gathered on this Sunday to honor a great mystery of our faith. The Winthrop trombone choir led the music. The choir sang from the balcony. We sang my most favorite hymn (I think for the first time since I started attending St. John's), *Be Thou My Vision*.

If you weren't in traditional worship that Sunday, you missed the most important debate of the day. Amidst all the adult concern about the future of the church and the implications of General Conference in both personal and denominational ways, the children were concerned about the color of Jesus's robe during the Transfiguration. Thomas Haselden settled it with a definitive, "Maybe it was rainbow!"

Sarah Bessey wrote about the patronizing phrase, "Well, you know, you need to have faith like a child." Her response (The full version of this can be found on pages 48-49 of her book *Out of Sorts*, which I highly recommend!!!):

To which I now respectfully ask: I'm sorry, but have you ever been around a child for any amount of time?

Because let me tell you, kids ask a lot of questions...

I think it's a bit dishonest to use "Have faith like a child" as a way to shut a person down. Like, somehow, it means we're not supposed to wonder, we're just supposed to accept. Now that I have a house full of small humanity, I think I'm beginning to understand why Jesus would encourage us to have faith like a child.

They don't know. *And so they ask.*

We don't know. And so we ask.

The asking isn't wrong. The wondering isn't wrong. The doubt isn't wrong. It's humbling to admit you don't know; it takes guts to ask and wrestle. The childlike quality isn't unthinking acquiescence: it's curiosity.

But here is the key of a child, the true wonder of childlike faith: They truly want to know. They're not asking to be cool or to push back on the establishment or to prove anyone wrong or to grind an ax or make a point without making a change. Tinies ask because they want an answer.

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. -Matthew 17:8

So all that to say... for me the Transfiguration is just mystery. It's this wild story stuck right in the middle of the rest of the story, and I'm left with more questions than answers. The

biggest being *Why?* I have yet to receive a satisfying answer to that question, and that's ok. In fact, it's good. It reminds me that a big part of this whole trust thing is mystery that simply isn't meant to be figured out. It forces me to ask questions each and every time I encounter it. This is the story that forces me to question and answer – even with this unknown is “the story of Jesus still one I'm willing to be wrong about”?

Yes, yes, it is.

Prayer:

Give to the struggles of our mind and the halting inadequacies of our words the magic of Thy self, O God, our Father. Walk beside us in the way that we take reminding us that Thou hast made us for ourselves and our souls are restless till they find their rest in Thee. O Love of God, Love of God, Love of God. (adapted from Howard Thurman)

March 8, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Sacrifice*

Employ whatever God has entrusted you with, in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree to the household of faith, to all men!... Give all ye have, as well as all ye are, a spiritual sacrifice to Him who withheld not from you his Son, his only Son.”
~John Wesley

Sacrifice is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as “deliberately forsaking the security of satisfying our own needs with our resources in the faith and hope that God will sustain us.

About 10 years ago, there was a debate of social media (shocker!) among UMC clergy (even bigger shocker!) about the role of sacrifice during Lent. It became such a thing that UM News actually had a whole article on it.

The practice of sacrifice or “giving something up for Lent” developed in the Catholic tradition and was one of the points argued against during the Reformation. However, our Methodist roots are in the Anglican tradition, rather than the Reformed tradition. You may recall from your high school world history class that the Anglican church separated from the Catholic church after the pope refused to grant the king an annulment. John Wesley's Methodism was essentially a revival movement within the Church of England. As such, Wesley believed in the discipline of sacrifice, but he also believed that it was not reserved for Lent. In fact, he fasted, restricting both food and liquid consumption, twice a week! He was cautious, however, in his practice and encouraged people not to become too zealous in the practice, thus creating an unhealthy practice. He also stressed the importance that the sacrifice should be a practice that draws us closer to God. If it is something we're doing just to check off a box, then he likely would caution against the practice.

1. If you've initiated the practice of sacrifice during Lent, take a few moments to check in. How is this practice drawing you closer to God? How do you respond when you experience desire for the thing you're fasting from?
2. If you haven't initiated the practice of sacrifice, it's not too late! Take a few moments to see if there is something you're possibly relying on when you could be trusting God to sustain you.
3. Spend some time in prayer – Repentance for our reliance on things that won't sustain us and thus our lack of trust in God. See if you can spend at least two minutes in intentional silence, listening for God's response.

Week Three

March 9, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7

One of the traits I notice in people who experience consistent transformation is the willingness to embrace dissonance and discomfort as a necessary part of the growth process. Nobody chooses discomfort based on natural inclination. But I think we can learn to embrace it ~Daniel Hill

I lived in the Central Valley of California for six years. For the entire six years of my time there, the air conditioner in my car didn't work. It's triple digits for at least four months of the year there. It's a desert – that's irrigated to support the vast agricultural industry. One day, I was preparing to catch a flight to fly to Tennessee to visit family. It was a full day with lots of errands. I had an early flight and crashed at a friend's house who had agreed to take me to the airport very early the next morning. Shortly after I arrived, while we were watching the Olympics, I became violently ill and spent most of the rest of the night in the bathroom. Simply put, I was dehydrated. I managed to get the vomiting under control enough to get on an plane. Upon my arrival in Tennessee, my doctor ordered some Phenergan. All that to say, wandering through the desert with no water is miserable.

Here the Israelite people had managed to sneak out of Egypt, only to be chased further by Pharaoh and his armies, then to escape their chase thanks to the parting of the Red Sea – all they wanted was some water. Eventually, they griped and complained enough that God provided through Moses and his staff.

Sometimes, I think we're too quick to ask for the easy answer – a miracle staff that can bring forth water from a rock. Yes, God provided the need for the Israelites, but only after they complained. There are indications throughout the Exodus story that after this event, they expected quick, easy fixes from God and were unwilling to trust God as they journeyed.

He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" -Exodus 17:7

Often discomfort is necessary for our growth. Maybe, as I suspect might be the case for the Israelites here, it's about learning to rely on God to sustain us through the wilderness moments of our lives. It can feel lonely when we're grieving, disheartened, hurting, repentant, doubting. It can feel as if we're stranded, lost, and longing for water. Sometimes, the answer we get is silence, and other times, a miracle staff appears that produces water from a rock. Regardless of the answer, the wilderness is critical to our growth. Our willingness to stay there (and sometimes return there) as long as necessary is integral to our

transformation as disciples of Jesus Christ. The challenge is to embrace the wilderness rather than wallow in it.

Don't be so quick, Beloved, to leave the wilderness. It has powers of healing and transformation beyond anything we can create. Know, too, you're never actually alone there.

Prayer:

Lord, at times we are broken and heavy laden, and we need you. Even in the wilderness, remind us of your great redemption story. Like the cloud by day and fire by night, we need daily reminders of your presence and guidance in the desert. We are in desperate need, and we are dependent on you. Amen.
(by Natasha Sistrunk Robinson)

March 10, 2020

Romans 5:1-11

The one who complains to God, pleads with God, rails at God, does not let God off the hook for a minute – she is at last admitted to a mystery. She passes through a door that only pain will open and is thus qualified to speak of God in a way that others, whom we generally call more fortunate, cannot speak. ~Ellen Davis

In middle school and high school and even parts of college, contemporary Christian music (CCM), second only to showtunes, was what I listened to. Then, I really started listening and questioning and struggling with the lyrics of the songs that had once been the source of such passion. I stopped listening. I started wrestling with scripture, with faith, and with God. A lot of this was done alone, in secret, as I was afraid of the repercussions, afraid of what others would think if they knew I wasn't quite sure I believed all the things anymore. It was dark and lonely until I found John Lewis, a retired clergy person in Montana and one of the dearest men I'll ever know! While John was in the Disciple I class I taught, he, and others he brought to walk with me through the wandering, affirmed that my wandering was good and that I was still good in wandering. Part of this process, often called deconstruction, was a reclaiming of some of that CCM.

Honestly, as a queer person in the UMC, life feels a little like that now... wandering... uncertain of who's safe and who's not... stepping back to assess my wellbeing, my endurance... holding space for all the hurt while watching the harm being done. It is from this lens that I approach this scripture (and all scripture right now but it feels particularly salient with this one). This is one of those passages that was used in ways that were incredibly harmful to me and one that I've had to support clients through the harm they've incurred. The problem – that we should somehow rejoice in our suffering. I truly, at times, want to hurl obscenities at Paul for this one. It's one of the passages that has been used to gloss over harm done to people, the grief and despair we experience... but “we also boast in

our sufferings”. No, we don’t because suffering sucks. And what if in the midst of our suffering, all we hear is silence!

Douglas Abrams described Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s discussion of hope with the Dalai Lama, “‘ I say to people that I’m not an optimist, because that, in a sense, is something that depends on feelings more than the actual reality. We feel optimistic, or we feel pessimistic. Now, hope is different in that it is based not in the ephemerality of feelings but on the firm ground of conviction. I believe with a steadfast faith that there can never be a situation that is utterly, totally hopeless. Hope is deeper and very, very close to unshakable. It’s in the pit of your tummy. It’s not in your head. It’s all here,’ he said, pointing to his abdomen.”

And hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. -Romans 5:5

One of the few pieces of CCM that I continue to hold close is Andrew Peterson’s *Love and Thunder* album, especially the last two tracks. They’ll likely make a second appearance in these writings during Holy Week. In the first of those two tracks, *Silence of God*, Peterson sings, “And if a man has got to listen to the voices of the mob, who are reeling in the throes of all the happiness they’ve got, when they tell you all their troubles have been nailed up to that cross, what about the times when even followers get lost? Cause we all get lost sometimes.”

There’s incredible substance in this passage about grace and justification, and still, the word that continues to stand out to me is *hope* – a hope that has been poured into our hearts, a hope that’s in our tummies. What if what we really need is to create space for suffering – to hold hope, without boasting, for our suffering and the suffering of others?

Douglas Abrams went on to describe Archbishop Tutu’s explanation: “Yet hope requires faith, even if that faith is in nothing more than human nature or the very persistence of life to find a way. Hope is also nurtured by relationship, by community, whether that community is a literal one or one fashioned from the long memory of human striving whose membership includes Gandhi, King, Mandela, and countless others. Despair turns us inward. Hope send us into the arms of others.” Hope sent me into the arms of John Lewis and his band of loving humans who held space and hope for my wandering – holding the promise of its goodness and the reflection of my own. May you be surrounded by those who hold that same space for you, giving you the courage to question and wander, knowing that your wandering is good and that you are Beloved of God in the midst of that wandering.

