



*F R O M A S H E S
T O E A S T E R*

Lenten Devotional 2021
North American Lutheran Church

Introduction

As we approach Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent, it seems worthwhile to say a few words of introduction regarding this historic, often misunderstood observance.

Without presenting a detailed explanation of the development of Lent, it is enough to say that a time of repentance, reflection and renewal has been practiced by Christians as a 40-day season (excluding Sundays) from the fourth century to the present day. Lent had its roots in baptismal preparation, fasting before celebration of Easter, and renewed baptismal commitment for those who had fallen away from the faith.

Historically, Lent has been associated with the three spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving (see Matthew 6). Lutherans have often focused their observance on growing deeper in the Word of God, study of Luther's Small Catechism, and reflection on one's sinfulness, repentance and renewal through God's grace and forgiveness. What is important, for Lutherans, is that Lenten observance be seen as a gracious gift for renewal and spiritual refreshment, not a good work to please God or earn His favor.

Martin Luther, preaching on Matthew 4:1-11, wrote about the spiritual discipline of fasting, "But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace." (Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Luther's Church Postil). Whether we share Lenten devotions, worship more frequently, give up things for Lent or engage in the biblical practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, it may never be understood as "a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace." Lent itself is a gift of God! So, with regard to Lenten devotions and all Lenten disciplines: use them in grace! People often become demoralized and disheartened when, by the end of the first week, they have stumbled in their Lenten discipline. If you miss a day's devotion, or several days, catch up when you have time. There's no eternal harm in reading two day's devotions at once, or reading one week's devotions all together, if necessary. This booklet offers short, to-the-point devotions that do not take much time so that you may find joy in the simple Lenten discipline of daily devotions.

This Lenten daily devotional is based upon the daily lectionary provided in the Lutheran Book of Worship, Year I. The daily lectionary appoints three lessons for each day, although, for the purposes of this booklet, one reading has been chosen as the basis for each day's reflection. This year, each North American Lutheran Church executive staff member has written a portion of the Lenten devotions, ending with Bishop Dan Selbo preparing the devotions for Holy Week and Easter.

The Rev. Dr. Daniel Selbo
Bishop

The Rev. Phillip Gagnon, STS
Assistant to the Bishop for Domestic Mission & Discipleship

The Rev. Andrew Ames Fuller
Director of Communications

The Rev. Dr. Eric Riesen
President, North American Lutheran Seminary

The Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba
Assistant to the Bishop for Missions

The Rev. Dr. David Wendel
Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry & Ecumenism

The Rev. Mark Chavez
General Secretary

February 17, 2021 | Ash Wednesday

Janani Luwum, Archbishop of Uganda and Martyr, 1977

Jonah 3:1-4:11; Hebrews 12:1-14; Luke 18:9-14; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{18:9} He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

– Luke 18:9-14



It is often said that Ash Wednesday is the threshold over which we step into the season of Lent. In generations past, it seemed Christians knew more about what they were stepping into! Today, society as a whole pays no attention to Ash Wednesday and Lent and this inattention is reflected in the lives of many Christians as well. Ash Wednesday may be even more neglected this year, given the pandemic and the reality that many are still not worshipping “in-person.” Some congregations are not offering Ash Wednesday services so that many Lutherans may slip past Ash Wednesday without realizing it.

Sadly, this distancing from the rhyme and rhythm of the church year may keep us from hearing again that stark, solemn reminder, spoken to Adam by the Lord God, “you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19). Normally, these words call us to repentance and return during Lent, as we come face to face with the shortness and frailty of human life. However, the reading above serves the same purpose, as Jesus tells a parable about men who “trusted in themselves” and treated others with contempt. He contrasts those with the tax collector who knows himself to be a sinner, unwilling to even lift his eyes to heaven, praying simply, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Ash Wednesday (and Lent) are about coming to grips with our own sinfulness, realizing and acknowledging that we cannot justify or trust in ourselves, so that we turn, anew, to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who died and was raised for us — that we might be forgiven, saved and redeemed by God’s grace. The journey of Lent is intended to create and renew in us a “broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17), humility in the presence of God and others which causes us to see our need for a Savior, yield to Him as our Lord and God — responding by loving and serving our neighbor. In this sense, Ash Wednesday and Lent are a re-orientation of our hearts and lives as our eyes are turned, once again, away from the many things, toward the one thing which is needful, Jesus Christ (John 10:42)!

May Ash Wednesday and Lent find us humbly sitting at the feet of Jesus by way of these brief daily devotions, with renewed focus on our Savior and Lord!

Prayer: God, be merciful to me, a sinner!

Lenten Response: Make the sign of the cross on your forehead as a remembrance.

February 18, 2021 | Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Martin Luther, Renewer of the Church, 1546

Deuteronomy 7:6-11; Titus 1:1-16; John 1:29-34; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{1:29}The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ³⁰This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³²And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

– John 1:29-34



As we hear John the Baptizer point to Jesus and acknowledge Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” I can’t help but hear the beautiful Communion hymn, known in Latin as the *Agnus Dei* (which is translated “Lamb of God”), sung after the Lord’s Prayer in our liturgy. This hymn became part of the Eucharistic liturgy about 700 A.D. when Pope Sergius I introduced it as a devotional hymn, first sung by the choir during the Fraction. Through the years, it has as often as not been sung as a congregational hymn, although in many of the great “musical Masses” of Mozart, Haydn, Gounod, and others, it is included as one of their five choral Mass texts: Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus and *Agnus Dei*.

Although the words in the reading above come from John the Baptizer, they also reflect the many times in the book of Revelation when Christ is referred to as the Lamb. This hymn reminds us of the connection between the Passover and Easter, which explains the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

According to Exodus 12, when the Israelites were about to be delivered from slavery in Egypt, God commanded each household to select a lamb without blemish, to kill it in sacrifice, and to put its blood on the lintels and doorposts of the house. When the firstborn in Egypt were slain, the angel of death would “pass-over” the homes marked with the sacrificial lamb’s blood. Under the new covenant, Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb whose blood delivers us from our bondage to sin and death. When we sing this hymn to the Lamb of God, we proclaim that in His sacrifice is our salvation, and we prepare to receive His body and blood for our forgiveness.

We hope and pray that our congregations and pastors have found ways to provide the Lord’s Supper to the faithful in spite of the pandemic. Still, throughout these unusual times we have found ourselves hungering for Word and Sacrament, when we, with John, witness the Lamb of God who is the Son of God — in our midst, with us always!

Prayer: Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, take away my sin! Amen.

Lenten Response: Search this link reformation500.csl.edu/luther-predigt-lc-wb to see Martin Luther pointing to Christ as Lamb of God in his preaching.

Friday after Ash Wednesday | February 19, 2021

Deuteronomy 7:12-16; Titus 2:1-15; John 1:35-42; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{1:35}The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So, they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴²He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

– John 1:35-42

What does it mean to be a church “member?” For years, church membership was thought of as being a member of an organization, not unlike being a member of the Lion’s Club or Elk’s Club or German/American Club! This understanding seemed to go hand-in-glove with the organizational or corporate structure of the church post-World War II, when church councils took on the trappings of boards of directors. To be a “member” of the church meant signing on the dotted line, receiving a box of offering envelopes and maintaining, at the least, the minimum required attendance and giving to remain a voting member or member-in-good-standing. What was lost in many ways was the biblical understanding of being a disciple and follower of Jesus!

In the North American Lutheran Church, there is a decided movement away from thinking of the Church as an organizational, institutional social entity, to hear again Jesus’ call for us to come and see, come and follow Him! In the biblical sense, to be a “member” of the Church means to be a living, functioning member of His Body! “Member” in this way of thinking is not organizational, but organic — as the hand or foot or eye or mouth is a member of one’s physical body. This shift in thinking is not only biblical, it is essential to the renewal of the Church in the world today. Thinking of ourselves only as members of the social club, which is the church, leads to minimum required participation, rather than encouraging full, faithful following of Jesus as Lord.

The season of Lent is an appropriate time for us as individuals and as congregations to consider our self-understanding and respond accordingly. Do we see ourselves as part of the community of disciples committed to following Jesus and His will and His way? Or are we stuck in old patterns of church and church membership which are leading to decline and decay, rather than exciting, dynamic, **living** faith and discipleship? Without turning this devotion into an advertisement, the NALC Life-to-Life Discipleship Initiative is one way that we are being renewed as disciples and followers of Jesus, the Messiah.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, make me a living, active disciple and follower! Amen.

Lenten Response: Do some research to become familiar with Life-to-Life Discipleship, the CREDO Initiative — and our commitment to the Great Commission! Visit nalclifetolife.org.

February 20, 2021 | Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Rasmus Jensen, First Lutheran Pastor in North America, 1620

Deuteronomy 7:17-26; Titus 3:1-15; John 1:43-51; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{3:1} Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. ³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸ The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. ⁹ But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. ¹⁰ As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. ¹² When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, for I have decided to spend the winter there. ¹³ Do your best to speed Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way; see that they lack nothing. ¹⁴ And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful. ¹⁵ All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.

– Titus 3:1-15



After reading just yesterday about Jesus' call for us to be disciples and followers, in our reading from Titus, St. Paul describes in practical terms what this looks like. Paul begins this short epistle with instructions, through Titus, for “elders/overseers/bishops” who “must have a firm grasp of the word ... able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9 NRSV). Paul then encourages Titus to also “teach what is consistent with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1) with instructions for all — older and younger, men and women, and yes, slaves, for “He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” (Titus 2:14 NRSV) Paul goes on in our reading today explaining the Christian life.

Because God, our Savior, saved us, Paul writes, not because of our works but because of His own mercy, we who believe in God may now devote ourselves to good works. We are now free for good works! We are free from foolish controversies, dissensions and quarrels about the law, as we now learn to devote ourselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, not being unfruitful. And what are the greatest of good works? To love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as our self. In this time of pandemic which has caused isolation, loneliness and financial strain, let us focus mercifully and fruitfully on our neighbor in need.

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior — and for freedom for good works! Amen.

Lenten Response: Do a good deed today — help one person in need!

The First Sunday in Lent | February 21, 2021

Jeremiah 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Mark 2:18-22; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{1:25} For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

– 1 Corinthians 1:25-31



One of my favorite little books is entitled *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. The author is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. In this work he gets to the heart of the biblical notion of wisdom: “In the biblical view, the wise are righteous and the righteous are wise: these are people who love and fear God, affirm God’s world, live gladly within its borders, and make music according to divine time and key signatures.”

Note that musical metaphor. The wise are those who, “make music according to the divine time and key signatures.” Jesus is “the wisdom of God.” He is Sophia — the Greek word for wisdom — incarnate. He lived His life in accord with the “divine time and key signatures.” The song of His life was in harmony with the divine Triad. Unfortunately, many did not want to hear it then, and many still don’t want to hear it today. Jesus simply does not harmonize with the off-key cacophony the world so often sings.

Apart from God’s grace, the song of our lives is always off-key. The folly is that so many have lost an ear to God’s timing and really believe that their solo must take center stage. So, they boastfully croon, “I did it my way.” We’ve all done it “our way” and it’s always off-key and out of time.

There is, however, good news, even for singers who can’t hold a tune. God, through the Holy Spirit, loves to teach us to sing a new song which is in harmony with the divine melody. And the Spirit doesn’t always choose those who have ability. Rather, he takes “tin-eared” musicians and makes them part of the chorus.

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.”

In other words, God chose off-key voices, who couldn’t keep time, to sing in His choir. So, when we find ourselves singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19); then we know that we are beginning to harmonize our lives with God’s symphony. This is wisdom.

Prayer: Almighty God, we thank You that through our Baptism we are united to the beauty and wisdom of Your triune melody. We ask that You would fill us anew with Your Holy Spirit and teach us to sing a song that glorifies You. In the name of the divine Triad: the Father, the Son+ and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lenten Response: This Lent we are encouraged to think and pray about the things in our lives that are out of tune with the divine melody. How is the Holy Spirit inviting you to sing a new song?

February 22, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Lent I

Deuteronomy 8:1-20; Hebrews 2:11-18; John 2:1-12; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{2:1} On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there ... ³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So, they took it. ⁹ When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."