Prayer:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I’m going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean

that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all I'm doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Amen. (by Thomas Merton)

March 11, 2020

Psalm 95

We have created a church of believers, not disciples. ~Shane Claiborne

Up in the Holston Conference (east Tennessee and southwest Virginia), our big annual conference youth gathering was Resurrection. While I was in high school, it was so large that there wasn't a venue big enough, so it was held over two weekends. Shane Claiborne wrote in *Irresistible Revolution* about attending this event each year as well (and our experiences are quite similar – Also, this is another book I highly recommend reading!). It was filled with passionate worship and concluded each Saturday evening with an emotional altar call. Passionate, exuberant worship can be incredibly powerful.

Powerful... filled with power. And we were. We walked around with our W.W.J.D. bracelets, listening to our CCM, and attending Young Life and UMYF (a.k.a. youth group back in the day). That power became entitlement. In her recent song, *Dear Me* (which could pretty much be an autobiographical statement on my own life), Nicole Nordeman sings, "Dear Me, this is a letter to the girl I used to be. Some things are not as simple as we said. Remember when we thought there were a handful of some magic words to pray, a guarantee and a payment on a mansion. Remember all the rules we made about the body and the blood, the hoops we made them jump through, though He offers it to everyone. I'm so sorry."

This psalm is one of extravagant, exuberant worship! We are reminded of the greatness of God and his Creation. Then, right in the middle the tone shifts.

*For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. -
Psalm 95:7*

Once at a professional development training, we had a Shadow Party in which we were to dress up as a part of our "shadow". I was an anarchist! Initially refusing to come plastering my door with signs, one of which read "Don't be sheep!", when I was instructed to come by our leader, I played sheep noises for the remainder of the party. My point was that sheep just follow the shepherd. Right here, in the middle of this psalm of enthusiastic worship, is our reminder - We're not the Shepherd. We're the sheep. We don't decide who gets in or out. We just follow without question.

Prayer:

God, bring us into alignment with the love you have for all of humanity. Let us be concerned with saving life more than saving face. Amen. (Sojourners)

March 12, 2020

[John 4:5-26](#)

Please help me to get down under things and find where You are. ~Flannery O'Connor

She has been picked apart. Her sins paraded through commentary after commentary. She is a warning to all women of what not to be. This Samaritan woman... don't be like her. Her supposed sexual sin paraded in front of everyone as a cautionary tale.

But... wait... nowhere in this story does Jesus condemn the woman. He slowly allows himself to be made known to her. In fact, nowhere in this story does he explicitly offer her forgiveness. It's almost as though Jesus doesn't see it to be necessary here. Is it because in the course of their unfolding interaction the woman does something? Is it because he was merely stating the facts of her life that would have made sense within the historical context? These and other questions have been pondered by theologians who choose to explore the nature of the interaction between Jesus and the woman rather than attempting to uncover her potential promiscuity.

At the heart of this story is not a warning of sexual sin, rather it is a discouraged encounter between "enemies" and across genders in which Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah. The Gospel of John is about the Divine... enfleshed. Here we see Jesus engaged with a woman, a Samaritan woman, with whom he should not be interacting. As she continues to challenge and question Jesus, he reveals his true identity.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me drink"... Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." -John 4:7, 26

With each encounter with Jesus, through scripture, prayer, or other spiritual disciplines, he reveals a little bit more of himself to us. Just as with the Samaritan woman, he can handle our questions and ponderings and challenges. I learn from the Samaritan woman, not the warnings of promiscuity, but rather that as I come to Jesus with persistent challenges and all of who I am, more of who he is revealed to me.

Prayer:

O, Answer to all Mysteries, we have unanswerable questions. We struggle with “If only...” and “What if?” and “Why?” Give us grace to live the questions in the confidence that we don’t have to have all the answers. Amen. (R. Preston Price)

March 13, 2020

[John 4:27-38](#)

It is customary to blame secularism for the eclipse of religion in modern society. But it would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive and insipid. When faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain, when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.
~Abraham Joshua Heschel

We’re still with the Samaritan woman and Jesus... He’s just revealed his Messiahship, and the disciples show up with food. They question why he was talking to her. Remember, she’s a Samaritan and a woman. Contact should have been avoided at all cost. Not only was it not avoided... Jesus pursued it!

Meanwhile, the Samaritan woman is gone. We’ll come back to her tomorrow, but she’s gone and left her jar behind...

And the disciples are still trying to get Jesus to eat and questioning his interaction with “that” woman. I chuckle at the picture of Jesus, having just revealed himself to the Samaritan woman, looking at his disciples like, “Really?! You’re kind of missing the whole point here.” Then, they still don’t get it, that they’re missing the point...

The disciples, having left him alone so they can get some food, walked into a conversation in which a woman, truly engaging with Jesus to seek, finds the “living water”. They proceed to urge Jesus to eat, and Jesus responds by telling them to look around, using the metaphor of a field ready for harvest. The glaring differences in these two interactions with Jesus stand out to me. I’m left noticing the bewildered words of the disciples.

So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” -John 4:13

In all of this, the disciples are concerned about who else might have brought Jesus food. How often have I been like the disciples? More concerned with the icon of Jesus than in truly becoming one of his disciples. I imagine the exasperation in Jesus’s voice as he, once again, reminds the disciples that they don’t quite get it, and in fact, they just might be turning their back on the one who did... the Samaritan woman.

Is our Christianity about who is out and who gets in? Or are we truly attempting to emulate the life of Jesus... the one who initiated contact with the Samaritan woman... the one who revealed himself in his vulnerability to her... the one who saw her authenticity and did not condemn her but invited her in? In much of what I observe of Christianity, there is more of the disciples. I suspect we get them. They are easier for us to emulate than Jesus. Following Jesus is risky business. He calls us to leave the safe places where food is readily available, enter the fields that are ripe for harvest, and offer our vulnerable, authentic selves to those we meet along the way.

Prayer:

O God, our Father, all the confusion inspired by our weariness and our inadequacy and our failure we make as a part of our offering to Thee. What in us is dark, illumine. What is low, raise and support that, in ways that we can understand, and in ways that transcend the limitations of our understanding we may be living instruments on Thy hands. Do not let us separate from Thy Spirit..., but go with us, O God, go with us, Our Father. Amen. (Howard Thurman)

March 14, 2020

[John 4:27-42](#)

God's grace is evident in our lives, and often it is the faithful witness, presence, and actions of women that remind us of this truth. ~Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

Have you ever had one of those moments when you were so excited about something that you dropped everything to share your enthusiasm? The Samaritan woman did. While the disciples were worried about Jesus's interactions with this woman and whether he ate, she left her water jar behind and went to tell others of her experience.

While it seems the authentic experience the Samaritan woman shared was joyful excitement, I don't know that this is always the case, and even though I can relish in her excitement, it's not necessarily something I share with her. Some of my greatest experiences of understanding the compassion of Jesus are in times of suffering – when, even though the silence seems pervasive, there's an enduring presence of the Divine.

Whatever our experience, I'm moved by the impact the Samaritan woman's vulnerability. We're told she immediately left to tell others of her interaction with Jesus, and because of this, others came to meet him, eventually inviting Jesus to stay with them. Remember, there was a divide between the Jews and Samaritans. They didn't interact, yet Jesus stayed another two days with them. From the earliest moments of his active ministry, Jesus worked to include those who had been pushed to the margins; to affirm the outsider as worthy of his compassion; to introduce his disciples, those who seem to be close to the center of the story, to those at the margins. The woman entered the interaction with Jesus with understandable hesitancy, but as Jesus reveals himself to her, she is freed to share her authentic self with others. The woman's witness, not only brought people to know the compassionate love of

Jesus, but was critical in building a bridge between two opposing cultures. The woman, whom the disciples were astonished Jesus would even speak to, did exactly what Jesus had just urged them to do!

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." -John 4:39

My introverted self oftentimes can be overwhelmed by displays of excited enthusiasm, but I'm moved by those who are authentic, genuine, and vulnerable. That's what this woman shared, a story of authenticity. That's what we're called to do – share our witness. This means not getting caught in our fear and shame but allowing our vulnerable humanity to lead us to compassion for others. As Jesus revealed himself to the Samaritan woman, he showed us, and the woman, how to be with one another. Our shame of ourselves and our fear of the other keep us at the center of our stories, but as we come to Jesus with the intent of a seeker, more of Jesus is revealed. As Jesus reveals himself to us, just as with the Samaritan woman, we are freed to share our authentic selves with those we meet.

Prayer:

Free us, Lord, from our obsession with ourselves long enough to care for others; to be so concerned about the well-being of the human community that we don't have to worry about our place, our church, our class, our values, our vested interests. Help us to know the joy and freedom of putting all our trust in you. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 15, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Worship*

The essential part of Christian holiness is giving the heart wholly to God. ~John Wesley

Worship is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as “expressing in words, music, rituals, and silent adoration the greatness, beauty and goodness of God, by means of which we enter the supranatural reality of the glory of God.”

Sunday mornings are reserved for church. Many of us have been conditioned in this practice. We grew up attending church on Sunday mornings, and we continue the tradition with our families. It's a habit of form. Others encounter worship experiences that are so full of emotions they lack a groundedness or foundation. John Wesley expressed concern about both of these – formalism and enthusiasm. Formalism occurs when we show up for worship, possibly even faithfully, but just go through motions. We know the routines of worship, but we don't encounter the presence of the Divine. Enthusiasm is strong emotional

experience in which our emotions are confused with encounters with God but, in fact, are not. Wesley warned about both of these.

Wesley was a strong believer in corporate worship. These authentic encounters are moments in which we gather with the expectation of greater revelations of who God is and who we are called to be. This doesn't always mean worship will be comfortable (In fact, encounters with the Divine probably shouldn't be all that comfortable but should push us to our edges. It's divinity! I can't even get my head around that!).

1. Spend some time in prayer regarding your practice of worship. Is worship a space in which God is continually revealed to you in real and meaningful ways?
2. If you find yourself caught in formalism or enthusiasm, allow yourself the same compassionate grace God does. Consider changing up your worship routines. Go to a different service. Explore *The Book of Worship* at www.umcdiscipleship.org to learn more about the rituals and routines of our services.
3. Move into worship with the intent of encountering God and divine revelation.

Week Four

March 16, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13

God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to the lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and the broken. ~Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I once told a friend of mine that I didn't understand why we included the stories of David in scripture. As I reflected on all the barbaric and ruthless and horrible things he did, she reminded me that even through that God used him. In fact, God chose him. Looking back, I wasn't the most articulate in my confusion. I really questioned why we seem to admire David as we do, why we seem to hold him up as a beacon for Christians to follow.