– John 2:1-12

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The Bible is sometimes misunderstood as a book of rules — a divine list of dos and don'ts. Admittedly, there are rules in the Bible. The ancient Israelites were commanded to keep the "rules and statutes" of the Lord their God. They were to be a peculiar people. They were not to follow the rules and cultural mores of the nations and people around them.

Yet, it would be a great mistake to think of the Bible as primarily a divine rulebook. The Bible is first and foremost a book about relationships, not rules. The unique thing about the biblical God is that He enters into covenant with a particular people in order to teach them to live in relationship with Him. Ultimately, God wants loving relationships, not rigid rule keepers.

Jesus was not fastidious about keeping the biblical rules of the Law. He ate and drank with sinners and didn't scrupulously observe the Sabbath. He rubbed shoulders with the unclean and this drove the religious legalists crazy. It could even be said that Jesus was unbiblical — at least as concerned the letter of the law. Jesus probed the depths of the spirit of the law. Mary knew this about her Son. She knew this because she lived in relationship with Him. She had mysteriously conceived Him in her womb, nursed Him as an infant, remembered how as a boy He amazed the religious leaders in the temple, and watched Him grow in stature and wisdom. She knew Him and therefore said to the servants at the wedding in Cana: "Do whatever He tells you." Jesus didn't give new rules. He gave new wine.

We Lutherans (as opposed to Martin Luther himself) have unfortunately often forgotten Mother Mary. In our concern that Mary is sometimes given too much devotion, we give her no devotion at all. But she is Jesus' Mother and she knew and loved Him deeply. Since we are Jesus' brothers and sisters, then in some sense she is our mother too. Therefore, we need to listen to her motherly admonition, "Do whatever He tells you."

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank You for the witness of the blessed Virgin Mary. She found favor in Your sight and conceived our Lord and our Brother. As she herself learned to listen to her Son, so teach us always to listen to Him and to do whatever He says. In His holy name we pray. Amen.

Lenten Response: Stop a moment and ask yourself, "What is Jesus asking me to do?"

Tuesday of the Week of Lent I | February 23, 2021

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, Martyr, 156

Deuteronomy 9:1-21; Hebrews 3:1-11; John 2:13-22; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{2:13}The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

– John 2:13-19



Most of us know the First Commandment, "I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me." The commandment begins with an indicative and ends with an imperative. "I am the Lord your God," is a statement of gracious fact. God doesn't wait for us to be good enough before He is "our" God. Rather He comes to us in our sin with the promise that He is the Lord our God. Then He commands, "You shall have no other gods."

Of course, that is exactly our greatest problem. We like to have other gods. This does not necessarily mean that we worship little statues set up in the family room, but it does mean that we have "things or people" that we idolize. Most especially, the three culprits we idolize are related to money, sex and power. The whole misbegotten history of man is the story of making an unholy trinity of these things.

When Jesus gets ticked off it's important to pay attention. When He makes a whip and hits people with it and turns over tables and scatters money on the ground, He does so for a reason. The moneychangers and their religious cohorts were using the temple (using God!) as a means to an end — to make money. Money was idolized.

Let's not be too hard on these religious entrepreneurs or seem overly shocked by such behavior. Money is a powerful force and few of us are ever free from its allure. Jesus called it "mammon" and some think that He is referencing a pagan god. A god who wants our devotion, our love, our obedience and our wallets. There's only one way to make sure that we are free from the idol of mammon — give it away and be free.

Not all of us can or should give everything we own away so that we can live under a bridge in bliss. Having less money does not mean that we love money less. But all Christians are called to give sacrificially. This is the one way to say, "Money will not be my god!"

"You shall have no other gods." Come to think of it, that's not only a command, it's also a promise. God will set us free from the gods who enslave us. Even His anger is good for us.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, free us from our insecurity and fear of poverty. Enable us to give freely so that we, with empty hands, may receive from You, the God of all true riches, that which will endure forever through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: Lent is a time for almsgiving. Where might God be asking you to give sacrificially?

February 24, 2021 | Wednesday of the Week of Lent I

ST. MATTHIAS, APOSTLE

Deuteronomy 9:13-21; Hebrews 3:12-19; John 2:23-3:15; Psalms 15 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{2:23} Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. ^{3:1} Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

– John 2:23-3:3



When Moses came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the Law he was shocked, disappointed, and angered by what he saw. It had not occurred to him that his people who had just been freed from bondage would so quickly turn back to idolatry. The infamous story of the “golden calf” reveals not only what was in those former slaves escaped from Egypt – it reveals what is in all of us. This is why Jesus did not entrust Himself to His admirers. He knew what was deep within them — within all of us. The Lenten hymn, “Ah Holy Jesus” gets right to the human heart of the matter: *Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. ‘Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.*”

It’s not only a long time ago on a hill far away that we crucified Him, but in every thought, word and deed today that crucifies the life of God in the world. What is truly within us is revealed by the myriads of the unborn who will never know love, the abuse of the weak, lust for power and pleasure, the callous words that pierce, cold-hearted apathy and indifference, and every other dark thing of which we are capable.

Martin Luther famously said that a human being is, “curved in on himself” (*incurvatus in se*). We want a god who will do our bidding so that “our will be done on earth as in heaven.” This is what is within us until we are born from above. Until the gentle Spirit moves like a wind and turns us “inside out and around” so that we can begin to see God — and our neighbor. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again. All of us must be born again.

Baptism is the sacrament of this new birth. The danger is that we let our Baptism lie abandoned like a discarded shoe — a worthless piece of old leather. But Baptism is the most precious gift we possess. Within our Baptism lies the promise and power of new birth, cleansing of sin, raising to a new life, and the light to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Prayer: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son+ and of the Holy Spirit. This day I remember and renew the covenant of my Baptism. Cleanse me, O God, from my sin, wash me from my iniquity, create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. Open the eyes of my heart that I may see You and my neighbor. Never let me crucify Your life in the world. In the name, and for the sake of, Jesus my Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: For the rest of Lent, each morning when you get up, make the sign of the cross in remembrance of your Baptism. Remember who, and Whose, you are.

February 25, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Lent I

Elizabeth Fedde, 1921; Emma Francis, 1945; Deaconesses

Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5; Hebrews 4:1-10; John 3:16-21; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{4:9} So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

– Hebrews 4:9

^{3:16} “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

– John 3:16-17



What keeps you up at night? Do you ever toss and turn because your mind is racing from one concern to the next? I'm reminded of the old Scottish children's rhyme about being kept awake by “ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties and things that go bump in the night.” Martin Luther was a man who often struggled with what he called “Anfechtungen.” These were “assaults” and condemnations that came against him and left him restless both spiritually and physically. We also know what it's like to lie awake under the word of condemnation. Unable to sleep because our noses are rubbed into every failure, regret, sin, embarrassment, criticism, grief or worry which continue to plague us.

Rest is a gift, and a necessity. We need rest for our mental, spiritual and physical health. Yet, when I can't sleep, I personally find it impossible to “will” myself to do so. This is the reason melatonin and other “sleep aids” are so common. The Bible tells us that even God rested after the labor of creating the universe (Genesis 2:3). I don't know for certain what to make of that. Is this telling us something about God or about we who are created in His image? Or both?

Evidently, incessant, unrelenting and unceasing activity is not an attribute of the inner, triune life of God. On the contrary, it is the devil who is ceaselessly active. The great psychologist Carl Jung once said, “Hurry isn't of the devil. It is the devil.” This is why God commanded the Sabbath. God gave the Sabbath to us as a gift. “The Sabbath was made for man” says our Lord (Mark 2:27). The Book of Hebrews says that faith is the means by which we enter God's sabbath rest. Faith is not work, but rest. And the works of faith are not feverishly done to earn merit before a stern Master. The works of faith are restful, joyful, peaceful, graceful and filled with love.

Dear friends, in order to rest we need to hear the Gospel again and again: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Prayer: O God of goodness and grace, You gave Your Son so that I could be free of condemnation. Help me to rest in the certainty of Your love and mercy. Amen.

Lenten Response: This Lent take some time to slow down and rest. Prayerfully repeat, “God did not send Jesus to condemn me, but to save me.” Take time, take a walk, take a break and let Jesus save you from hurry, worry and “ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties and everything that goes bump in the night.”

Friday of the Week of Lent I | February 26, 2021

Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, Missionary to India, 1719

Florence Li Tim-Oi, First Female Priest in the Anglican Communion, 1944

Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Hebrews 4:11-16; John 3:22-36; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{4:11} Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

– Hebrews 4:11-12



Yesterday we thought about the gift of Sabbath rest. The writer of the Book of Hebrews continues with this theme and says something curious: “Strive to enter that rest.” This seems a bit paradoxical. Striving seems to be the opposite of resting. How do we strive to rest? The writer continues by adding that we are to strive so that, “no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Note the stark contrast between the exhortation for us to rest and the robust activity of God’s Word. God’s Word is “active” (in Greek *energes*). We get the English word “energy” and “energetic” from the Greek. So, if we think of disobedience as an unrestful, fast-paced life in which we’re too busy to listen to God, then we begin to understand what this verse is saying. We enter the rest for which we strive by listening to God’s Word and letting God’s Word energize our lives.

Every day we are bombarded with words and messages. These words come at us externally from the news and our neighbors, but also internally from the thoughts of our hearts. It is of utmost importance that we separate the words that are from God and the words that are not. The writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us to strive to listen to God and to rest in what He says.

John the Baptist bore witness, pointed to Jesus, and said. “He whom God has sent utters the words of God” (John 3:34). I think that it is incredibly instructive to note that God the Father only directly speaks twice in the New Testament. The Father speaks at Jesus’ Baptism and at the Transfiguration. Basically, the Father says the same thing, “This is my Son, listen to Him!” By the way, this is not a nice suggestion. It is a commandment.

We’re all restless and anxious about so many things. These words often rob us of rest. There is a Word that brings comfort, peace, and rest. The Word is Jesus Christ. Strive to listen to Him!

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You are the eternal Word of God. Give me strength always to strive to listen to You and to do what You command. In your Holy Name. Amen.

Lenten Response: Lent is a time in which we strive to discipline our devotional lives. The church often offers mid-week Lenten services and provides materials for daily Bible readings and meditation. This is a good time for us to begin to practice a daily routine of listening to God’s Word. Nothing is more important than hearing and heeding the Word of God.

February 27, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Lent I

Deuteronomy 11:18-28; Hebrews 5:1-10; John 4:1-26; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{5:1} So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar ... ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well ... ⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ... ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" ... ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

– John 5:1-10

One of the reasons that I deeply appreciate the Lutheran theological tradition is that it boldly faces the fact that we are all broken and imperfect people. I am an imperfect man writing to imperfect people. The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds his readers that the high priest who served in the temple in Jerusalem could, "deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness." As a pastor, I often have the opportunity to put this advice into practice. When I hear a confession, I always remember that I am a sinner hearing the contrition of another sinner. We're in this together.

Jesus was not a sinner. He faithfully walked the fine line and avoided both unrighteousness and self-righteousness. He lived a fully righteous life, but was incredibly kind to the "ignorant and wayward" (Hebrews 5:2). Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. She had everything against her: 1) She was a Samaritan — so had her theology wrong. 2) She worshipped at the wrong temple. 3) She was a woman, and in the ancient world this was against her. 4) She was divorced five times. 5) She was unmarried and living with a man — so was both an adulterer and a fornicator. In short, she was wayward.

Given all this, Jesus still says to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Please do not misunderstand. Jesus is not being "soft on sin." To use an overused phrase. Jesus simply loves the sinner – not the sin. He will give to anyone who asks. He is not stingy or withholding of the divine gift of living water. Nor does He wait until we are "good enough" before He gives. He gives freely to sinners who ask. That's very good news for us!

Never think that you must get your life in order before you can receive the gifts of God. Or, that God won't give until you've cleaned yourself up. Ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit now. Worship "in spirit and truth" with the Samaritan woman and all other sinners. I've no doubt that this Samaritan woman's life was changed by her "chance" encounter with Jesus at the well.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ Jesus; come and fill me with the water of life. Cleanse me from my sin, free me from guilt and shame, and enable me to worship You in spirit and truth. In the name of the Father, and of the Son+ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lenten Response: Lent is a time in which we intentionally reflect upon our lives and take stock of our own ignorance and waywardness. Are there sins which you think make you unworthy to receive forgiveness? Listen to Jesus, if we ask, He will give us living water. Not because we are good, but because He is good. He is the fountain of all goodness, truth and life.