While I still question the ways in which we revere David, I see much of myself in him. I think we tend to gloss over his humanity. We're reluctant to look at all the harm he did, the ways he abused his power. Doing so would offer too clear of an image of ourselves. At least, that's been my experience. When I envision David now, I see a man to whom harm was done and a man who committed almost unspeakable atrocities (and yet we must speak of them just as we must put words to our own). I read his psalms and hear his shame and agonizing cries for God to comfort him alongside his celebrations of God's presence.

This passage, however, reminds us of David's beginnings, of his innocence. The once glossed over shepherd, the one no one assumed God would use. We are reminded that external characteristics of force and power are not reflective of the internal character God required of a ruler. The Israelites had experienced a ruler of power in Saul. He met all their external expectations of a king but lacked the internal values that were aligned with God, so Samuel was sent to find a new king among Jesse's sons... David. One who would struggle with his own humanity... over and over again, and from all accounts, return to God each time brokenhearted and shameful.

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." -1 Samuel 16:7

Israel had the experience of the powerful, ruler king in Saul. It failed, so God selected a shepherd boy. This boy would grow to make all the human mistakes as do we, yet we see in these the ways God revealed himself each time. We see a man, who when given everything a human could ask for, succumbed to his humanity, only to learn, time and again, that those things and people and places drew him further and further from God. Yet here we're

reminded of the innocence of the shepherd boy who was selected to be king, who eventually overthrows the powerful tyrant the fearful Israelites had demanded. While David frequently is a mirror of my own harm and atrocities, here I am reminded of my own childlike innocence that yearns to just show up in the presence of the Divine.

Prayer:

You are God, high, lifted up, majestic. As we say, “Yours is the kingdom, the power, the glory... forever.”

You are high and lifted up; it dazzles us that you work your will through human agents – those whom you call and choose and empower, even the weak, the lowly, the nobodies.

You are high and lifted up; it stuns us that you have worked your will through such human agents as David, the runt of his family, almost left behind and forgotten, and you called him to power and obedience and success.

You are high and lifted up; it staggers us that you worked your will through this Jesus of Nazareth, he of no pedigree, he of no form or comeliness, he who emptied himself in obedience; and you have raised him to new life, before whom every knee shall bow.

You are high and lifted up; it astonishes us that you work your will through human agents like us, people of little consequence and limited capacity.

You call us beyond ourselves; you send us beyond our imagination; you empower us beyond our capacity, and we become your agents in the world, day by day doing justice and mercy and compassion.

At the end of the day we still say in astonishment, that you are high and lifted up and majestic. We are your creatures, and we give our life back to you, filled with gratitude, eager for the rest that only you can give. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 17, 2020

[Hebrews 10:4-10](#)

This is the central Christian mystery. Life has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. ~Flannery O'Connor

I'm struck by two things in this passage – embodiment and sanctification. Embodiment is central to my world. I just opened a private practice called *Embodied Resilience* of the Carolinas! For a long time, I lived a life disconnected from my body. I spent 13 years training in classical ballet... totally disconnected from my body. I spent several years practicing yoga before starting my teacher training... totally disconnected from my body. I came to worship... totally disconnected from my body. Learning that my body was not only safe but good was important for my total wellbeing. Knowing that God created my body in God's image and found it good was important for my relationship with God and my

understanding of the ways I'm called to walk on this earth. Here, I am reminded that embodiment was important for God as well, that God needed to take bodily form. For some reason, our omniscient creator needed to do this. For some reason...

Sanctification is a giant mystery that I struggle getting my head around. The author is writing to Hebrews. People of the Jewish faith who had decided to follow Christ. Previously, they had tangible sacrifices they made for various purposes and reasons (See *Leviticus* for more information), but part of the reason for Jesus's embodiment was sanctification. The crucifixion of Jesus replaced the offerings previously required. Essentially, the definition of sanctification is "to be made holy" (*Dictionary.com*). God, freely and willingly, took bodily form, walked this earth showing us how to live, eventually allowing himself to be crucified for our holiness.

And it's by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. -Hebrews 10:4-10

"Once and for all..." This is mystery to me. It's done. It's finished. There is no action to earn this, no purposeful step to take. It's "once and for all."

Prayer:

Eternal God, we give thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (UMC Word and Table Service I).

March 18, 2020

[Psalm 23](#)

May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins. ~Rob Bell

Sword drills. If you don't know what they are, they're essentially "competitions" to see who can out-memorize everyone with scripture quotations. They are a standard part of children's and youth ministries in many fundamentalist and non-affirming churches. I was a frequent winner thanks to my memorization of Psalm 23. Once I had reached the end of all the other verses I knew, I'd just work my way through Psalm 23, one verse at a time. They were actually quite ridiculous, sword drills – shaming those who were newly encountering scripture or struggled with memorization and creating a false sense of "knowing" scripture among those of us for whom memorization came easy.

Needless to say, I'm sure several of those reading this could also recite this passage from memory, line by line, to secure yourselves a sword drill victory. When we do that, though, we miss what's truly being offered here. In describing Jesus as "the Good Shepherd", Rob Fuquay stated, "Typically sheep pens in Jesus's day were a configuration of tall rock walls with only one entrance. Sheep spent their lives traveling in and out of doorways. They came in through the gate for security and rest. Inside the pen they were free from predators or bandits. A good shepherd who cared about the condition of his flock would often inspect each sheep as it entered through the gate. The shepherd would look for parasites or injuries and properly tend to them."

This comparison of God as shepherd carries throughout scripture, and David, to whom this psalm is attributed, was intimately connected with the love a shepherd had for his flock. I recently learned of the Hebrew word *Chesed*. As is often the case, it is difficult to translate into English, but it is essentially the gracious, merciful, benevolent love of God. *Chesed* is the Hebrew word used for "mercy" in verse 6.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of Lord my whole life long. -Psalm 23:6

Chesed isn't out there somewhere, waiting for us to find it. It's chasing after us – in the green pastures and through the darkest valleys. It is a love so urgent that it doesn't wait for us to wander upon it or get everything right. It doesn't leave us in the hardest times. Instead, it's chasing after us and checking us for wounds or injuries as we come back and nurturing us with food and oil. Essentially, there is not a single thing we can do to escape the *Chesed* of the shepherd.

Prayer:

Pursue us and catch us, Good Shepherd – embrace us in your love. Help us to trust you and desire you more than anything else, that we may know the joy and freedom of life in you. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 19, 2020

[John 9:1-12](#)

God doesn't punish sin; sin punishes sin. ~Julian of Norwich

I remember hearing the stories of Jesus's miracles as a child. The focus was always on the miracles as if Jesus was some kind of magician come to heal all the people, back then, of their ailments. Often those he healed were presented as helpless individuals, just waiting around for someone to rescue them. I have no recollection of anyone pointing out the first part of this story...

After Jesus encountered the blind man, his disciples automatically assume that his blindness is the result of sin, and they are anxious to know exactly what he has done wrong. Nadia Bolz-Weber stated “Our own fragility is terrifying to us. It’s easier to say: ‘Well, there’s a reason it’s happened to THAT person.’ We don’t want to be next.” It’s so true, isn’t it? That we’re terrified of just how fragile we are. It keeps our focus on the vulnerabilities of others and often not from a place of care and compassion but from one of shame and guilt. It keeps our focus on the miracle rather than Jesus’s response...

That the man’s blindness was neither the result of his sins nor the sins of his parents. While there are certainly consequences for our sin, illness is not a punishment for our sin. I love this reminder from Julian of Norwich that “sin punishes sin.”

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. -John 9:5

Rob Bell said, “And that is the secret deep in the heart of many people, especially Christians: they don’t love God. They can’t, because the God they’ve been presented with and taught about can’t be loved. That God is terrifying and traumatizing and unbearable.” Somewhere along the line, many of us were taught that we would be punished by God for our sins, our mistakes, our humanity. How are we to make sense of a God that would love us with *Chesed* one minute but strike us with blindness should we mess up? We can’t, and we don’t have to because Jesus tells us that God isn’t in the punishing business but in the business of bringing light.

Prayer:

O Wisdom on High, by you the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly. Grant us, in all doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do, that we may be saved from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path we may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)

March 20, 2020

[John 9:13-34](#)

Jesus and the disciples would probably get in a lot of trouble in most fancy churches. They’d probably be turning water fountains into wine fountains, inviting kids to swim in baptistries, ripping holes in the roofs when the crippled can’t get in the doors, flipping over the cash registers in the bookstores – at which point a trustee would scold Jesus... ~Shane Claiborne

Enter the Pharisees... I giggle a bit here because “Pharisee” is now a pejorative in Christian culture. I see it all along the spectrum of Christianity when someone proposes a rule or practice that others sees as “hypocritical”, that person is compared to the “Pharisees”. Poor

guys. They really were just well-versed in the culture of the day, and a big part of that culture was law and rules and mandates. While these were primarily designed to keep people safe, the law that seems to have been broken here was not honoring the Sabbath.

Caveat... I love the practice of Sabbath as I've learned it from my Jewish friends. Go read Susanna Heschel's introduction to her father's book on Sabbath for a description. Then read that book, followed by Walter Brueggemann's book on Sabbath (I'll list all these at the end.). I spent all summer studying Sabbath because it's so beautiful!

But its beauty lies in its intention, not in the rule itself. Sometimes, we're so caught up in following rules that the intention is lost. Following rules for rules sake makes no sense. In this case, Jesus encounters someone he could help on the Sabbath, but work is forbidden on the Sabbath. I don't think anyone would say that the kind, loving, compassionate thing to do is walk away because it's the Sabbath, but that is the argument of the Pharisees, and they go to great lengths to prove their case interviewing the formerly blind man twice and his parents once.

Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. -John 9:14

Jesus broke rules... when those rules caused harm, he broke them. He broke a lot of rules! As disciples of Jesus, we're called to do the same. We're called to kindness which is different than niceness. We're called to learn to walk through the world with eyes wide open (more on that tomorrow) in order to see the ways rules cause harm, keep people at the margins, and create systems of oppression, and as those learning the ways of Jesus, we're called to challenge and possibly break those rules when we see them.

Prayer:

God, grace us with the eyes and the understanding to see the gospel as a tool for liberation. (Sojourners)

March 21, 2020

[John 9:35-41](#)

To make our way forward is to go back in history. To recover past trauma is to awaken to the pain, and we cannot heal until we see the narratives of the past renewed by faith and hope. ~Makoto Fujimura

I must have been about four years old. We were visiting my great-grandparents in Jellico, Tennessee, and while my mom was putting us to bed, she started singing *Edelweiss* (*The Sound of Music* reference number two in these writings if you're keeping count!), and I stopped her. "Sing the song about the blind man," I demanded. My mother was legitimately

confused, and after some questioning, realized I was asking her to sing *Amazing Grace*. You know, “the song about the blind man who can see again.”

One of the things I love about this season is that if we’ll let ourselves truly rest in it and not try to protect ourselves from the suffering and lament, we find grace. *Chesed* is what’s left behind. So often, we armor ourselves against the pain of letting things die, of noticing our wounds, of seeing the places where harm has occurred. This might just be the greatest lack of faith (or trust) we can display – our fear that if we acknowledge our woundedness and its consequences that there will be nothing left.

The story of the blind man is a testament that this is false. When we allow ourselves to loosen the armoring and be revealed in our humanity, we find grace. We find that God saves wretches and makes things new, but we can’t skip over the pain. It’s a process that hurts but doesn’t destroy us. It transforms our wretchedness into things God can use because they no longer carry the shame and guilt that so often hold us back. Our armoring and shadows are replaced with vulnerability and courage and grace... amazing grace.

Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” -John 9:40

It can be so easy to fall into a pattern of rule and regulations related to religion. Frequently, these rules are more about armor and protection than disciplines that actually bring us closer to God. Yes, the blind man regained his sight, but that didn’t magically make everything easier. He was called before the Pharisees... twice. He was driven out of the city only to encounter Jesus again. Meanwhile, the Pharisees say, “Surely Jesus isn’t talking about us?” Yes, Jesus is talking about us. We are spiritually blind and don’t even know it. Trust that God will see us through the pain and darkness leads to our experience of grace – grace that’s already available and waiting for us to remove the blinders.

Prayer:

You are the God who creates and recreates, who judges and delivers, who calls by name and makes new.

This much we gladly confess in praise and thanksgiving.

This much we trust and affirm... only to ponder that chance that we are too glib, that we say more than we mean, that we say more than we can in fact risk.

We make our gingerly confession in a world filled with those who cynically acknowledge none but themselves... and we are their fellow travelers, with those who in vulnerability have no chance but prayers to you... and we stand in solidarity with them.

Thus we ask, beyond our critical reservations, that you be your powerful, active, sovereign self.

Give us eyes to see your wonders around us; Give us hearts to live into your risky miracles; Give us tongues to praise you beyond our doubt.

For it is to you, only you, that we turn to on behalf of the world that waits in its deathliness for your act of life. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 22, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Service*

We abhor the doctrine of justification by works as a most perilous and abominable doctrine. And though no one is a real Christian believer who doth not good works... yet our works have no part in meriting or purchasing our justification. ~John Wesley

Service is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as “loving, thoughtful, active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world, through which we experience the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves.”

Wesley identified two “Means of Grace” – Works of Piety and Works of Mercy. Both include private and public works. Frequently, a Jerusalem cross is used as a visual depiction of this idea. Works of Piety include the private Acts of Devotion and the public Acts of Worship. Works of Mercy is the term John Wesley used for *service*. These include the private Acts of Compassion – doing good works; being in relationship with the hungry, the sick, and those in prison; and giving generously to the needs of others. The public Acts of Justice include seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination, and addressing the needs of the poor. While Wesley was clear that our justification is already freely given, these Means of Grace are visible in the lives of those committed to becoming disciples of Jesus.

1. We tend to find some aspects of the Means of Grace more comfortable than others. For John Wesley, all these aspects were important spiritual disciplines. Spend some time reflecting on the Means of Grace and how visible they are in your own life. If your life were a movie, without added commentary, would the audience see evidence of these means in the film? For more information, a Google search of “Wesley Means of Grace” will take you straight to the UMC page.
2. What aspects of the Means of Grace are most uncomfortable for you? What fear or woundedness do you need to address in order for there to be more balance in the Means of Grace in your own life?
3. Spend at least five minutes in silence, trusting that God will begin to reveal God’s grace to you, and knowing that this process takes time, agree to return to this silent space of revelation and listening.
4. Sometimes, this process can bring up woundedness that we are unable to manage on our own. If you find yourself in need of professional assistance, please reach out. Rev. Horne can provide appropriate referrals for professional counseling and

spiritual direction as needed. Additionally, Stephen Ministers are available for companionship through this process.

Week Five

March 23, 2020

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small. ~Nadia Bolz-Weber

At the recent General Conference Listening Session, we were asked what we wanted the delegates to know. I stated, "If this thing needs to burn to ground, it's ok." The scribe didn't like that, so she changed it to read, "If a new creation needs to come, it's ok." While I admit my description may have been a little much, I'm still not ok with the change - because we want the resurrection without the death, the new creation without the destruction. The point I wanted to make was that if the United Methodist Church needs to die in order for a new creation to come, we need to surrender to that process.

This death to resurrection theme is presented throughout creation and scripture. Jeff Chu tells beautiful stories about how he learned this by working with compost at The Farminary at Princeton Theological Seminary. Rachel Held Evans said, "Baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair." It reminds me of my favorite quote from Kate Bowler, "Everyone is trying to the Easter the crap out of my Lent."

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. -Ezekiel 37:13

We want Easter without Lent, without Holy Week, with Good Friday, without Holy Saturday. That's not the way it works. In all of our humanness, we dig graves for ourselves, mostly out of fear, but God reaches down, pulls us out of these graves, and suddenly the Spirit of God breathes new life in us. When I watch a client who has experienced traumas that cause them to disconnect from their body suddenly experience a bit of sensation of embodiment, they often experience pain, having numbed themselves from the experience for so long. New life, resurrection is not a painless process, but it is the essence of our faith that in each moment we are offered the opportunity to be pulled from despair to newness and wholeness.

Prayer:

In this season of Lent, O God, unsettle us. Increase in us that sense of gnawing that arises from the incongruity between our lives and the life to which you call us, and transform us in newness. Amen.
(Walter Brueggemann)

March 24, 2020

Romans 8:6-11

Taking the form of Jesus is not optional for Christians, but is the very essence of who we are as individuals and a community both now and in the future. ~Elizabeth Shively

One of my biggest struggles with Paul is the way he words things (or at least the way interpreters have translated his words), and sometimes, when I can allow myself to sit with him long enough to get underneath his syntax, I discover a message that is grace-filled and hopeful. Then, I'm reminded of Marcus Borg's statement that when we read scripture, and the epistles in particular, we're reading letters not meant for us (I think he even said we're basically eavesdropping on someone else's relationship, so we never have all the context – which is so true!), so I step back from my annoyed self and attempt to glean the goodness in the midst of the cultural and relational factors I clearly don't understand.

Here I struggle with Paul's use of the body and flesh. I see so many ways this language has been used to harm folx (*Folx* is an alternative spelling of *folks* that emphasizes inclusion, support, and solidarity with oppressed and marginalized people.) and has turned people away from the beautiful, grace-filled message within this passage. Elizabeth Shively's sermon on this passage (available at WorkingPreacher.org) reminds us that as disciples of Jesus, we are striving to learn from him and follow in his footsteps, each and every moment. This includes death and resurrection. It is the Spirit that breathes life into creation in scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and when we allow death to happen, She breathes new life in us and transforms us, and with each death and resurrection, we live more and more in the ways of the Spirit.

But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. -Romans 8:11

Shively's words above are poignant for me – “taking the form of Jesus is not optional for Christians.” Despite some of the unhelpful (at least for me) language, Paul is reminding us of this. As Christians, we strive to emulate Jesus in each and every step, and paradoxically (which is so often the case), that striving involves the surrender into death and resurrection, over and over and over again.

Prayer:

Lord, when we weary of the journey, strengthen us by your Spirit to imagine new heavens and a new earth. Amen. (from "Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals")

March 25, 2020 – Feast of the Annunciation

Today is known as the Feast of the Annunciation or the Feast of the Incarnation in Christian tradition. It is the day we honor Mary's consent to bring Jesus into the world.

Luke 1:26-38

Mary, no longer just a silent member of the nativity, or a holy womb for God, or an obedient and compliant girl, has become the focus point for how I, and many other Christians, celebrate Christmas while living in the reality of waiting for true justice to come. She has helped me understand the true magnificence of how much God cares about our political, economic, and social realities. The economic and political worldview of many white evangelicals has led to a silencing of Mary and God's dream for the world. But now she is helping me trust that the eventual upending of the systems of the world will be good news for me, and for other evangelicals as well. ~D. L. Mayfield

A lot of folks don't know about today. It's the day we honor Mary's encounter with Gabriel in which she agreed to carry Jesus, so we hit pause on Lent, this day, nine months before Christmas day, and really, we don't talk enough about Mary. Do we really take moments to realize how incredible this act was?! Most scholars suggest she was about 13 years old, but there's agreement she was between 12-15 years old. A girl of little means who is engaged to a man of little means. Honestly, there are not a lot of obvious pros in this deal for her. In fact, Gabriel doesn't promise her reputation won't be ruined or that Joseph won't leave her abandoned or even that there will be sufficient means to care for this child. There is no promise of safety, but Mary agrees. *She gives consent.*

Mary's obedience is often depicted as meek compliance, but it was far from it! She was a consenting accomplice in the whole Jesus thing! Accomplices aren't idle bystanders. They stir things up! After getting a few more details from Gabriel, she agreed to the whole thing! It's from this place of agreement that some of my favorite words in all of scripture come! Luke 1:46-55, known as the *Magnificat*, are words of praise attributed to Mary in which she reminds us of God's connection with those on the margins – "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away" (Luke 1:51b-53). Those are not the words of a mild-mannered servant but a powerful young woman who was empowered by the Holy Spirit!

Then Mary said, Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. -Luke 1:38

What if we were more like Mary? Willing accomplices, filled with the Spirit’s urgency for mercy and justice! When times seem dark and hopeless, Mary’s power and fortitude provides a hopeful example of how I might engage with this world... a consenting accomplice in God’s vision!

Prayer (In the tradition of praying scripture, I invite you to pray Mary’s Magnificat today.):

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever. Amen.

March 26, 2020

Psalm 130

God communes with and uses people not because they are perfect and antiseptically clean in life but because they have painfully discovered the way of grace. ~Gordon MacDonald

We talk so much about grace in the Christian tradition, but I think sometimes we miss that because of our humanity, learning to surrender and trust grace often is painful. I only came to know grace through pain, through long hard looks in the mirror at my own wretchedness that I am completely unable to fix or hide or make better.