The Second Sunday in Lent | February 28, 2021

Jeremiah 1:1-10; 1 Corinthians 3:11-23; Mark 3:31-4:9; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{1:6} Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” ⁷ But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.” ⁹ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

– Jeremiah 1:6-10

^{3:16} Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. ¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.

– 1 Corinthians 3:16-19



Today on the Second Sunday in Lent, we are presented with several passages regarding the Lord as the source of all holiness and wisdom. In Jeremiah, we see the “weeping prophet” appointed by the Lord, without any consulting of Jeremiah. This divine involvement in Jeremiah’s life should not trouble us who believe in God’s sovereignty, as the Scriptures clearly teach that God has the right as Creator to do whatever He desires with our lives (cf. Num. 8:19; John 3:16). At the same time, He has allowed us the freedom of choice from the very beginning (Gen. 2:16–17). Here, Jeremiah recognizes that God has tasked him with this calling from the time He formed him in the womb.

However, Jeremiah’s response to this responsibility and call was to offer excuses. We have seen this before from those who have been called by God: like Moses, Jeremiah feels inadequate as a public speaker (Exod. 4:10); like Solomon, Jeremiah cites his youth and immaturity as justification to avoid the call (1 Kings 3:7). Although his age is uncertain, biblical scholars suggest that Jeremiah was not quite twenty years old at this moment (i.e., he is a teenager)!

And yet, the Lord reminds Jeremiah that his abilities or age are of no consequence, for God will give him His authority and wisdom. In fact, in our New Testament reading, Paul says something very similar. Where does wisdom come from? Not from age, and not from any human constructs of knowledge. No, instead, wisdom comes only from the Lord, and it comes to those who are united to Him in humility, submission and holiness. Perhaps Jeremiah’s young age and meekness actually help him in this case. God’s very Spirit of wisdom dwells in His holy temple and, as Paul excitingly reveals to us, through our Baptism and participation in Christ’s life, death and resurrection, that holy temple is us!

Prayer: Almighty God, help us to call on You for wisdom and discernment in this age. Like Jeremiah, may our perceived faults and lack of ability be openings for Your true calling and purposes in our lives, so that the words from our mouths be none other than Your true Word. Amen.

Lenten Response: Confess any moments of unbelief, skepticism or condescension in hearing the prophetic Word of God, simply due to a human characteristic of the one who has proclaimed it.

March 1, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Lent II

George Herbert, Priest, 1633

David, Bishop of Menevia, Wales, c. 544

Jeremiah 1:11-19; Romans 1:1-15; John 4:27-42; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{1:11} And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond branch.”¹² Then the Lord said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.”¹³ The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.”¹⁴ Then the Lord said to me, “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land ...”¹⁹ They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.”

– Jeremiah 1:11-19

Following Jeremiah’s calling from the Lord, we read that he received two visions — a way of confirming and reinforcing his call. The first vision was of a branch of an almond tree (ṣṣ/shaqed). In a play on words (cf. Amos 8:1-2) God said he was “watching” (v. 12, ṣṣ/shoqed) in order that His word would be fulfilled. The almond tree was called the “awake” tree because it blossoms early in the spring while other trees remain dormant. The purpose of this first vision was to warn that God’s pronouncements of judgment through earlier prophets had not been forgotten. Whenever Jeremiah and the people of Judah saw the almond tree, they were to remember that their God was watching them (5:6; 31:28). However, this vision also is interpreted as a message of encouragement to Judah that God was not unaware of the wickedness of other nations. They would be punished.

In the second vision, Jeremiah saw a boiling pot, either a cooking pot or washpot. This was an object Jeremiah had seen many times, but now he saw it in a new way — as a symbol of imminent judgment. The pot tilted toward the south with its liquid contents about to boil over. The impending disaster on Judah (the southern kingdom) is compared to the spilling of the contents of a boiling pot, which would scald the people of Judah. The meaning of the vision is unmistakable. It pictures the certainty of God’s judgment that was going to come on Jerusalem by an enemy invasion from the north; and, thus, the urgency of Jeremiah’s message. Unfortunately, the people of Judah would scoff at Jeremiah’s warnings of danger, as they knew that the Assyrian power was coming to end with the death of its last great monarch, Ashurbanipal. While it was indeed the Assyrians that had conquered Israel (the northern kingdom) years before, the scoffing people of Judah were not aware that their destruction would instead be inflicted by the Babylonians, fulfilling God’s judgment.

In that day Jerusalem’s inhabitants would ask God why the calamity had happened. He would answer by reminding them of their faithlessness in worshiping other gods, giving their hope and protection to peoples, rulers and items other than the Lord. Together the two visions mean that the Lord was watching over His word of threatened punishment to carry it out. That punishment would be inflicted at the hands of an enemy coming from the north. The impending calamity on Judah would not be due to economic or political factors but was theological and moral.

Every generation faces a similar challenge to trust in God for its security rather than in “gods” of its own making. As Walter Brueggemann explains: “It is a recurring temptation for every concentration of power to imagine itself self-sufficient and therefore free to order its life for its own purposes without the requirements of YHWH.” As it has been noted by many, this judgment is given to God’s own people. We should be wary of this as the evangelical church in North America during this third millennium as we, too, are tempted to follow false idols claiming to give us security and hope. The good news, though, is found in verse 19: “they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.”

Prayer: Almighty God, You who never ceases to watch over Your people, save us from our false idols and turn our hearts toward the worship of You. Amen.

Lenten Response: Reflect, discern, and repent of any false idols in your life by asking the question: What am I counting on to bring me security or safety, comfort or peace, value or worth, prosperity or immortality that cannot actually deliver on that promise?

Tuesday of the Week of Lent II | March 2, 2021

John Wesley, 1791; Charles Wesley, 1788; Renewers of the Church

Chad, Bishop of Lichfield, 672

Jeremiah 2:1-13, 29-32; Romans 1:16-25; John 4:43-54; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{2:29}“Why do you contend with me? You have all transgressed against me, declares the Lord. ³⁰ In vain have I struck your children; they took no correction; your own sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion. ³¹ And you, O generation, behold the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, ‘We are free, we will come no more to you?’ ³² Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number.

– Jeremiah 2:29-32



The season of Lent is a time of penitence in the wilderness, and it is no coincidence that these passages cause us to reflect on our own lives in acts of confession. Yesterday’s passage from Jeremiah was a hard word, but today’s might be even harder. The Lord describes the days past to Israel, His people: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest” (vv. 2–3). This warm nostalgia turns to sadness, as the Lord laments over the current situation: “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? ... And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. ... Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds [or rulers] transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit” (vv. 5–8). The people of God have taken the blessings and provisions given to them, and then rejected the Giver; they have covenanted to follow the Way of the Law, but then scorned its use. This is a dreary picture, indeed, one of which the Lord does not mince words: “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate” (vv. 11–12).

Ultimately, the Lord will declare, “You have all transgressed against me” (v. 29). Notice here that this is not directed toward the other nations, those who do not know the Lord. This is directed towards God’s own people, those of His covenant, protection, and promise: “Why then do my people say, ‘We are free, we will come no more to you?’ Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number” (vv. 32–33). We are not left with hope at the end of this passage, but in today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, we receive the parallel news, and it is good news indeed! While Paul, too, warns us against idolatry, of “worship[ing] and serv[ing] a creature rather than the Creator” (v. 23), he gives us the good news that our hope, our righteousness, our true salvation is found in God — and it is revealed and given to us by faith. It is no wonder that our Gospel passage from John shows us the wonderful consequence of faith: here, the official “believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way” (v. 50), and this very Word brings life.

Prayer: Almighty God who gives us unfaltering faith, never allow us to forget You, that through Your new life gifted to us, we may dwell in You and You in us for all of eternity. Amen.

Lenten Response: Pray for your generation and the generations to come, that all might continue to come to the Lord their God.

March 3, 2021 | Wednesday of the Week of Lent II

Jeremiah 3:6-18; Romans 1:26-2:1; John 5:1-18; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{3:10} Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.” ¹¹ And the Lord said to me, “Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.”

– Jeremiah 3:10-11

As we continue in Jeremiah, we read a passage about fidelity, adultery, divorce and repeated mistakes — not between a married earthly couple, but between the Lord and His chosen bride. The passage begins by mentioning the reign of Josiah, the 16th king of Judah, whose story can be found in 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35. The Scriptures refer to Josiah as a righteous king, a king who “walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2; 2 Chron. 34:2). Josiah also instituted major religious reforms, established or compiled important Hebrew Scriptures, and began restoration and repair of the temple. However, Josiah’s sons Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (Mattaniah) all disregard his reforms, doing “evil in the sight of the Lord” during their reigns as king (all of which end traumatically). Ultimately, Zedekiah becomes the last king of Judah in the line of David, and like Israel, the kingdom of Judah is destroyed and brought into captivity. Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple are plundered and destroyed by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II.

This background context is important as we look at this passage in Jeremiah. Here, during the reign of the righteous king Josiah, Jeremiah quotes from the Lord, who looks at Israel’s (the northern kingdom) idolatry and faithlessness and calls it “adultery” and “whoredom.” The Lord then issues Israel a certificate of divorce and “sends her away” because of all her adulteries with “stone and tree” — idols of other gods and rulers. The people of Israel are conquered by and deported to Assyria for their sin and wickedness. But we find an even harder word in verses 10-11: “Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.’”

King Josiah was a good ruler, and he earnestly attempted to turn the people of Judah away from the wicked practices of his grandfather Manasseh. We see a taste of these practices in our Romans reading from today, as well. Although he ordered the people to destroy all the pagan high places and to stop worshiping other gods (2 Kings 23:4-25), he could not change their hearts. Instead of fearing the same fate as Israel, Judah committed the same kind of adultery with false idols. And because the temple was in Jerusalem, Judah thought that the destruction that happened to Israel could not possibly happen to them. How could God declare that “faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah” as they had both engaged in the same forbidden religious practices? The answer is that Israel had no prior example to serve as a warning. Judah had the benefit of seeing what had happened to Israel but chose to ignore the warnings. Thus, their guilt was greater. Knowledge of history is an insufficient antidote to repeating it.

But then, the passage shifts. In the final verses, we see the Lord use Jeremiah to tell His people, His bride: “Return!” The Lord assures them: “I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful ... I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God ... for I am your master ... and I will bring you to Zion.” Although the temple will be destroyed, Israel and Judah will be in captivity, and Zedekiah will be the last king to rule in succession of the house of David, the Lord will send a Good Shepherd, a King of kings from the house of David, one who will rebuild the temple and call all nations (including Israel and Judah) back to His throne in a new Jerusalem.

Prayer: Merciful Father, who gives undeserved grace to all who turn to Him, do not cast us away, but restore righteousness in our hearts and grant that we may truly return to You. Amen.

Lenten Response: Assess where there might be repeated sin and wickedness in your own life, perhaps recurring from your ancestors. Renounce and repent of it.

March 4, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Lent II

Jeremiah 4:9-10, 19-28; Romans 2:12-24; John 5:19-29; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{4:9} “In that day, declares the Lord, courage shall fail both king and officials. The priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded.” ¹⁰ Then I said, “Ah, Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life.”

– Jeremiah 4:9-10

There is a reason that Jeremiah is called the “weeping prophet.” In chapter 4, the alarm has been sounded, the shōfar (trumpet) has been blown, the approaching danger of destruction and desolation is urgent, and Jeremiah tells the people of Judah that it is time to put on sackcloth for mourning. As we read elsewhere in the Scriptures (2 Sam. 3:31; 2 Kings 19:1; Lam. 2:10), periods of mourning and lament are marked by the wearing of sackcloth and the use of ashes, particularly on the forehead. When we enter into the season of Lent, a season of repentance, confession and lament, we begin by placing ashes on our foreheads during Ash Wednesday. Jeremiah’s lamenting and wailing for the Lord’s judgment should be on our minds throughout this season. Instead, as Jeremiah sadly prophesies, all of the leaders who were leading the people astray — including the king, officials, priests and prophets — would be overcome with terror and helplessness at the sight of the destruction. And while to some, the invasion would look like one motivated by political and military considerations involving the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah makes it clear that it was God’s fierce anger that was the real cause of the coming destruction.