The first three steps of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs are as follows

1. We were powerless over (fill in the blank with your own wretchedness) – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

When I would present these steps to my counseling students, they frequently disagreed with the steps’ focus on powerlessness. These phrases don’t fit into our self-esteem building, positive psychology that thrives in today’s culture. When we’re called to be in this world but not of it, I think it looks more like this (So did Rachel Held Evans. She presented this in

Searching for Sunday – “Imagine if every church became a place where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might just create sanctuary.”).

Jesuit priest, Gregory Boyle, said, “God seems to be an unwilling participant in our efforts to pigeonhole Him... God’s unwieldy love, which cannot be contained by our words, wants to accept all that we are and sees our humanity as the privileged place to encounter this magnanimous love. No part of our hardwiring or our messy selves is to be disparaged. Where we stand, in all our mistakes and imperfection, is holy ground. It is where God has chosen to be intimate with us and not in any way but this... Yet, it’s precisely within the contour of one’s shame that one is summoned to wholeness... It is precisely in the light of God’s vastness and acceptance of me that I can accept the harm I do for what it is.”

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. -Psalm 130:3-4

The psalmist reminds us that if God were out here judging all our sin, there would be no hope. The psalmist, however, lives in hope, reminding us that God is not in the judging business but the grace business. More and more, I find that spiritual life is as much about paradox as anything else. When I am closest to my own wretchedness, I am simultaneously closest to God’s grace. I’m learning not to hold this with the punishment I was taught God would deal me if I erred but rather with the compassion of a mother to a young child that I’ve come to learn God is actually offering if I just lean in.

Prayer:

With a certain sense of shame and limitation, but with enthusiasm of spirit, we make to Thee, O God, the offering of our minds and spirits. Be with us as we move each one of us into the pattern of the daily responsibility of life, and may nothing separate us from Thy love today, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, O God, the Father of our spirits. (Howard Thurman)

March 27, 2020

[John 11:1-37](#)

While there are those that would reduce the Christian faith to moralism and delusional positivity, we know that the God we worship is not a shiny-toothed motivational speaker churning out cheerful memes in times of suffering. We know that the God we worship is a crucified and risen God.

Which is to say we worship a God who is not unfamiliar with darkness. A God who comes close to those who mourn. A God who comes close to those who stand outside tombs. A God who is not far off, but is as close as that choppy breath that falters when you're sobbing. ~Nadia Bolz-Weber

We're told Lazarus was Jesus's dearest friend. Tomorrow Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, but Jesus chooses to mourn. He could skip this experience knowing he has ability to change the outcome, but he doesn't. He chooses to mourn. He chooses to weep.

We work so hard to avoid this weeping, don't we? I think about tissues used to wipe away the evidence or ways our fingers causally reach for the edges of our eyes to push back tears before they have a chance to fall or the times we hold our breath choking back the tears that so desperately want to come.

Before I was diagnosed with Fibrocystic Breast Disease, I was about 32 when I found the first lump in my breast. Sunday came between my initial doctor's appointment and my mammogram. I was 2500 miles away from my family. I went to church and did not sing in the choir. I wept – as the terrified tears of loneliness and not knowing flooded my being. At the conclusion of the service, I was surrounded by women who held me and rocked me while I wept in the sanctuary. "If you can't do this in church, where can you do this?" one of them said. She was right.

Jesus began to weep. -John 11:35

Jesus wept, and yet all too often, in our sterile, superficial presentation of worship and Christian life, there is not room to weep, to sob. The grossness of the snot and the wetness of the tears and the puffiness of our eyes and face are not welcome. There is something so powerful about this experience of grief and mourning that Jesus allowed himself to experience it, even chose to. Just maybe mourning should hold a more prominent space in a Christian practice.

Prayer:

Divine Darkness, when the night of grief swallows our feeble light, help us to feel you lovingly wrap us in that very darkness. Amen. (R. Preston Price)

March 28, 2020

[John 11:28-45](#)

The miracles of Jesus aren't magic tricks designed to awe prospective converts, nor are they tests from the past, meant to sort true believers from doubters. They are instructions; challenges. They show us what to do and how to hope. ~Rachel Held Evans

Another miracle. Jesus's best friend, dead four days, is brought back to life. I'm reminded again of how this story was presented to me in my youth – the images of Lazarus the dead man walking out the tomb. Many of us were encouraged to focus on the magic of the miracle rather than the lessons Jesus taught. First, I'm reminded that Jesus wept, that he chose to weep.

Jesus's words to Martha also stand out. I really feel for Martha. In some ways, I feel like we've made quite the mockery of her with our whole comparison with Mary. Martha is a woman who really is trying her best but keeps being made the example. As she reminded Jesus that there was already a stench in Lazarus's tomb, Jesus reminded her that in order to see God's glory, she first had to believe that God's glory existed. This one statement challenges the notion of the ways in which we understand the miracle stories of Jesus, the ways we understand faith and trust.

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" -John 11:40

Certainly, this idea can be used in ways that are harmful (just as all scripture can when taken out of context or misused). I'm reminded of a family who made the national news recently for praying for the resurrection miracle of a young girl. I think sometimes we look for the miracle as a way of avoiding the grief. Jesus wept, and even in the midst of weeping and mourning, we're reminded to believe in the glory of God. God's glory presents in all manner of ways, and God is far greater than our limited imaginations. When we are caught in spiritual blindness, we miss all the ways God's glory is evident around us. Setting an expectation on how God's glory might present itself is different than believing that God's glory will be present.

Prayer:

Divine thief in the night, you come to us in the darkness to unsettle our expectations and certainties. Open our hearts to bewilderment, that we may be open to your wisdom. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

March 29, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Submission*

Make me what Thou wilt, Lord, and set me where Thou wilt... Lord, put me to what Thou wilt; rank me with whom Thou wilt. Put me to doing; put me to suffering. Let me be employed for Thee, or laid aside for Thee, exalted for Thee, or trodden under foot for Thee. Let me be full; let me be empty. Let me have all things; let me have nothing. I freely and heartily resign all to Thy pleasure and disposal... O eternal Jehovah, the Lord God Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Thou art now become my Covenant-Friend, and I, through Thy infinite grace, am become Thy Covenant-Servant. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen. ~John Wesley

Submission is defined in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* as “subordination to the guidance of God.”

God does not force our submission, just as Mary was not forced to carry Jesus. We are invited to enter into this relationship with God. John Wesley was clear that our works do not lead to sanctification, but there are practices that are part of Christian life. Submission was evident in much of Wesley’s prayer life, and as those who follow in the Wesleyan tradition, we are encouraged to become consenting accomplices with God through submission.

1. Reflect on John Wesley’s *Prayer of Submission*, and consider whether you are prepared to enter into that covenant with God.

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, you, all the days of my life... I give you my understanding... I give you my will... I give you my affections... I give you my body... I give you all my worldly goods... I give you my credit and reputation... I give you myself and my all... O my God and my all, when hereafter I shall be tempted to break this solemn engagement, when I shall be pressed to conform to the world and to the company and customs that surround me, may my answer be: “I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God. I will give unto God the things that are God’s. God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

2. If so, begin the practice of praying this prayer each morning.
3. Even as I write this, I’m cautious as I’ve observed the harmful consequences when religious leaders have misused the discipline of submission. If you find yourself as one who has experienced this, first, I’m sorry. Often, this leads to fear of the practice of submission, which is normal and completely understandable as we may no longer trust our own innate ability of discernment. If this sounds familiar, I would strongly encourage you seek the support of a spiritually-trained clinician who can help you reconnect with your ability. Again, Rev. Horne can help make that connection for you.

Week Six

March 30, 2020

Psalm 118: 1-2

This king was born to an obscure teenage girl, huddled in an animal shelter with news of the event told to shepherders, followed by troops looking for a child to kill. Certainly, this rabbi would preach about victories, health, and prosperity, right? Not quite, but the meek, grieving, and poor listened closely. And a few days after the cheering throngs welcome him and his donkey to the capital, Jesus took off his cloak, knelt down, and washed twelve pairs of feet. ~Kate Bowler

Here we are. Week six. This coming Sunday is Palm Sunday. The children will likely parade through the congregation waving the palm branches. We will sing hymns of Hosanna as we remember Jesus's entry to Jerusalem.

I never quite understood the recreation of the triumphant entry. I still don't. Because the shadow of the upcoming week remains in the back of my mind... that this is the beginning of Jesus's walk to his torturous death by crucifixion. That those who are waving palm branches this week are the ones who will be shouting for his death or turning their backs on him in silence next week.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever. -Psalm 118:1-2

As we enter into this week of praise and worship, let us not forget the shadow. We expected a triumphant, powerful king. God sent a servant, a sacrifice. Gives thanks that even through our silence and denial of the Messiah, his steadfast love endures.

Prayer:

We are bold, as your creatures, to praise you. We praise you for the gift of life, and for the gift of new life in Easter. We praise you for the mystery of creation, as we stand in awe alongside all your creatures – zebras, cabbages, sharks, all the birds of the air, all the fish of the sea, all the beasts of the field. We praise you alongside all our human cousins of the single family of humanity: Hispanics and Koreans, homeboys and immigrants, our good friends, our fearful enemies. We praise you with full throat and glad hearts. We praise you on this glad day... (Walter Brueggemann)

March 31, 2020

Psalm 118:19-29

This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more. ~Rachel Held Evans

Our lectionary text for this week includes this second part of Psalm 118. It is described as "A Song of Victory" in my bible. It really seems a song of deliverance as the psalmist thanks God for their salvation.

Again, God delivers, saves, holds up the unlikely. The victor is not going to look the way we think or expect. When faced with every possible human temptation of power and riches, Jesus said, "No, thank you." There was Nicodemus who came to Jesus in the dark to question Jesus about who he was. There's the griping Israelites who just wanted Moses to quench their thirst. The Samaritan woman who stayed with Jesus until he revealed his messiahship. The disciples who just never quite get it. David, the shepherd king, who seemed to make every possible mistake as a leader but was never not Beloved to his creator. The blind man who never backed down when questioned by the Pharisees. Mary, the consenting accomplice, who made the whole Jesus story possible. The Pharisees who just couldn't see past their own rules. Martha who wanted to ensure everyone was cared for, including her dead brother. Jesus, who chose to weep for his dead friend.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. -Psalm 118:22

I'm not sure that if we were to write the story of the Messiah who would redeem our sanctification any of us would naturally include this list of characters. But this gathering of misfits and oddballs and folx who don't meet our expectations is exactly who God uses.