Why did the leaders — even the spiritual ones — not heed Jeremiah’s word from the Lord? Jeremiah told the people to go ahead and start mourning because the outcome was certain, and yet, the people were shocked when the destruction actually happened as Jeremiah prophesied. Verse 10 gives us insight into this. Did the Lord actually deceive the people of Judah about His judgment? The answer is obviously no, as we read so many prophets in the Scriptures warning the people of the imminent destruction. As we see often in Jeremiah, the people are often deceived by false prophets, claiming to speak on behalf of the Lord. These false prophets had often assured the people that everything was all right, saying, “All will be well with you,” or “Peace will be with you” (see 6:14; 8:11; 29:8). Unfortunately, the people listened to them.

Jeremiah then gives an agonizing response, with verse 19-22 often called the “cross of Jeremiah” because they reveal his personal anguish for having to announce the doom of his people. It is certainly a burden to prophesy on behalf of the Lord, and Jeremiah takes up this cross because of his love for his people (18:20). Jeremiah prophesies about the aftermath of the Lord’s judgment, and it is a bleak image, indeed — one of devastation and ruin. The words parallel Genesis 1, with destruction as the opposite of creation. The people respond by accusing him of treason for his harsh messages of condemnation.

In today’s landscape, we, too, are fraught with “prophets” and other leaders who speak deceptive words of peace and prosperity in our ears. They tell us who will win elections, and they give us a false sense of security, telling us that we have a special relationship with the Lord that places His judgment outside of us — to those wicked people “out there.” But Paul’s words in Romans assure us that even the people of God can be foolish. Even *we* can be God’s chosen people and not follow His ways. *Our* sin will be judged, too. Thankfully, however, as we read in John, the One who has the authority to judge also is the One to resurrect us out of the ashes, to give us new life, to be the Word of the Lord who speaks peace into our world. And He invites us into a relationship with Him — an invitation that has no need of weeping, wailing or lament.

Prayer: Almighty Father, help us to hear and see the truths You are revealing to us, that we may not be deceived by any other promises of peace than those from Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: Grief and loss are familiar in these days. Pain, injustice and suffering are knocking at our doors in ways we cannot ignore. The Scriptures show us a way to meet this deep pain and suffering through the practice of lament. Pray aloud a psalm of lament (e.g. 3, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 28, 31-32, 35, 42-43, 51, 52, 54). Allow these prayers to become your own.

Friday of the Week of Lent II | March 5, 2021

Jeremiah 5:1-9; Romans 2:25-3:18; John 5:30-47; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{5:1} Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her. ² Though they say, “As the Lord lives,” yet they swear falsely ... ⁴ Then I said, “These are only the poor; they have no sense; for they do not know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. ⁵ I will go to the great and will speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God.” ... ⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord; and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?

– Jeremiah 5:1-9

In chapter 5, we see Jeremiah’s dramatic and vain search to find a righteous person in Jerusalem. In a similar manner to the Lord’s agreement with Abraham in Genesis 18:22-23, here He offers to spare the city if a single upright person could be found there — just one. However, in Abraham’s story with Sodom, it is Abraham doing the pleading, and the agreed-upon number is 10 people. In this case, it is the Lord doing the offering — in order to prove to Jeremiah the hopeless moral condition of the city — and the number is only one person. Commentators have noted that this episode is a way of the Lord stating that Jerusalem must have been ten times more immoral in Jeremiah’s time than Sodom was in Abraham’s time, a sobering prospect to be sure.

And so, Jeremiah begins earnestly searching across the city: just one person is all he needed to find. Surely, he would find piety and integrity among the poor — those who live simply and humbly — so he goes to them first. Instead, he finds them faithless, and attributes this to their lack of education and formation in spiritual matters. Jeremiah then turns to the leaders, the “great ones.” They were certainly educated, knew the law, and had a sense of responsibility and devotion as leaders of God’s people. To his dismay, they too rebelled against the Lord. Just as Wednesday’s devotion discussed how Judah’s sin was worse than Israel’s, here the sin of the leaders who were educated and formed in the ways of the Lord (and therefore should know better), but still reject Him, are greater than the sin of the poor who never learned His ways. Jeremiah does not find the one he is looking for, and whether poor or great, judgment was inevitable for such a people. The lion, wolf, and leopard — references to either foreign nations or rulers — were coming as God’s instruments of judgment and punishment.

The Lord then asks, “How can I forgive [them]?” He then lists their ingratitude for all He has done for them. The two main transgressions, according to the Lord, are these: (1) the people give credit to false gods for God’s abundant provision for their needs (see Hos. 2:5, 8); as one interpreter notes, “Affluence often results in arrogant self-sufficiency and immoral conduct rather than in humble gratitude and submission”; and (2) the people are rife with sexual promiscuity, both in figurative (faithlessness to God) and literal (actual carnality among the people) ways; the reference to the men as “well-fed lusty horses” eager to commit adultery with other men’s wives is some of the strongest uses of language of gross carnality found in the Old Testament (see Ez. 23:29). It is no coincidence that God justifies His right to punish such a “nation” (גוֹי; a word usually reserved for the ungodly Gentile nations other than Israel).

In our Romans reading today, we are confronted with the reality that the Lord is showing to Jeremiah: “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’” (Rom. 3:9-12). This is a hard word, but an honest confession that we constantly choose to believe in ourselves and our own benefits, and not the promises of the Lord. Even though He promises judgment, God also gives us a great promise: He has sent someone to bring His voice, His love, His light and His life (John 5:30-47).

Prayer: Almighty Father, reveal to us our unrighteousness, that we may confess our transgressions against You, seek after You, and receive Your promises. Amen.

Lenten Response: Just as the Lord lists His transgressions, contemplate how you, your community, your neighborhood, and perhaps even your nation, have sinned in these ways. Have you shown ingratitude towards the Lord’s provisions and blessings, perhaps even attributing them to someone or something else instead of in humble gratitude and submission. Have you had moments of faithlessness to God, putting your hope and trust in an idol? How have we collectively done these things as the Church? Confess these and cling to Jesus.

March 6, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Lent II

Jeremiah 5:20-31; Romans 3:19-31; John 7:1-13; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{3:21} But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

– Romans 3:21-25

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This has been a hard week walking through the opening chapters of Jeremiah. Here we read once more that the people of Judah — God’s people — do not fear Him. Instead, they are as foolish and senseless (“without heart”) as the lifeless idols they have turned to. Instead of learning from what happened to the Northern Kingdom (Israel), they remain deaf to the warnings of the prophets, following Israel to destruction. As one commentator says, “It seems the only lesson we learn from history is that we learn no lessons from it.” None is righteous, no, not one. Instead of fearing the Lord and trembling in his presence, Judah fears lifeless gods, and they tremble before faithless foreign rulers. Instead of giving credit to God for His blessing and provisions, they give credit to Baal. Instead of listening to the prophets, caring for the poor, giving thanksgiving to God, and remaining faithful to Him, Judah is exploited and oppressed by its own wicked people, failing to meet their responsibilities to any of these.

This is not only astonishing, but “appalling” and “horrible”: prophets, claiming to speak for God, proclaim lies rather than His words; priests, who are to instruct the people in God’s laws, rule by their own authority with the false prophets, and are perhaps even responsible for hiding the Book of the Law from the people (see 2 Kgs. 22:8-23:3). While it may be shocking to us that this has happened even with religious leaders, history has proven that all of us are susceptible to sin; there is always a danger that religious leaders might become insensitive to the demands of God’s Word and substitute their own rules — either through their own moral corruption or from a misdirected desire to win the approval of their constituency. The people do not know the laws or ways of the Lord, and as a result, most astonishing of all is the fact that the people of Judah “love” this kind of leadership (see Amos 4). Wickedness can so sear the conscience that sin has no limit. There was no evil they were incapable of committing for their self-gratification, even at the expense of the fatherless and the needs of the poor. In verse 29, God asks a second time, “Shall I not punish them for these things?”

In Romans 3, Paul speaks to us about the law. Once again, he reminds us that “all [of us] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” recognizing that we are not righteous people and cannot submit to His law in perfection. But Paul says something else: he says that our righteousness — our justification — is found not in ourselves, but *in God*. It is *His* righteousness, found through our redemption in Christ Jesus, that perfects us and makes us righteous, too. This gift is given to us by faith, and it is the blood of Jesus that covers us and makes us whole.

This week (as a week should in the season of Lent) leaves us with a deep longing. We yearn for the wholeness, the life, the mercy, the love that only our Father God can give us. We recognize our own iniquities, we see our lives and our nations in Jeremiah’s account of the fall of Israel and Judah, and we cry out for redemption — for salvation! Here in the season of Lent, Jesus’ “time has not yet come,” but in a few short weeks, it will! Cling to Jesus, friends, the Messiah and Savior who will bring us from death, destruction and despair to that glorious Easter resurrection and the promise of new and eternal life.

Prayer: Loving Father, thank You for clinging to us even in our sin, that we may cling to You in faith and receive Your abundant and great mercies; through Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Lenten Response: While the road ahead will still be difficult, sit today in the hope of the coming resurrection and the gift that the Lord has given us.

The Third Sunday in Lent | March 7, 2021

Perpetua and Her Companions, Martyrs at Carthage, 202

Jeremiah 6:9-15; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; Mark 5:1-20; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{6:10}To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.

– Jeremiah 6:10



Jeremiah’s proclamation of God’s word is clear, “their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen.” Despite God’s warnings, His words of love and comfort, His presence and the sending of His prophets, Israel will not hear Him. I tell this story often of when my wife and I lived in a small town north of Edmonton, called Barrhead. She was a teacher and was getting herself ready for work one morning and was in the washroom. I got up to use the facilities and then went to the sink to find her curling iron in the way. Grabbing it by the barrel, I quickly realized was not the best idea. I exclaimed a grunt of sorts and she said, “Quick, put it under cold water,” and so I placed the curling iron under the water in the sink. Second not great idea of the day. Evidently, I am not very good at mornings. She grabbed the curling iron and said, “No! Your hand, silly!”

I tell this story, one that’s actually true, as I was fond of telling my congregation, unlike the other stories I tell, because it illustrates part of our all too human condition. Sometimes we are not that bright at certain points in our lives, or attentive. Perhaps in our youth — as opposed to when we are older, and hopefully wiser — or in our need to have for the sake of having our own way, or maybe just not paying attention to what is happening and being said — especially in relation to God’s Word. Are we paying attention? Do we listen and reflect upon His love letter to us, the Holy Scriptures that have been given to us as His bride?

Often, I think, in our frail humanity, we obviously do not. Jeremiah speaks of the people not having circumcised ears, ears that are attuned to their Maker and paying attention. In today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark, verse 17 reads, “and they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region”, in response to the Lord’s casting out of the demons, Legion, into the pigs, the unclean into the unclean. But even so, those who came to see the healed man knew that the pigs were a source of money and what if this Jesus did or said something else that threatened their sense of what was ultimately important to them? Better not take that chance, they likely thought.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, help me to have two ears to hear Your word and one mouth to speak of myself. Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you seen the goodness of God at work? How did it challenge your sense of what is important and worthwhile in this life? Are you paying attention?

March 8, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Lent III

Jeremiah 7:1-15; Romans 4:1-12; John 7:14-36; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{7:9} Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord.

– Jeremiah 7:9-11



Reading through the prophets, one cannot help but be struck by the raw and direct words. As we reflect upon Jeremiah's words in this passage they cut to the bone. Part of this condition called original sin, is the tendency, the proclivity, to try and have our own way; when we want it, where we want it, how we want it and what we want. Without the Spirit's leading us and equipping us it is truly difficult to walk the walk of faith.

The Lord in this passage speaks of the Israelites hypocrisy and cheap grace and how it offends Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it this way, "Grace as presupposition is grace at its cheapest; grace as conclusion is costly grace" (*Cost of Discipleship*, p. 51). How often have we approached God in our prayers, or in worship confessing our sins, but knowing within the deepest, almost whispering part of ourselves that we intend on repeating that which we know is wrong and sinful again? It's not a good place to be for it is quite different to be addicted to our sin, whatever it may be, and be sorrowful about it and strive to walk accordingly. There grace attends us, for God knows our frail frame as sinners and loves us nonetheless.