Prayer:

Around the edge of our doxology are other brothers and sisters with whom we stand in solidarity. So we name them for your attention: the war-wounded and amputees; the mothers whose sons are gone but not forgotten; the dying who lack healthcare; the poor who eat less than we eat; the prisoners who have not had smart lawyers. We look up to you in exuberance. We look around at them and our praise is muted, because we wonder some about your mercy; we are not completely sure of your generosity. Our praise turns to plea: look upon us in our common need and give us life again. Give us new life and we will recover our voice of praise. (Walter Brueggemann)

April 1, 2020

Matthew 21:1-11

But the God of love is always hanging around, the brown-skinned Jewish rabbi preaching about the poor being blessed and the broken-hearted comforted. ~Shane Claiborne

See if, for just a moment, you can put yourself in Jesus's shoes – setting the scene as Zechariah prophesied, entering the gates of Jerusalem to cheers and adoration, knowing all along the reality of what was to come... betrayal, torture, silence. What must that have been like? This triumphal entry to one's death.

When I was in high school, the Holston Conference Council on Youth Ministry had these incredible t-shirts they sold. They were black shirts with white lettering and contained quotes from various individuals. I wish I still had mine. It read, "The greatest sin of our time is not the few who have destroyed but the vast majority who sat idly by." Martin Luther King, Jr. said those words. I am struck by the silence that will come in a few days' time from those people who are rejoicing here. That they're rejoicing, here, is not enough to carry them through the challenge of Jesus's pending arrest, trial, torture, and execution. These people who rejoice here might be among those who call for Jesus's execution or they might be among those who are silent.

As a therapist with an expertise in trauma who also experienced PTSD, I am intimately aware of the freeze response in our nervous systems. To oversimplify, we freeze when we enter a dangerous situation in which we cannot fight or run away. Freeze eventually leads to dissociation and collapse in which we "play dead" in order to survive a perceived attack. No doubt, these individuals in Jerusalem had been under Roman rule for a long time. They were not considered Roman citizens and as such did not have citizens' rights. They witnessed regularly the atrocities of a ruler who sought power and control, pushing those on the margins further to the edge. They were an oppressed people, unable to gain equal status because of the powers and structures of the day. When they thought their liberator had arrived, they celebrated and rejoiced, only to be left in disappointment and possibly shock a few days later.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. -Matthew 21:8

Their celebration was not enough to carry them through the next week. It won't be enough for us either. When asked if he denied the resurrection, Peter Rollins stated, "Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think... I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However, there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for

those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who've had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.”

How often do we show up to celebrate the triumphant entry only to deny the Christ a few moments later?

Prayer:

We salute you Prince of Peace then we daily commit violence: against our neighbor close at hand, by word and deed; against our neighbor far away, by our systems that keep hurt invisible; against creation by our heavy consuming;... wittingly, unwittingly, greedily, without caring. And then find much of our violence is in the name of your righteousness, that you have started these cycles of violence with your ethnic cleansing. Or did we get it wrong? Or did we get it wrong? Prince of Peace: Purge the hungry violence among us. Use this Lent to turn away our devouring habits, Make us thin and lean and quiet, and led beyond your fierceness. Prince of Peace! Amen. (Walter Brueggemann, 2001)

April 2, 2020

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

Jesus is what the living, breathing will of God looks like. ~Rachel Held Evans

Several of the authors I've quoted here have book clubs where they encourage folx to read a book with them every other month or so. There's usually some social media discussion around the book and possibly a videoed interview with the author(s). I know Kate Bowler and Nadia Bolz-Weber do this. Sarah Bessey chooses selections from those on the margins – BIPOC, LGBTQ+, folx with varying abilities. At the moment, I'm reading *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* as part of Sarah's book club. It's a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I've quoted it earlier, and I highly recommend it (even if you just look at the pictures)! It's fascinating to read as these two men share about their struggles with the mind (also they don't necessarily agree on everything).

The mind of Christ... I have no clue what that's like. I'm pretty much certain it's nothing like my mind. I'm pretty sure Christ wouldn't have a love for the snooze button that I do. Would he have relished morning dog snuggles like I do? What was his morning routine like? Did he just bounce out of bed ready to go or did he need to prepare himself for the day? How did he know where to go as he journeyed? What did this knowing feel like? Did he ever get exasperated with his disciples? When his divinity was stronger than his humanity, what was that like? Did he have to be careful with his words? Did he overthink things and just not act on those thoughts? What is it like to truly forgive?

I can't even to begin to imagine what it must be like to walk through this world with the mind of Christ. I do, however, have some examples of his behavior. That's really what Paul is sharing here. Jesus didn't exploit his status. In fact, he did the opposite. He became a servant, humbling himself. He wandered the world without a home which allowed him to

meet all those on the margins, those who were different than he. He didn't condemn those who falsely accused him, nor those who called for his execution, nor those who were silent.

He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. -Philippians 2:8

Being disciples takes intentionality and effort. Showing up at church on Sunday and tithing does not make us disciples. Disciples strive to follow their teacher with each step. We do so knowing we will fail but that with each failure we have a chance to get it right the next time. Shane Claiborne said, “While the ghettos may have their share of violence and crime, the suburbs are the home the more subtle demonic forces – numbness, complacency, comfort – and it is these that can eat away at our souls... Perhaps the most dangerous place for a Christian to be is in safety and comfort.” Being disciples of Jesus Christ requires us to move from safety, complacency, and comfort. I may never know the mind of Christ, but I know how he behaved. I strive to emulate him more and more, and boy, do I get it wrong so much of the time.

Prayer:

We are eager for Easter joy and new life, and yet we are haunted by the space between where we are and where you are. Grant us a new mind, a new readiness, a new heart, that we might stand with you in self-emptying obedience. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

April 3, 2020

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

In other words, the prophets are weirdos. More than anyone else in Scripture, they remind us that those odd ducks shouting from the margins of society may see many things more clearly than the political and religious leaders with the inside track. We ignore them at our own peril. ~Rachel Held Evans

The lectionary provides the church with two options for the texts for this week – those for Palm Sunday and those for Holy Week. I've taken some liberty. In order to honor Holy Week and not jump too quickly to Easter, we'll look at most of those next week, but this passage is part of the Holy Week texts. It seems fitting that we would be reminded of servanthood between the triumphal entry of Jesus in Jerusalem and his death by torture.

We don't read the prophets enough. They make us a bit uncomfortable. They choose the wilderness. They stay there crying out to us – Get out of your complacency! They remind us that to claim to be a disciple of Jesus means to become like a servant. They don't back down. They aren't always civil. They don't play nice, and they definitely don't mess around, trying to work within the existing power structures of the day. They profess

apocalyptic visions – and they don't quite seem to be afraid of the destruction! They remind us what we could be.

I always feel this pull toward the prophets, this gentle nudge in the core of my being – “Come on out here. There's life and vitality and freedom.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “To us a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a death blow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.” Do we allow ourselves to feel this threat, deep in our bones? It's there. At least, it is for me. If I truly felt the weight of it as the prophets do, I suspect my life would look very different. I confess, it feels easier most days to ignore it, get caught up in my busyness and to-do's. The prophets speak to the core of our being, the space deep inside where we know our extravagance is too much; where we feel the weight of those who don't have the same chance; where we know the excruciating pain of hurting, dying children aching for the comfort of caring adult; where we can't breathe when unnecessary force is used to calm innocent people; where tears flow as we watch animals die because of our unwillingness to care for creation. Somewhere under all our layers of armoring, we know these.

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. -Isaiah 50:4

The prophets call us out of our complacency. It's why we're uncomfortable with their existence. They tug at us calling us out of our over-consumption, calling us to use our privilege to create systems in which all can truly thrive, calling us to never allow another human being to suffer alone and in silence for our believed safety and security, calling us to stand against violent actions in all the ways they may present themselves, calling out our abuse of the creation that was entrusted to our care. *We ignore them at our own peril.*

Prayer:

The idols have ears but do not hear... so unlike you, for all your hearing... so like us, ears but do not hear. You have endlessly summoned us: shema, listen, listen up, pay attention, heed, obey, turn... We mostly do not... in our narcissism, in our recalcitrance, in our departure from you. So we pray for ears open, unwaxed, attentive, circumcised. Call us by name... so that we know. Call us to you... so that we live. Call us into the world... so that we care. Call us to risk... so that we trust beyond ourselves. You speak/we listen/and comes life, abundant, beyond all that we ask or think... Our ears hear your word of life. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann, 2000)

April 4, 2020

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Newness happens in the world when long silenced people get their voice enough to sing dangerous alternatives. ~Walter Brueggemann

Tomorrow, we will “celebrate” Palm Sunday and begin Holy Week, observing the final acts of service of Jesus Christ. This passage from Isaiah is known as one of the *Servant Songs*. I’m not sure we think about prophets as servants. Our complacency is safer if they are crazy, obnoxious, pushing their agendas, or weird, so we create all manner of excuses to avoid facing the reality of their servanthood.

One of the pieces of this passage that stands out to me is that servanthood is chosen. It is agreed to. It is entered into with consent, just as Mary consented to carry Jesus. Prophets aren’t crazy protestors just causing a ruckus for fun or attention. Prophets have been to the wilderness and have experienced God’s vision of humanity. I can assure you this vision doesn’t include extravagant spending, for-profit prison systems, children in cages, people having to choose which of their basic needs they will pay for this week, spending more money on weapons and war than on caring for those on the margins. I’m also certain that God’s vision doesn’t include folks condemned as “incompatible” or kids sitting alone at lunch or bullied at recess or the objectification and exploitation of human bodies or threats of extinction to parts of God’s creation or... I’m weighted by the weariness of the list of things that are part of our daily existence that I am certain are not part of God’s vision for us. It can be easier to push them over to the categories of crazy or too conservative or too liberal or not practical than to allow them to disrupt our daily ways of life, but this is exactly what prophets agree to – to disrupt our daily way of life, to bring us back to God’s vision for humanity, to challenge us to move closer and closer to that vision and not relegating it to some point in the future when God will rescue us from our complacency. Fannie Lou Hamer said, “You can pray until you faint, but if you don’t get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap.”