As Luther wrote, (I have this as a daily reminder in my daytimer) "The genius of Christianity takes the words of Paul 'who gave himself for our sins' as true and efficacious. We are not to look upon our sins as insignificant trifles. On the other hand, we are not to regard them as so terrible as to despair. Learn to believe that Christ was given, not for picayune and imaginary transgressions, but for mountainous sins; not for sins that can be discarded, but for sins that are stubbornly ingrained" (Luther's comments on Gal. 1:4).

It is another to mouth the words knowing that under the words and correct facial expressions of regret there lies the undercurrent of unrepentance. If this is the case, read again Luther's encouragement, repent of the cheap grace you've dined upon and turn from those thoughts that attempt to steer you from God's mercy and rely upon the Spirit to strengthen you and guide you. If we turn to the Word and the Spirit, we will find mercy and forgiveness. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Lord God, You know my innermost thoughts and desire to serve and love You, by Your Spirit, help me to walk in Your ways, day in and day out, to trust in Your forgiveness and resist sin and the evil one. Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you ever noticed within yourself a moment or tendency to speak words of repentance, but thinking otherwise? Do you find yourself at times discounting past confession and doing once again that which you ought not?

Tuesday of the Week of Lent III | March 9, 2021

Jeremiah 7:21-34; Romans 4:13-25; John 7:37-52; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{4:13} For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope ... ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” ²³ But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

– Romans 4:13-25



Journeying in this world as a Christian is a most glorious thing. Our eyes are opened by faith to see the beauty of God’s hand in everything. Our hands and feet and voices are used by God to reveal His presence to those in need. And one is privileged to count so many as brothers and sisters in this family first promised to Abraham long ago. But one also encounters evil in so many ways around the world, between peoples and nations, and even polarization between those who claim Jesus yet allow hate to reside in their hearts. It would seem at times, that in our world darkness has sway and influence so much so that it appears to be winning.

And I know we’re not supposed to begin a sentence with “but.” But God is a God of miracles and is active where we do not expect Him. After all, the Spirit blows where it wills. One of my favourite parts of Scripture is where Jesus tells the Pharisees, “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matt. 3:9). God “gives life to the dead,” Paul writes “and calls things into existence the things that do not exist.”

When things within us and without us in this world appear to be dead in their sin and evil is winning the day, remember that God created Adam from clay, causes stones to spring forth water, and faith proclaimed from stone cold hearts. He is the Author and Perfecter not only of our faith, but of all things. If there is hope for a stone, care for the birds of the air, and for things that are not, to be, certainly God has not forgotten you. Lent reminds us, yes, of the reality that we are sinners, but especially that there is hope and this hope is not from ourselves but given to us from a loving God who creates life from nothing, even rocks.

Prayer: Gracious Father, the Giver of all good things, help us by Your Spirit to cling to the hope that is found in Your word, for You have promised to never leave us nor forsake us. Amen.

Lenten Response: Have you been tempted to despair and give up? Read Philippians 1:6 and remember Who has begun the good work in you.

March 10, 2021 | Wednesday of the Week of Lent III

Jeremiah 8:4-7, 18-9:6; Romans 5:1-11; John 8:12-20; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{8:4} “You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? ⁵ Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return. ⁶ I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. ⁷ Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord.

– Jeremiah 8:4-7

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Hearing the Lord speak through Jeremiah in the texts for today one could feel despairing or, at the least, convicted that we are not unlike those He speaks of concerning our own thoughts and behaviour at times, and even compare them favourably with the current political, social and cultural climate of today. One only has to hear the news, pay attention to regular updates about COVID-19, and be caught up in the negativity and speculation that attends our frustrations at lockdowns, inconsistent rules and just down right miserableness at the situation we are all in, just for example, let alone other sins.

But as we consider inconsistent rules, God has something to say about this too. “Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord” (Jer. 8:7). The craziness in the world today is derived from our own not knowing “the rules of the Lord.”

How we live in this world is seen by our character, not always by our competencies, whether in the business world, parenting or the Church. We might be good at some tasks, but are we good people? Do we know the Word of God that guides our hearts and minds and forms us into His people, being “little christs” to each in this world of ours, as Luther once quipped. Do we commit ourselves to prayer, to contemplation on God’s goodness and wisdom to act and speak winsomely for the Gospel, or do we neglect the Word and continue to backslide?

Lest we fall into despair because of our own tendencies to not follow rules, follow our own ways and disregard others is certainly accurate and true, greater yet is the Light of the world which pierces the night of our discontent, illumines our need and bathes us in His mercy and love. God’s mercy is indeed new every morning, His Spirit is with us, “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

Prayer: Father in heaven, comfort us and convict us by the light of Your Son, and guard our hearts and minds from the strategies of the dark kingdom that would entice us into the shadows. Bless our yearning to be faithful and strengthen our resolve to know You by Your Word and prayer, ever thankful for Your promises in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lenten Response: As you read the Scriptures, where are you in the story? Whom do you identify with? How can you give hope to someone you might be concerned for?

March 11, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Lent III

Jeremiah 10:11-24; Romans 5:12-21; John 8:21-32; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{10:11} Thus shall you say to them: “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” ¹² It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens. ¹³ When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses. ¹⁴ Every man is stupid and without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. ¹⁵ They are worthless, a work of delusion; at the time of their punishment they shall perish. ¹⁶ Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob, for he is the one who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance; the Lord of hosts is his name.

– Jeremiah 10:11-16

“American Idol” is a long running show. I watched it for a while, amazed at the talent displayed at times, dismayed at other times. I felt sorry for both “groups” as each person was on display for all to see and would deal with the results one way or another. Each person would experience the consequences of not measuring up, or the challenges of fame and wealth and the issues that go with them. What idols do we cling to in life?

As I’m sure you’ve heard in catechism or other Bible studies, there are so many idols. Wealth, power, status, popularity, being right all the time, the list goes on. Regardless of what it might be, Luther called each of them “pretender gods,” things which had no life or power in themselves, but promised all that might be considered good in this life. They can’t, of course, and the ultimate idol is not the thing or idea clung to, but actually the person themselves. As Isaiah 44:9-20 describes well, imagine the lunacy of trusting in something crafted by an ironsmith or carpenter that trusts in the thing that was made by themselves, bowing down to the object of their own imagination, “a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself” (Is. 44:20; Jer. 1:3,4).

What idols are we trusting in these days of our lives? Have we placed trust and faith in institutions, in power or status, well-paying jobs, political parties that promise the world and deliver little, or the like? Are we enslaved to our own ideas and believe in our own delusions (Jer. 10:15), rather than the wisdom of God. Control is always a need we have to get where we think we ought to go. But we do not have any real measure of control, even in the designing of our own idols to those ends. The Lord is the One that creates and sustains the universe with a Word, and His heart is wounded when we follow the ways of the nations. The Lord calls us to rely on His ways and thoughts and not to be dismayed at what the world is dismayed at. Rather, as difficult as it can be, Jesus calls us to repent and abide in Him, and He will abide in us.

Prayer: Lord God of all creation, You are the arche (Rev. 3:14) of all that is. Teach me, Father, to cling to Your Word and Spirit, discerning the false gods that attempt to make themselves at home in the living room of my heart. Amen.

Lenten Response: Examining your values, your thoughts about the state of the world today and your hopes, do you discover an idol or two, hopefully none? If so, what kind of idol is it?

Friday of the Week of Lent III | March 12, 2021

Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, 604

Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-17; Romans 6:1-11; John 8:33-47; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{8:33} They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” ³⁹ They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

– John 8:33-44

Family is a beautiful, wonderful thing, isn't it? Relationships are nurtured, cherished and sustained, woven in threads of love, trust and promises kept in a covenant between everyone. One belongs to the other, not only of blood and flesh, but of spirit, character and compassionate, edifying love for each other. One can hear Paul's chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 often at weddings, because of its emphasis on love's importance, indeed centrality in life (1 Cor. 13:13) and hope for the couple as they begin a family.

However, being born into a family doesn't automatically guarantee that one will act, believe, stand for, or love as part of the family. Here in John's Gospel, Jesus confronts those Pharisees who claim to be sons of Abraham. Jesus directly challenges their claim by pointing out that they have forgotten what Abraham did. They forget that Israel was in fact enslaved to Egypt, but greater yet, “anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” Jesus reminds them. Being physically descended from Abraham is one thing, but living faithfully, in accordance with the truth of God's Word is another. They reveal that in their hearts they have a different father, a different loyalty, a different family.

As Moses and Paul each wrote, do not be circumcised of the flesh alone, but of the heart, for who is the true son of Israel, the one circumcised of the flesh or of the heart? To follow self is to be enslaved to sin and to not hear the word Jesus speaks (John 8:43) and, thus, Jesus reveals who their true father is, the devil, and their will and ours, when we neglect the Word and follow our own desires — this is the devil's desire; to lie, kill and destroy, and thus not of God.

Prayer: Gracious Father, help me to show my family's ties by living according to Your love. Help me, when I doubt myself, to look to Your Word of promise, to Your Baptism, for You have claimed me as Your own. Teach me in my stumbling, weak way to remember that You are for me and not against me, that You know my frailty, and in Your love walk beside me, carry me and will hold me close to Your heart as Your child. Amen.

Lenten Response: In reading the texts for today, what does the Word reveal about your desire?

March 13, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Lent III

Jeremiah 13:1-11; Romans 6:12-23; John 8:47-59; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{8:47} Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” ⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

– John 8:47-51

I would imagine that being a slave to something one develops a certain mentality that is captive to that which is enslaving one. Over time, after internal tension between what is good and what is evil, one can give in from the battle and acquiesce to the slavery. After all, there’s only so much one can do by oneself given our sinful nature. And so often we give up, and there is a chance of falling into despair or abandoning hope. But then we are surprised by hope, by a word of compassion, of grace and forgiveness. The Gospel comes to us new and refreshing and we give thanks and begin to walk in newness of life.

The world, the flesh and the devil do not give up so easily, however. They remind us of our sins, old and fresh, even those contemplated even if not acted upon. Daily we wake up and have to remind ourselves to whom we belong. It is difficult to break out of this mindset of guilt and regret. Being enslaved tends to create certain ways of thinking and being that need to be challenged by mercy and forgiveness, and it can be hard to relinquish that sense of comfort and control when one is in familiar territory. And so, like Paul in Romans 6 and 7, we go back and forth, desiring the right and then the wrong.

Being a sinner, you will fall, but by the grace of God we are forgiven saints by grace and faith alone. Here is the call to each of us who are claimed in Baptism, and as one theologian (Watson) said, “let go and let God.” Be reminded by the Word and in prayer, that it is Christ Jesus who calls you, forgives you and enlivens you. It is Jesus who frees you (Rom. 7:24, 25) and His brothers and sisters who remind us who we are as a child of God.

While in Lent, we are reminded of the cost of grace, of what Jesus gave for us on the cross. We are encouraged to give up something in this time of discipline — that which we desire, something comfortable, pleasing or delicious — that in those moments of wanting, we would turn away and contemplate the life we have by grace, remembering and giving thanks that Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. I used to say to parishioners, when they were asking what I was giving up for Lent, I’d say “I’m giving up sin.” Right ... Lent may be a time of giving things up, but sometimes it can be attitudes, thoughts and ways of being that cause us to stumble. And so, daily surrender yourself into the Spirit’s hands, remind yourself, “I am baptized” and strive in obedience to God’s mercy to not let sin reign in your mortal body.

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, I give thanks for Your dear Son who gave Himself in exchange for me. Help me by Your mercy to cling for dear life to the cross when I am tempted away from it. Amen.

Lenten Response: Take a walk one day and observe the goodness of God all around you, the sunshine, the wind and wonder of creation. Think upon the many blessings that are yours. Remember His mercy and walk forward with Him into the future He calls you to.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent | March 14, 2021

Jeremiah 14:1-22; Galatians 4:21-5:1; Mark 8:11-21; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{4:21} Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband." ²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. ^{5:1} For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

– Galatians 4:21-5:1



Who would choose slavery over freedom? Seems like an easy and obvious choice. Yet Christians in Galatia in Paul's day were living in slavery, "desiring to be under the law." Christians in every generation since have also submitted to a yoke of slavery. Our day is no exception. Surveys of what North Americans believe consistently reveal a substantial majority of Christians in most denominations believe they are saved by their good works, including Lutherans.

How does this happen? Because it is not a matter of choice. As sinners "we are in bondage to sin, and we cannot free ourselves." We are not on neutral ground with Christ on one side and Satan on the other, free to turn in either direction. Rather as sinners we are completely mastered by Satan. As saints we are completely free in Christ our Master. We are sinners and saints totally at the same time. Our entire life after our Baptism is living in the mortal combat between Christ and Satan.

Satan convinces us we must do something to save ourselves, as if Jesus did not do enough for our salvation. It is a big lie. We fall for it every time we try to prove ourselves worthy of God's mercy and grace. When this happens, stand firm in the freedom Christ gives us. Tell Satan, "I don't deserve God's forgiveness and favor. I deserve eternal condemnation. However, Jesus chose me, and I am His forever. He's the victor, and you're the loser."

Prayer: Holy Spirit, keep me firm in the true faith You give me every day to be free in Christ. Amen.

Lenten Response: Think of a specific time in your life when you were caught up in trying to save yourself by your good works. How did God rescue you from your yoke of slavery? Give thanks that He did.

March 15, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Lent IV

Jeremiah 16:1-21; Romans 7:1-12; John 6:1-15; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{6:1} After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So, the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also, the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" ¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

— John 6:1-15



There is something pathetic about the ending of this scene in John's Gospel. Five thousand men, after witnessing Jesus' power to feed them with two barley loaves and two fish, think they can use their power to grab Jesus and by force make Him king. They would have been slaughtered by the Roman forces, even if they had been able to seize Jesus.

The large crowd rightly claims Jesus to be the Prophet. Prophets speak God's Word. Which is more powerful? God's Word or human force? Didn't they know their own history? God's Word saved the Israelites again and again, not their mighty armies.

The crowd had such a limited understanding of who Jesus was and how He was bringing God's kingdom into the world. God's kingdom isn't coming by brute force. It comes in the same way He created everything out of nothing — by speaking. Speaking a word that is truth and life. And love. The Kingdom comes in the way the bridegroom woos His bride.

How often we are tempted to make things the way we want them to be by using force and power. Power belongs to God (Ps. 62:11). Jesus was coronated as King of all creation by giving up all power on His cross. Instead of taking things into our hands, better to fall into Jesus' hands carrying our crosses.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be still and know You are God when I am tempted to do things my way rather than Yours. Amen.

Lenten Response: Set aside three times in the next 24 hours in which you begin each time by reading Psalm 46:10a. Then spend five minutes each time being still and listening for God speaking in the stillness.

March 16, 2021 | Tuesday of the Week of Lent IV

Jeremiah 17:19-27; Romans 7:13-25; John 6:16-27; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{7:13}Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

– Romans 7:13-25



Paul succinctly and powerfully describes our lives as saints and sinners, caught up in the mortal conflict between Christ and Satan. We know what we ought to do. We even want to do it as saints. We, like Paul, “delight in the law of God” as saints. However, as sinners our view of the law is totally the opposite. We resent it and its relentless demands.

The mortal conflict is not just out there in the world. It is within us, encompassing our whole life. The “I” in the letter is who Paul was called to be in Christ, a saint. His identity in Christ was at war with his identify in the flesh, a sinner. He kept on doing evil because sin, his sin, dwelled within him.

When we sin, we might say, “The devil made me do it,” We are only fooling ourselves. No outside force needs to push us to sin. We sin because sin dwells within us.

Paul, an apostle chosen directly by Jesus, was powerless to get himself out of the mortal combat within him. But he knew who could rescue him. He immediately answered his question, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Jesus Christ is the only one who can deliver us from our bodies of death.

Prayer: Lord, deliver me from this body of death. Amen.

Lenten Response: Think of the most recent time when you found yourself not doing the good you wanted to do or the evil you did not want to do. What led up to that moment? How did the Lord lead you through it? Praise God for His powerful deliverance for you.

Wednesday of the Week of Lent IV | March 17, 2021

Patrick, Bishop, Missionary to Ireland, 461

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Romans 8:1-11; John 6:27-40; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{18:1}The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²“Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. ⁵Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’

– Jeremiah 18:1-11

One of God's most arresting metaphors in Holy Scripture is the potter and the clay. It is more than a metaphor in Genesis 2, when God forms the first man out of the dust of the earth. Perhaps when the prophets use the metaphor it is God's subtle way of reminding us how He created humans. More than that, He reminds us He is the Creator, and we are the creatures.

The metaphor was certainly arresting when God used it through Jeremiah. It was not good news to hear that God might completely rework the house of Israel. It is not good news for nations in 2021. The rulers and leaders of all nations would do well to pay heed to God's warning through Jeremiah. God can pluck down and destroy even the mightiest of nations. It is not good news for humans in 2021. A growing number of North Americans do not believe there is a God who created them. Even if they do, they probably find it offensive to be compared to clay in the hands of the Potter. The culture has such a high view of ourselves and what we can do. There seems to be no limit. We can be whomever we want to be. We can even make up preferred pronouns for ourselves and demand everyone addresses us that way.

The metaphor demolishes our human pride, arrogance and presumption. Let's be honest, we all need to be reworked. In truth, that is what God does in our Baptisms. He joins us to Christ in His death, so we die each day as sinners. He also joins us to Christ in His resurrection, so each day we are raised as saints, completely new creations in Christ. In the promise of our Baptism the metaphor is very good news. We are clay in God's hands and there's no better or safer place to be.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You are the Potter, and I am the clay. Do all the reworking and reshaping of me needed so I am who You called me to be in Christ. Amen.

Lenten Response: What part of your life is most in need of being reshaped by God, but, at the same time, the part you least want Him to reshape? Then imagine that part of your life as clay in God's hands and pray for Him to be at work in you and on you.

March 18, 2021 | Thursday of the Week of Lent IV

Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, 386

Jeremiah 22:13-23; Romans 8:12-27; John 6:41-51; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{6:41} So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

– John 6:41-51



Here is another arresting word from God our heavenly Father — no one comes to Jesus unless the Father makes it happen.

This Word should stop us in our tracks as North Americans. We think we are the masters of our lives. We are in charge. We decide what to do, where to go and whom we follow. It’s my choice, my decision and my life.

Scripture runs completely counter to our assumptions and our worldview. If we believe in Jesus and we are following Him, it is not because we made the right choice. It is not because we have our act together and our values and desires are all lined up the right way.

Martin Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Small Catechism states the truth. We cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him by our good intentions, best efforts, wisdom or sheer determination. Rather, the Holy Spirit calls us through the Gospel.

That’s how the Father draws us to Jesus. He speaks promises of love, grace and mercy to us in Word and Sacrament. We are not drawn to Jesus by constant threats of condemnation. God may have to speak the harshest words of condemnation at times in our lives when our hearts are completely hardened. But those words don’t draw us to Christ. They soften our hearts, so we can hear God’s love and forgiveness for us in Jesus.

As we are drawn to Him, we realize He delights in us. In response, we delight in Him.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, thank You for calling me each day through the Gospel, and each day keeping me united in Jesus with the whole Church in true faith. Amen.

Lenten Response: Think of the people God used in your life to draw you to Jesus. Thank God for their witness and their love for you. If possible, thank one of those persons for discipling you.

Friday of the Week of Lent IV | March 19, 2021

ST. JOSEPH, HUSBAND OF MARY AND GUARDIAN OF OUR LORD

Jeremiah 23:1-8; Romans 8:28-39; John 6:52-59 Psalms 89 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{6:52}The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

– John 6:52-59



There are many absolute words in Scripture. There are also many jarring words. Jesus’ words in verse 6:53 are at the top of both those lists.

As Jesus’ conversation with the crowds and the disciples progresses, He goes out of His way to offend them. They were having enough difficulty hearing Him say He is the “bread of life” and “living bread” from heaven. Jesus ups the ante by telling them they must eat His flesh and drink His blood. The Mosaic law forbade the eating of any blood (Leviticus 17:10-14), let alone human blood. Jesus says they must drink His blood and eat His flesh. No wonder by the end of this conversation many of Jesus’ disciples leave Him. His words were too jarring for them.

Pause and consider how absolute His word is: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” The only way for anyone to have any life at all is to eat Jesus’ body and drink His blood. There are a lot of people who have no life within them. Their hearts may be beating and their lungs breathing, but if they do not come to the Lord’s Supper to eat Jesus’ body and drink His blood, they are without life.

No doubt many hear Jesus’ words as too absolute and harsh. But He Himself says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Peter tells the crowds in Jerusalem they had killed “the Author of life” (Acts 3:15). Jesus is life and the Author of life. The simple, but profound truth, is the only way to have life is to do as He commands — “Take and eat ... Take and drink.” We must be in Jesus and He in us. In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, we rightly yearned to come together in person for the Sacrament. The Lord’s Supper is the one meal not to be skipped.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, stir up in me the deep desire to tell others of Jesus’ love for me so they too are drawn to Him to receive life in the Lord’s Supper. Amen.

Lenten Response: Think of one believer you know who is not able to worship in person with a congregation to receive Jesus’ body and blood. Contact that person in whatever way you safely can. Carefully listen to how she or he is doing. Offer to pray at the end of the conversation. Do this even if you are not able to worship in person.

March 20, 2021 | Saturday of the Week of Lent IV

Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, 687

Jeremiah 23:9-15; Romans 9:1-18; John 6:60-71; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{6:67} So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

– John 6:67-71



Jesus is in charge throughout John’s Gospel. Even at unexpected times. At His betrayal in the garden, twice He asks the soldiers and officers whom they are seeking. The first time when He tells them He is the one they are seeking, “they drew back and fell to the ground.” The second time He orders them to let His disciples go (18:6-7). He is in charge when He dies on His cross: “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (19:30).

Jesus was even in charge of His betrayer. He chose Judas knowing he was not a believer, rather a devil. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus tells the Twelve one of them will betray Him. They want to know who it is: Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So, when He had dipped the morsel, He gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly” (13:26-7).

The Bread of life speaks in both scenes in chapters 6 and 13. In the second He commissions Judas with a morsel of bread to betray Him. Jesus told the disciples a second time He chose them: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (15:6) This time only eleven hear it. Judas had left in the night a short time before this to go to the Jewish authorities.

It is sobering to think about why Judas was chosen. Some might say, “It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right.” Focusing on Judas will not be very edifying. Better to focus on the eleven and why they were chosen. When Peter speaks those wonderful words about why they would not be leaving Jesus like all the other disciples, Jesus’ response is a little cheeky and revealing — “I chose you, didn’t I?” They believe and know Jesus because He chose them for that purpose and for bearing much fruit.

Jesus chooses us as well for the same purposes — so that we believe and know Him, and so that we too bear fruit that abides.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing me long before You conceived me in my mother’s womb to be Your child forever. Amen.

Lenten Response: When do you remember hearing and knowing for the first time Jesus chose you? After thinking about how He chose you, then share your story with a child in your family — your own child, a grandchild or a niece or nephew.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent | March 21, 2021

Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1711

Jeremiah 23:16-32; 1 Corinthians 9:19-27; Mark 8:31-9:1; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{8:31} And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." ³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." ^{9:1} And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."

– Mark 8:31-9:1

The Son of Man must suffer ... must be rejected ... must be killed ... after three days rise again. These are powerful words spoken by Jesus about His mission and ministry, and generally about His life. The text says that He spoke about this plainly. This last statement, "He spoke plainly about this" stood out to me. This tells us He is speaking the core message of His life. Suffering for our sake, rejection for our inclusion, dying to give us life was the mission of Jesus on earth. As a church that is what we have to also declared plainly.

Contrary to that, Peter comes up with an alternative, yet convenient message. He took Jesus aside to tell Him that He should avoid suffering, rejection and dying on the cross — "may this be far from You, may Your life never see suffering, rejection and death." This looked like a message of compassion, sympathy and affection. However, it was satanic and carnal. It was from Satan, in contradiction to the saving plan of God. It was not the true Gospel of God, but it was a message sent from Satan. Jesus quickly discerned that message and rebuked Peter for it.

Jesus sent us to preach the true Gospel at any cost. We are invited to follow Jesus by carrying our cross and by being ready to die for this true Gospel. At any cost, the message of the Gospel has to be believed, confessed and shared openly and plainly. Preaching Jesus and His death on the cross and inviting people to hear and believe that message is the work of the Holy Spirit through our lives.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, please help us to see the Gospel clearly, believe it fully, confess it boldly and preach it regularly. Please save us from believing and preaching the false Gospel, fabricated and produced by Satan. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lenten Response: Pray intentionally for those who are suffering because of the name of Jesus.