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. -Isaiah 50:5

Prophets choose servanthood. They strip us of the security of our “service.” They remind us that lives of servanthood are not made up of fundraising banquets or whatever cause the local social club is supporting or yoga donations or dropping some items in a box. Lives of servanthood require us to come close to those on the margins of society, those we would prefer to keep at a distance, that they might show us God’s vision rather than assuming our ways are correct.

Prophets choose this servanthood. They are not rebellious to truths they see, and they do not turn backward. We do. Each time we fail to respond with the grace, compassion, and mercy of Jesus Christ. Each time fail to disrupt and dismantle the systems and structures and powers that cause brokenness, that cause God to grieve. We do. We do.

Prayer:

Your word is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path. Your word is a glue of the universe wherein the whole creation coheres. Your word is the address of promise and command by which we live. Your word has come fleshed among us full of grace and trust. We are creatures of your word and give thanks for it. For all that we are more dazzled that your word is carried, uttered, acted by frail vulnerable human agents. We ponder and give thanks for those who this day speak your word where it is desperately needed and deeply resisted. We ponder and give thanks for those who this day act your word for newness and peace and justice. We ponder with trepidation that among us you will yet designate such carriers, such speakers, such actors. In our thanks for your word, we pray for courage in the name of the one who emptied himself. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann, 2000)

April 5, 2020

The Spiritual Discipline of *Prayer*

Prayer is the grand means of drawing near to God. ~John Wesley

I currently serve as President of the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling. One of my responsibilities is to issue statements following acts of religious violence. Each time, the phrase “thoughts and prayers” comes to mind. While our prayers are not sufficient in these times and this phrase is often dismissive of the problem, there is incredible power in prayer. We certainly can pray anytime, anywhere, and setting aside a time specifically for prayer is transformative. Prayer as communication rather than just a petition of blessing for a meal, a group, or a study of scripture.

1. Reflect on your current practices of prayer. Do you spend more time speaking or listening?
2. If you spend more time speaking, consider adopting a contemplative practice as well. Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina are excellent options. If you’re looking for a starting point, I really like *Sacred Breath: Forty Days of Centering Prayer* by J. David Muyskens.
3. If you do more listening or you need some additional structure, consider adopting a version of the Daily Office. There are some excellent free apps if you have a smartphone: *Book of Common Prayer* is an app of *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*. For a more traditional practice, check out *Prayer – Mission St. Clare*. Additionally, *Orders for Daily Prayer and Praise* can be found in the back of the *UM Hymnal* or in the *Book of Worship* mentioned earlier.

4. Whatever practice you adopt, a consistent devotion to prayer requires time, effort, and energy.

Holy Week

April 6, 2020 – Monday of Holy Week

Psalm 31:9-16

It is still taught in some seminaries that is a heresy to think that God can suffer with us. But what does the incarnation show us but the ultimate act of particularity? This is what compassion is all about. ~Madeleine L'Engle

Settle in, friends. Come close as we begin to take our first steps into this week. At this point, I am weary. My body physically hurts. I've had sleepless nights with these words, not because of struggles to write them but because of the magnitude of them. Our season of lament has reached its pinnacle. I hold you close. I see many of your faces as I write these final pieces for Holy Week. I see all the ways we armor ourselves against the pain and shame and sorrow. I hold the armor and the pain.

Beloved, know that you are not alone in these places. As we walk through this week, I hope you feel the hand of Jesus reach out and grab your own, hold you close, gently wash your feet, serve you a meal of soul food. I hope you hear him say –

I know, dear one. I know. It's ok to loosen your armor, and I know. I know it's terrifying. I know.

It's ok to trust people, and I know it's scary. I know.

I know people will betray you, and I know it hurts. I know.

It's ok to want the story to go in a different direction, and I know it's agonizing when it doesn't. I know.

I know people will pretend they never knew you, and I know it will break your heart. I know.

I know people will mock you to your face and lie about you behind your back, and I know it feels defeating. I know.

I know how impossible it seems to see your mother in pain and be unable to soothe her, and I know it feels helpless. I know.

Beautiful, heartbroken, child, I know. I know. I know... and I also know all the shame you feel, all the hurt you've caused... all those hidden, secret places of yourself you've come face-to-face with, I know, and there is nothing, Beloved, that can separate you from my love. You are made exactly as you were meant to be. I claim you as mine and call you holy. I love you.

For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. -Psalm 31:10

As we enter into this week, I'm reminded of a line from a song I've mentioned previously, "The man of all sorrows, he never forgot what sorrow is carried by the hearts that he bought." (*The Silence of God*, Andrew Peterson)

Prayer:

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we will be saved, in quietness and confidence will be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your presence where we may be still and know that you are God. Amen. (The Daily Office from Mission St. Clare)

April 7, 2020 – Tuesday of Holy Week

[Matthew 26:14-35](#)

Sometimes no explanation is sufficient to account for suffering. The only decent thing is silence – and the sacraments. ~Thomas Merton

For a few months before I started my doctoral program, I lived with my grandparents on their farm just west of Knoxville. While I would spend a week or so with them every summer, this was the first time I lived there for an extended period of time. At some point, my grandmother called my mom about what I liked to eat. During those childhood summer trips, she would cook all my favorites lasagna, chicken and dumplings (if the humidity cooperated), etc., but that was simply not going to work for a long-term stay. My mom informed her that my absolute favorite meal was pinto beans and cornbread which astonished my grandmother. To this day, my birthday dinner consists of pinto beans, cornbread, whatever greens happen to look the freshest (or wilted lettuce, an Appalachian delicacy, if there happens to still be fresh lettuce around). My birthday is late enough in the summer that fried okra is likely, but if not available, there will be fried green tomatoes. If we really think about it, for my Scotch-Irish, mountain dwelling ancestors, that was a winter survival meal. The pork fat, cornmeal, and beans were reserved and stored throughout the summer to get them through the winter. It's soul food at its finest – the food that nourishes us when there's not much else left.

One winter, I was a leader at Convo, the Yellowstone Annual Conference version of Revolution, and as is typical, communion was served on the last night (As a conference small in population, we had about 100-200 kids instead of thousands.). As the service concluded, two girls stayed behind. I knew they were good friends, a junior and a senior, meaning one would be graduating. This would be her last Convo as a youth. I sat in the back of the sanctuary holding space as they grieved the pending loss. Eventually, they turned to me and declared that they were hungry. The remaining elements were on the altar, so we gathered and ate them eventually joined by another leader. We laughed and cried. Finally, one of the girls said, "If you think about it, bread and grape juice is a pretty disgusting combination, but this is one of the best meals I've ever had!"

I love the Eucharist, communion! Since my confirmation, there are few moments when I approach The Lord's Table without tears in my eyes. As a child, I didn't put together that we celebrated communion once a month. In my very traditional church, I just knew that the Sundays the elements were on the altar, we got to eat in church! In middle school and most of high school, I was still pretty clueless, but I knew it was something deeply moving. I still don't totally get the mystery of communion, but it's soul food. The Passover meal is one of soul food for the Jewish people, a meal that helped them survive and prepared them to flee. Communion that night on the sanctuary floor was soul food – the nourishment after all the tears had been shed.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve -Matthew 26:17

Bishop Karen Oliveto wrote “We eat with the people we love.” Jesus ate with the twelve, knowing one of them had already betrayed him. He ate with the people he loved. We can get into the intricacies of the sacrament and the varying theologies and beliefs around it, but I prefer its mystery. I don't know why I cry when I come to the table. I don't know why I love this meal of bread and grape juice so much. I don't know why, but I do know that it soothes my soul. It fills me up in ways nothing else can... not even pinto beans and cornbread.

Prayer:

From our beginning, you shaped us to live in service to another and all the earth. You set us in the garden to co-create life with you. You surrounded us with creatures and creations that depend on our care. Our destinies have always been wrapped in one another – our individual well-being bound to the well-being of all... God, your bread and your cup renew our spirits. No matter the times we have failed to show up to your call, or to our own needs, or to the cries of our neighbors, you receive us again. May your unending grace be our foundation as we journey with Christ towards justice. Amen (enfleshed)

April 8, 2020 – Wednesday of Holy Week

[Matthew 26:36-75](#)

I don't always want freedom. I want security. I want comfort. I want nothing to go wrong, nobody I love to be hurt, to disappoint me. But that is not what Jesus offered. He offered life, and life more abundantly, and that means everything, the whole spectrum, laughter and tears, joy and disappointment, but above all life lived fully and openly and appreciatively. That is how Jesus lived, and how we are to live. ~Madeleine L'Engle

Jesus in Gethsemane might be my favorite piece of scripture. In the whole Bible, this might be it. I have never been to Israel or Palestine, so my point of reference for this garden is a small piece of land in Ireland (which I realize is probably nothing like this garden). After a

day of backpacking along the western coast, I took a break on this little piece of land looking out over the Atlantic Ocean. The grass was a perfect green, and as I sat myself down, it felt as though this piece of land had been preparing for the moment by body would arrive for rest. That's what I imagine Gethsemane to be like for Jesus.

Having asked his friends to wait, he wanders into this garden to wrestle with God. I have this thought that maybe we can glimpse the Divine when Jesus is his most human, and this is one of those moments. I see Jesus face down, curled up (child's pose for those yogis out there), tears watering the ground beneath him. If he'd had a weighted blanket, it would be covering him. He's begging, pleading with God – "There's got to be another way! Please, let's do something different. I don't want this anymore. Make it stop." This is humanity, and the only answer he hears is silence. At some point (Don't forget, his friends have bailed and fallen asleep... three times!), he gathers the courage to put one hand on the ground and then the other, pushing himself up to standing. Then he takes that first step to turn out of the garden, to leave the safety of that space to face what he knows is coming. This is divinity.

Our human tendency is to gather and protect, stay in safe places. Jesus could have stayed there, in the safety of the garden, but he doesn't. He moves toward the path God has called him to.

*And going a little father, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." -
Matthew 26:39*

There are times when PTSD still flares up big time for me. Those days, when my nervous system is on overdrive, I want to stay in my bed with my dogs and weighted blanket. I beg for God to give me something different (Please note, Jesus did too. It's ok to ask for a different plan!). I want to be safe and protected, and the absolute hardest thing, the thing that takes every ounce of energy I have is to put one foot on the ground and then the other, get dressed, and walk out into the world that seems so terrifying. We all have those moments. Maybe, they last a few hours or days or months or sometimes even years. The times when the hardest thing imaginable is to put one foot in front of the other and walk into those places and spaces. Jesus has been there. He knows the agony. He knows the pain in our bodies. He knows the distress in our minds. He knows the tears and the begging and the pounding and the wanting anything but this. He knows.