March 22, 2021 | Monday of the Week of Lent V

Jonathan Edwards, Teacher, Missionary to the Native Americans, 1758

James De Koven, Priest, 1879

Jeremiah 24:1-10; Romans 9:19-33; John 9:1-17; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{9:1} As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So, he went and washed and came back seeing. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So, I went and washed and received my sight.”

– John 9:1-11

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In this powerful text, Jesus declares He is the Light of the world. This is a powerful claim and the most powerful statement ever said or ever stated by any human being on the face of this planet. It was incredibly stunning, confusing and startling to all of those people who were listening to Him. Rather than trying to understand the source and the content of that claim, they started to look for and find fault in everything that Jesus was saying and in every action that He was taking.

Truly speaking, Jesus is the Light of the world! He spoke that statement and made that claim as He was dealing with the issue of sin. Jesus was also dealing with the tragic condition of human brokenness: such as sickness, poverty, blindness, and in general, the brokenness of human life. Before healing the blind man and changing the condition of his life, Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world.” Two important things need to be highlighted in this text: the first one is dealing with the issue in question of human sin, and the second one is resolving human tragedy and predicament. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the ultimate source and radical solution to the deepest predicament of humanity — namely dealing with our spiritual and physical brokenness. Jesus is truly the Light of the world! He brings light into our dark life and helps us to overcome the burden of sin. He also brings His light of love as He heals the brokenness of our life and resolves every issue and situation we have in our lives

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, may Your light continue to shine in my life every day, especially as I'm dealing with the burden of my sin and with the brokenness of my body. I pray that You bring Your light into my life and show me the way to get out of my darkest life conditions. Thank You for declaring to me that You are the Light of the world and thank You for giving that light to me. Please help me to experience that Light and to let others also experience that Light through me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lenten Response: Light a candle today, as you pray and remember that Jesus is the Light of the world.

Tuesday of the Week of Lent V | March 23, 2021

Gregory the Illuminator, Missionary Bishop of Armenia, c. 332

Jeremiah 25:8-17; Romans 10:1-13; John 9:18-41; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{25:8}“Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹ behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰ Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. ¹³ I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. ¹⁴ For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”

– Jeremiah 25:8-14

Jeremiah 25 clearly declares that the brokenness of Israel in their enslavement by the Babylonian Empire came as a result one major reason. That reason is clearly stated in verse eight of Jeremiah 25, “because you have not listened to my words.” Listening to the Word of God is the greatest factor in starting and maintaining a strong relationship with God. The greatest gift that the Lord has given to us is the gift of His Word — everything that we know, everything that we have, everywhere that we are about to go, comes as a result of the Word of God.

When people lose their relationship with God as a result of ignoring and disobeying the Word, lots of bad things happen in their lives. The only way to come out of that tragic brokenness — in the sense of being lost from the sight of God — is through the Word of God. God already spoke that they were going to be enslaved by the Babylonian Empire because of their disobedience to His Word and now He was going to declare a word over their lives and the empire would collapse after 70 years (as a result of God’s authoritative decree that is embedded in Jeremiah 25).

Throughout these 70 years, lots of people would grow old, nations and empires would collapse, seasons and historical junctures would pass, but the Word of God remains forever the same and powerful. Therefore, in this day and season, as we are thinking about Jesus Christ and His suffering, let us also stay strong in our dedication and commitment to uphold the authority, integrity and authenticity of God’s eternal Word.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, without Your grace I can never hear, understand and obey Your Word. Therefore, please grant me Your grace and open my heart to receive, to believe, and to fully obey Your Word. And whenever I fail to obey and follow Your instructions, please send me Your grace to convict me, chastise me, rebuke me and guide me back to sustain and maintain my relationship with You. I confess, without Your Word I have no wisdom and direction in my life. However, when Your Word comes and takes hold of my life I fully know where I'm coming from and where I'm going. And thank You for the gift of Your Word in my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

Lenten Response: Memorize a new Scripture verse today.

March 24, 2021 | Wednesday of the Week of Lent V

Óscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, Martyr, 1980

Jeremiah 25:30-38; Romans 10:14-21; John 10:1-18; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{10:7} So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

– John 10:7-10



Throughout the Bible, God is depicted as a Good Shepherd. From Genesis to Revelation, one of the clearest images the Bible uses to show the love of God for humanity is God working, serving and leading His people as a Good Shepherd. Without a Good Shepherd all the sheep in the world would have a great deal of difficulty finding their daily food, place to live and protection and security from all kinds of animals and thieves who threaten their livelihood. God is doing exactly the same for us. Our life can be in great danger if God is not providing us His protection and if God is not leading our life through the deepest and darkest jungle of this world. On top of that, all of those things that we need to sustain our life, such as our daily nourishment, place to live, health, are given to us by God. Therefore, without a doubt, we can clearly and boldly confess, and declare, that God is our Good Shepherd. It's only a fool who thinks that they can sustain their life by providing everything that is needed, such as safety, security, health, and all the necessary nourishments to sustain our life — including the clean oxygen that we are breathing every second. God is the Giver of life, God is the Protector of life and God is the only Sustainer of our life.

The Bible also tells us there is another entity or agency which is trying to work in opposition to what God is doing for us. The Bible calls that entity the thief! That is clearly Satan. That enemy comes into our lives to kill, to steal and to destroy. That enemy is fully capable of doing that. There is one fact that we can assert on top of that reality — there is no way that we can protect ourselves from the vicious attack that this enemy is trying to unleash over our lives. Our God, He's our Shepherd — therefore we shall not want anything because He makes us lie down in green pastures. Even though we walked through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil because His rod and His staff are always with us because of our covenant relationship with Him.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for having all of us as Your sheep. We did not choose You, but You chose us. We did not come to You, but You came to us. Thank You for Your grace. Thank You for Your love and thank You for Your forgiveness. We are clearly like sheep, with no wisdom and no knowledge of life. We make bad choices and take wrong turns in life. But You are always there to protect us and to provide for us as our Good Shepherd. Because of You we have life, and because of You we have a future. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lenten Response: Take time to confess today the areas in which you try to serve as your own provider and shepherd, instead of acknowledging the Good Shepherd.

Thursday of the Week of Lent V | March 25, 2021

THE ANNUNCIATION OF OUR LORD TO THE VIRGIN MARY

Jeremiah 26:1-24; Romans 11:1-12; John 10:19-42; Psalms 40:1-11 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{10:22} At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

– John 10:22-30

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah tell us plainly!” Wow ... this is a nation that has been waiting for a Messiah for thousands of years. Now they encounter someone who claims to be the Son of God and who is doing extraordinary things before their very eyes. He is reading and teaching Scripture, with absolute clarity and immense authority like they have never seen before. He is not self-centered. He's upholding God the Father, and He's humble and very wise. At the same time, He is performing miracle after miracle — things that they have never seen before, or even imagined. But there is one major problem that they are experiencing. That problem is a problem of faith and certainty.

How can we be certain about the messianic authority and divine identity of Jesus Christ? He is living and walking among us as a human being. But everything about Him is supernatural and everything He is saying and doing is extraordinary. Therefore, most of His contemporaries, whether they are His friends or His family, are all kept in this magnanimous suspense that they cannot resolve. Finally, they come very close to Him and proposed this question boldly: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus is giving them a very direct answer, indirectly. He's not making an explicit claim, but He's pointing to all the things that He's doing. And all the things that are stated in Scripture about the Messiah. He's asking for them to go and compare the works in His life to the claims and declarations of Scripture. And then it is up to the Holy Spirit, in the grace of God, to create that faith and certainty in their lives. That is the process of being born again. It is the Holy Spirit that opens our eyes and our hearts to see the person and identity of Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You for revealing Yourself to us and for opening our eyes to see You and for helping our hearts to believe in You. Without the help of Your Holy Spirit, and without the guidance of Your grace, and without the preaching of Your Word, there is no way for us to put our faith and trust and confidence in You. But we are forever grateful for the marvelous work of Your Holy Spirit that opened the eyes of our hearts to see You clearly, to love You, to follow You and to worship You. Now we ask Your grace to continue working in our hearts and to help us grow in knowing and loving You all the days of our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Lenten Response: Pray for someone who is struggling with their faith or who does not know the saving love of Jesus. Perhaps set an alarm on your phone to remind you to continue to pray for this person or write their name on an index card.

March 26, 2021 | Friday of the Week of Lent V

Jeremiah 29:1-14; Romans 11:13-24; John 11:1-27; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{12:1} Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

– John 12:1-10

Mary took about a pint of pure nard and she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped His feet with her hair! This is an incredible statement. Nard is a very expensive perfume that could have been given to Jesus, wrapped in very special paper with the words, “please use it as you please, on very special occasion.” But Mary took very expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus’ feet. That expensive perfume is a sign of human prosperity. It is a sign of an accumulated wealth and it's a mark of social class and status. But Mary took all that and poured it on the feet of Jesus because there is nothing more superior, better or greater in status or class than Jesus Christ our Lord.

When Mary took that action, it was not unanimously acclaimed by everyone in participation. A lot of people questioned if that was appropriate. But that question was not raised from the angle of the status or the person of Jesus, it was raised from the value of the perfume. For me, that is the essence of materialism — giving greater value to goods and items than to the life and person of Jesus Christ. Pouring that perfume on the hair of Jesus, or on His neck, or on His chest, would have looked somewhat appropriate. Or giving Him the entire perfume as a gift could have also been considered as a proper act of generosity and hospitality. While pouring it on his feet can only be understood as an excessive extravagance — or it's an ultimate adoration in respect to the person of Jesus Christ. For me, what Mary did was a clear depiction of ultimate adoration to the person of Jesus Christ. That day her action declared a powerful statement that is still audible today, there is absolutely nothing that is more important than Jesus. Everything we honour, and every item we value, we should put under the feet of Jesus Christ for His glory and for the advancement of His mission in the world.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, please help me to be like Mary and to bring everything that I have and everything that I value and put it under Your feet. I confess that many times I fail to obey You and detach myself from the love of this world. But today as a result of this Word, I am convicted, and I am moved to confess that I'm a lover of this world. Please fill my heart with Your Holy Spirit and with Your grace, that Your Word would take over my life in that I would start to clearly judge what is important and what is not. Thank You for opening my eyes and my ears to hear this word today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Lenten Response: Consider giving a special gift of finances or time that would benefit the mission of the Gospel as a sacrifice of praise.

Saturday of the Week of Lent V | March 27, 2021

Charles Henry Brent, Bishop of the Philippines and of Western New York, 1929

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Romans 11:25-36; John 11:28-44; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 31 & 143 (PM)

^{7:6} Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. ⁸ You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee. ¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. ¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, “Where is he?” ¹² And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, “He is a good man,” others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.” ¹³ Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

– John 7:6-13

Among the crowds there was a widespread whispering about Him. Some said He's a good man. Others replied, “no He deceives the people.” The crowd was clearly divided about Jesus. The division in this particular crowd was not unique to first-century society. In the 21st century, people are still divided about Jesus. There are billions of people who are confessing, believing, declaring and serving Jesus Christ as the true God, while there are billions of people who are openly, boldly and clearly declaring that Jesus is not God. The same scenario will continue to exist until Jesus comes back. For all of those who are claiming authority over this deep and mysterious subject of Christ's divinity, the second coming of Jesus Christ will finally settle every debate and conclude all discussions on this matter.

In this passage, almost all of His disciples are encouraging Him to reveal Himself fully and to assert His claims by going to the festival and openly authenticating His true identity and revealing His deeply mysterious persona to the crowd in Jerusalem. But Jesus told them repeatedly, “my time has not come.” What kind of time is He referring to? Obviously, He is referring to the time of Christ's crucifixion because the true identity of Jesus was fully revealed to the entire human race on that cross at Golgotha. God chose to reveal Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the most unusual way, by allowing His Son to be crucified on the cross of Calvary in the middle of thieves and robbers. He revealed Himself as a very humble Servant who was willing to quietly sacrifice His life and shed His blood for the cleansing of our sin and for the ultimate redemption of life.