Prayer:

God, you never promised us that the way would be clear. You have, however, created us in your image – the image of the One who is Wisdom, who is Love, who is Courage. You breathed your life into us with the assurance that we have, within and around us, everything we need to be your faithful people. Though we sometimes act in disregard for your call on our collective life, still you show up with and for us, relentlessly. Amen. (enflshed)

April 9, 2020 – Maundy Thursday

Matthew 27:1-26

To stand apart from the complex and often morally corrupt world of political involvement and responsibility in the name of Jesus Christ is to dishonor that name – the name of one who was hauled before the authorities precisely because his “saving work” was perceived to be (and really was!) political. ~Douglas John Hall

A people under Roman political rule. Despite paying exorbitant taxes are not granted citizenship status. They aren't given “papers”. They lack the rights of a Roman citizen. A rabbi who challenges the structures and powers of Rome. A rabbi who challenges those Jewish leaders who abuse their power by oppressing the Jewish people in order to secure themselves with the Roman authorities. A homeless rabbi who lives and preaches a message of love, justice, mercy, and compassion is arrested under trumped up charges.

I see so much chatter about who is responsible for Jesus's arrest and crucifixion. Was it Judas? Was it the Jews? Was it his disciples who seem to have fled and scattered by this point? Was it the political authorities? Was it those we'll read about tomorrow who shouted for his execution over Barabbas?

It was all of them. It was everyone. As the story plays out, all these individuals have opportunities to step in, step up and defend Jesus. They don't. What if this debate and blame pushing keeps us complicit in the current systems that resulted in the execution of an innocent man? It's easier to debate who was responsible for Jesus's death than to acknowledge that everyone was. It's easier to debate who was responsible for Jesus's death “back then” than to look at our current complicity with similar systems today.

Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!” -Matthew 27:23

He knows. He knows the feeling of ultimate betrayal. He knows the feeling of false accusations. He knows the feel of handcuffs and prison bars. He knows Death Row. He knows the silence of God. He knows.

Prayer:

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace. For the unbearable toil of our sinful world, we plead for remission. For the terror of absence from our beloved, we plead for your comfort. For the scandalous presence of death in your creation, we plead for resurrection. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace. Come, Holy Spirit, and heal all that is broken in our lives, in our streets, and in our world. In the name

of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (Prayer for the Death of Someone Killed in the Neighborhood from "Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals")

April 10, 2020 – Good Friday

[Matthew 27:27-56](#)

You may be certain that as long as someone is in hell, Christ will remain there with him.
~Elder Sophrony

Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment. According to *Britannica*, this form of execution was used for almost ten centuries, Constantine abolished the practice in the 4th century CE. After being stripped of their clothing, whipped, and beaten, the “dead man walking” carried his own crossbeam to the place of execution. At that point, the condemned were nailed the crossbeam which was then nailed to a waiting upright beam to which the feet were nailed or bound. There was usually a small ledge about halfway up to provide some support for the body. “Death ultimately occurred through a combination of constrained blood circulation, organ failure, and asphyxiation as the body strained under its own weight. It could be hastened by shattering the legs with an iron club, which prevented them from supporting the body’s weight and made inhalation more difficult, accelerating both asphyxiation and shock.” (Britannica)

Agony. Crucifixion was torture. Crucifixion was prolonged torture. While I get the whole empty cross idea of hanging crosses, wearing crosses, it’s not something I’m totally comfortable with. We’re honoring a symbol of torture, and while we know Jesus was eventually resurrected, it’s troubling that we honor a device used to torture and kill more than 3800 known individuals, primarily religious and political adversaries. I also think it draws us away from the agony endured by those who were crucified. Regardless, Jesus was tortured, brutally tortured as a religious agitator. The sign noting his crime read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

As Jesus experiences the slow asphyxiation and organ failure of crucifixion, he utters a desperate cry quoting the psalms. He sees the women who followed and cared for him, including his mother helpless to comfort her.

And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” -Matthew 27:46

Today, we grieve. Today and tomorrow we are offered the gift of time. Time set aside to reflect on this journey of Lent. We see this Jesus, whom we claim to be disciples of, dying a torturous death. We notice where we are in the story. Are we among the women who followed in the shadows? Are we among the crowd mocking Jesus as he carried his

crossbeam? Are we among the soldiers who stripped and whipped Jesus? Are we among those calling for Jesus's death? Are we among the politicians afraid to challenge the religious leaders for fear of invoking a riot? Are we among the religious leaders seeking to maintain their semblance of power and control? Are we among the disciples who flee and hide?

What are the ways we continue to participate in the crucifixion, denying the divinity of Jesus? Today, we name those things, grieve them, and repent.

Prayer:

O merciful Father, who taught us in your holy Word that you would not willingly afflict us, look with pity upon our sorrows. Remember us, O Lord, in mercy, nourish our souls with patience, comfort us with a sense of your goodness, lift up your countenance upon us, and give us peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Daily Office of Mission St. Clare)

April 11, 2020 – Holy Saturday

[Matthew 27:57-66](#)

When I say I have hope, I don't mean I have confidence that my desired outcomes will come to pass. I mean I have already seen God with us, and when I look to the future I see God there too. I've been transformed, and I'm no longer afraid. ~Lyndsey Medford

Nobody's really sure what to do with Saturday. It's liminal space, and liminal space is hard. We know about Good Friday and Easter, but Holy Saturday? There's no service to attend. I tend to think about it like the day after the funeral. The day after the busyness is complete, and we're eating leftovers with those dear ones who are still around. It's when the reality sets in. It can be tempting to avoid this time – jumping into going through our loved one's belongings, going over aspects of the estate, but I think a pause is warranted.

I think it's particularly important in this story. I want to honor this day. I avoid jumping into Easter too soon. Easter is coming, but Easter only comes because there was a Friday. Saturday gives us a chance to pause in the darkness of Friday, a chance to rest. There's not much happening on Saturday. No body to prepare. No estate to work on. No belongings to go through. Saturday is for the liminal time, the time of the unknown.

*Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. -
Matthew 27:61*

We live in a world that encourages us to constantly be on the move, continuously productive. In fact, our worth as human beings often is caught up in how much we produce. Pausing, resting, waiting in the darkness. We talk a big talk about new creation, but there is

no new creation without death. Today, we wait, knowing that death has occurred. Maybe you've experienced a personal death of something or someone this season, or maybe you're reflecting on the death of Jesus today. Tomorrow, God will be in the rising and celebrations, but today is for noticing that God is in the dying and waiting, too. Rest in that assurance, today, dear ones.

Prayer:

You are the God who remains with us during our Saturdays of waiting and wondering, marked by the memory of Friday and the hope of Sunday. Forbid us too-easy exits out of the darkness. May we wait until we are at last interrupted by your life-giving grace. Amen. (Walter Brueggemann)

Easter Sunday Morning

Before you enter too quickly into the excitement of the day, I hope that through this season of sacred lament you have come face-to-face, even if for just a moment, with the abundant grace of God. I mentioned before we began that Rachel Held Evans's influence was everywhere in this. When I first sat down to write, I kept the benediction from her funeral close by. It was given by Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber and was adapted from her book *Accidental Saints*. I offer it now as a benediction for our Lenten journey. Much love, my friends, and may you never forget that there are arms of Amazing Grace waiting to catch you and lift you up in your fallings and risings.

Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those whom no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers. The closeted. The teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it all together for everyone else. Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet." Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us because that is our Lord's nature. This Jesus cried at his friend's tomb and forgave those who hung him on a cross. He was God's Beatitude – God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong.

Jesus invites us into a story bigger than ourselves and our imaginations, yet we all get to tell that story with the scandalous particularity of this moment and this place. We are storytelling creatures because

we are fashioned in the image of a storytelling God. May we never neglect that gift. May we never lose our love for telling the story. Amen.

Resources

Books – in no order (Not even alphabetical)

Search for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church – Rachel Held Evans

Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again – Rachel Held Evans

Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People - Nadia Bolz-Weber

Miracles and Other Reasonable Things: A Story of Unlearning and Relearning God - Sarah Bessey

The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs – Peter Enns

Jesus and the Disinherited - Howard Thurman

Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived – Rob Bell

Glory Happening: Finding the Divine in Everyday Places - Kaitlin Curtice

A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent – Walter Brueggemann

Learning to Walk in the Dark – Barbara Brown Taylor

I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness – Austin Channing Brown

Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith – Sarah Bessey

Interrupted: When Jesus Wrecks Your Comfortable Christianity – Jen Hatmaker

From Judgement to Hope: A Study on the Prophets – Walter Brueggemann

Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution – Diana Butler Bass

Finding God in the Waves: How I Lost My Faith and Found It Again Through Science – Mike McHargue

Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved – Kate Bowler

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion – Gregory Boyle

Executing Grace: How the Death Penalty Killed Jesus and How It’s Killing Us – Shane Claiborne

Strength to Love – Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Irresistible Revolution, Updated and Expanded: Living as an Ordinary Radical – Shane Claiborne

Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion – Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne – Wilda Gafney

I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation – Chanequa Walker-Barnes

Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality – Steve Harper

Strangers at My Door: A True Story of Finding Jesus in Unexpected Guests – Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

A Sojourner’s Truth: Choosing Freedom and Courage in a Divided World – Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

The Book of Joy – Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu

Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann

Glorious Weakness: Discovering God in All We Lack – Alia Joy

Holy Disunity: How What Separates Us Can Save Us – Layton E. Williams

Prayers for a Privileged People – Walter Brueggemann

The Sabbath – Abraham Joshua Heschel

Sabbath as Resistance, New Edition with Study Guide: Saying No to the Culture of Now – Walter Brueggemann

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, and Feasting – Marva J. Dawn

The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus – Rob Fuquay

Podcasts

Almost Heretical

Ask Science Mike

Becoming Wise

Can I Say This at Church?

Compass Podcast

Crackers and Grape Juice

Duke Chapel Sermons

Everything Happens with Kate Bowler

For the Love with Jen Hatmaker

Get Your Spirit in Shape

Homilies with Richard Rohr

Inverse Podcast

Lectio Diversa

Lord Have Mercy

Making Room on the Pew

On Being

Reclaiming Jesus Now with Jim Wallis

Reports from the Spiritual Frontier

Small Groups in the Wesleyan Way

Thanks Be to Pod

The Bible for Normal People

The Deconstructionists

The Neighbor Next Door

The RobCast

The Zeitcast

2Fab 2Furious

Narrative Lectionary

You're Not Accepted