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for helping us to be part of that crowd that believes, loves, follows and worships Jesus. Obviously, we did not join this group because of our wisdom or knowledge, but because of Your grace and love. We did not choose You, but You chose us. We did not find You, but You found us. Thank You for that gracious act of salvation. Today we pray, please help us to be that instrument of inviting more and more people into a living relationship with You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lenten Response: Who can you invite to join you for a cup of coffee or a conversation, or to worship, or to share a live streamed service together, in order to invite them into a living relationship with Jesus Christ?

March 28, 2021 | Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

Zechariah 9:9-12; 1 Timothy 6:12-16; Matthew 21:12-17; Psalms 84 & 150 (AM); Psalms 42 & 32 (PM)

^{21:1} Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me ... ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹ And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

– Matthew 21:1-11



Today marks the beginning of the most Holy Week in the life of the Church. What happened during those final days of Jesus' life are, without question, some of the most important events this world has ever seen. Nearly one out of three chapters in the four biblical Gospels are dedicated to that final week of our Lord's life. And why? Because what happened during those final days is what makes Jesus' life of eternal importance for us.

It is the question of the ages. It is a series of events that forces each of us to decide. It is a week, beginning with the events we remember today, that demands that everyone who has ever lived make a choice.

"Who is this Jesus?" That is the question the people asked on that first Palm Sunday, and that is the same question we face as we enter this week of passion for our Lord. If Jesus was the Christ, the Savior of the world, then the answer to that question means everything. If He was not and it was all a farce, then it means nothing. But there is no middle ground when it comes to Jesus. There is no middle ground for us as we answer that question for ourselves.

Did you know that there is more historical evidence for the life of Jesus than there is for almost any other person who has ever lived? Four different accounts are given to us in the Bible. More than five thousand historical references are found outside of the New Testament alone. You can question the significance of His life. You can wonder about the validity of what He did. You can even have your own opinion about the difference it makes in your life. But you cannot argue with the historical facts. Jesus was a real man, with real-life followers. He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the shouts and cries for a king. And by the time the week was finished, this same Jesus was nailed to a cross. The Bible says He was God's Son, and He did it for you and for me.

"Who is this Jesus?" It is the question of the ages. It is a question you and I must answer. There is no better day to answer it for yourself than today.

Prayer: Lord God, as we enter this most Holy Week, we ask for a renewed sense of who You are, what You did for us in Your Son, Jesus, and how much we are loved by You in Him. Amen.

Lenten Response: Read Matthew, chapter 21 and ask yourself if you truly understand the significance of Jesus' life for you.

Monday in Holy Week | March 29, 2021

John Keble, Priest, 1866

Hans Nielsen Hauge, Renewer of the Church, 1824

Jeremiah 11:18-20; 12:1-17; Philippians 3:1-4; John 12:9-19; Psalms 119:73-80 & 145 (AM); Psalms 121 & 6 (PM)

^{21:12} And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³ He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." ¹⁴ And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, ¹⁶ and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" ¹⁷ And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

– Matthew 21:12-17

It is an interesting study, in the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, how His popularity with the religious leaders continues to decline as He makes His way to the cross. It is also interesting how Jesus never backs down from His purpose in life, to speak and to live the truth, even as those around Him want nothing to do with what He has to say. Add to that the fact that His actions were always consistent with His words, and it is easy to see that what happened in the temple during that Holy Week was yet another sign of the purpose for which Jesus was born.

The Jerusalem temple, designed to be a house of prayer, had become a marketplace for selling and for stealing and for profit-making for the religious elite. When Jesus saw what they were doing, He pulled no punches. Overturning the tables of the moneychangers, He chased them out and called them out for who they were and for what they were doing and claiming to be.

Meanwhile, the blind and the lame were healed. Throughout His ministry, Jesus' words and actions were shaped by love. Even the children offered shouts of praise to this One whose life and whose actions and whose words bore witness and gave testimony to the fact that He came into this world to save.

Jesus could have walked away that day unscathed, rather than walking into the temple and causing a scene. He could have remained quiet and never said a word, instead of lashing out against those who had lost sight of the temple's true purpose. But He spoke and He lived with one saving purpose in mind. His destiny was with the cross. He was born in this world to die. And He died on a cross so that you and I could live.

During those final events leading to His death, Jesus cleansed the temple when He overturned those tables. In the final event of His life, He cleansed us from sin when He bled and died on Calvary's cross. As with the temple and its cleansing, He did not have to do it, but He did. And He did it because He loved us more than we will ever know.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we thank You for Your saving work on the cross, for Your love for us that became so clear, and for never backing down on the road that led to Calvary, that we might have life. Amen.

Lenten Response: Find ways today to offer praise to Jesus, just as those children offered their praises long ago.

March 30, 2021 | Tuesday in Holy Week

Jeremiah 15:10-21; Philippians 3:15-21; John 12:20-26; Psalms 34 & 146 (AM); Psalms 25 & 91 (PM)

^{12:20} Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

– John 12:20-26



Today’s passage, in John’s Gospel, is one that comes not long after Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, not long before He is to go to the cross and pay the price for our sin, and just prior to the washing of His disciple’s feet on Maundy Thursday. It is also one in which the request being made leads to a challenge for life.

The Scriptures do not tell us who these Greeks were. It appears as if they were converts to the faith and if not yet, at least, wanting to find out more. And so, they came to Philip and asked if they could possibly see Jesus. Philip told Andrew, Andrew and Philip told Jesus, and Jesus responded with an answer that continues to challenge us today.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” His answer was pointing to His own death. In a few short days He would find Himself upon a cross. And it would be upon that cross, in the death of that one “seed” that all who would come to faith and follow would find life.

He was also, in His response, pointing to the only way in which those Greeks would ever be able to truly “see” Jesus. If you want to see Jesus, you need to follow Jesus. And if you want to follow Jesus, then you need to be willing and ready to sacrifice your own life for others and for Him, as He was for you.

What was true for them is also true for us. There is no true life apart from a willingness to sacrifice. And there is no true sacrifice greater than a willingness to die. Jesus sacrificed it all for you. He offered His life and went to His death, so that we might have life and find life, even as we die.

Prayer: Jesus, we thank You for Your willingness to die and for giving us a way to truly see You. Guide us in our faith, that our own desire to sacrifice for others would help us see You. Amen.

Lenten Response: Be intentional today in finding ways to sacrifice for others, with a heart of thanks for the One who sacrificed it all for you.

Wednesday in Holy Week | March 31, 2021

John Donne, Priest, 1631

Jeremiah 17:5-10, 14-18; Philippians 4:1-13; John 12:27-36; Psalms 5 & 147:1-12 (AM); Psalms 27 & 51 (PM)

^{12:27}“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

– John 12:27-33



What is it about the death of Jesus that continues to attract people two thousand years later? What is it about His life and ministry and death on a cross that continues to draw people’s attention today?

There is nothing inherently attractive about the cross. In Jesus’ day, it was an instrument of torture. It was a death penalty designed to send a clear message to the surrounding world that Rome was in control. Stay in line or the next one to die could be you. And so, they did, and so it was, and so there was no attraction to the cross.

The apostle Paul speaks of the cross as “a stumbling block.” He said it was “foolishness” to the outside world. He said it would cause people to trip up and to stumble and to fall. And it did. And it still does. There is something about the cross that repels more than attracts.

Paul also said, “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentile world ... but to those who are called and who are being saved, it is the power and the wisdom of God. And so, I decided,” he said, “to preach nothing among you, except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

The cross, on its own, has no attraction. There is nothing about a cross, by itself, that draws people at all. But when Jesus is on the cross, it does. When there is a deeper meaning and a life-giving purpose, then it will.

So, it was when God’s only Son was lifted to the cross on Calvary. The deeper meaning became real. The life-giving purpose was offered to us. Our sins were forgiven. Our broken relationship with God was restored. The promise of life eternal was made real for us in Christ.

“I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And so, the cross continues to attract. And so, you and I continue to have life.

Prayer: Lord God, we praise You for the attraction You have given in the cross and for Your willingness to allow Your only Son to die that we might have life in Him. Amen.

Lenten Response: Make a list of the promises that are yours because of the death of Jesus on the cross, and then thank Him for attracting and drawing you to faith.

April 1, 2021 | Maundy Thursday

Amalie Wilhelmina Sieveking, *Renewer of Society*, 1859; Frederick Dennison Maurice, *Priest*, 1872

Jeremiah 20:7-18; 1 Corinthians 10:14-17; 11:27-32; John 17:1-26; Psalms 27 & 147:13-21 (AM); Psalms 126 & 102 (PM)

^{17:5} And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. ⁶ “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

– John 17:5-11



On this Maundy Thursday, a day named as such because of the mandate Jesus gave His disciples to “love one another as He has loved us,” we read from a section in John’s Gospel known as Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer. On the evening before He was to die on the cross for our sin, just as the High Priest would intercede before God on behalf of the people, Jesus was interceding for us as His Church.

Two things stand out in the opening verses of this chapter. The first is the fact that Jesus was praying for the glory He shared with His Father to be restored. From the beginning of time, Jesus, as the second person in the Trinity, was one with the Father, along with the unity they shared with the Holy Spirit. In their Triune nature, they were one with each other and they shared a glory that was theirs from before the world began. Now that He was about to finish His work on earth, by offering His life on the cross, Jesus prayed that the Father would be glorified through His death and that in His death, and subsequent resurrection, the glory that was His with the Father would be restored.

He also prayed for the protection of His people from the evil one and for them to experience the same kind of unity that He and His Father shared. He prayed for our unity in the Church. He prayed for our protection against the one whose sole purpose is to attack what belongs to Christ. In so doing, He prayed that our unity together, rooted in His teachings and work, in His life, death and resurrection, that we would be so united in Him and with each other, that nothing that the evil one might send our way would pull us apart from each other or from Him.

How fitting on this Maundy Thursday, a day in which we remember the mandate given to us, “to love one another as we have been loved by Him,” that Jesus would pray for our unity and our protection, and that our unity in Him would bind us together and, thereby, protect us throughout all of life.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for Your prayer, for interceding for us, that we might be one as You and the Father are one. Amen.

Lenten Response: Read Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer in John 17, and then pray that His prayer would be answered and lived out in your life.

Good Friday | April 2, 2021

James Lloyd Breck, Priest, 1876

Genesis 22:1-14; 1 Peter 1:10-20; John 13:36-38; Psalms 22 & 148 (AM); Psalms 105 & 130 (PM)

^{19:38} After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So, he came and took away his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

– John 19:38-42



And so, we come to the day in which the work of Jesus is finally done. He was faithful to His Father. He fulfilled His mission on earth. The purpose for which He was born was now complete. He died for our sin. He gave His life so we could have ours. He let go of any power He had and trusted fully in the power of God. And so, we read the story of His burial and of two followers of His who were instrumental in making it happen.

At first glance, it might seem a bit ironic that the two who took Jesus' body and buried it were doing so in secret. Joseph of Arimathea was doing it quietly, in fear of the Jews who might take him to task. Nicodemus was doing it under the radar, not wanting the other Pharisees to find out the connection he had with the so-called Christ. At the same time, their involvement in giving Jesus, what they thought would be His final resting place, was more revealing than it was ironic.

How appropriate that these two secretive followers of Jesus were not among those we might have expected to be present. Throughout His ministry, Jesus called and claimed and ministered to the unexpected. Matthew was a tax collector. Peter and James and Andrew and John were fishermen. The other disciples had no claim to fame at all. All they had was a calling given to them by Jesus. The only claim they could make was the one made upon their lives by Christ.

Add to the list of unexpected followers the story of Mary Magdalene, a woman possessed by demons, the calling of Zacchaeus, a tax collector and cheat who was despised by almost everyone, and the stories of countless sinners in need of redeeming who have been led, since our Lord's death, to a life-changing and Spirit-filled faith, and the irony of that day of Jesus' burial becomes one more way in which His person, purpose and part in God's eternal plan for His kingdom is revealed.

The apostle Paul had it correct. "While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us" (Rom. 5:8). How ironic that God's Son would be buried by two sinners for whom He gave His life. How revealing that His death and burial and saving work included even us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for dying on the cross to cover our sin and make us right with God, undeserving as we are. Amen.

Lenten Response: Light a candle in a darkened room and then sit in silence, thanking Jesus for His saving work on the cross.

April 3, 2021 | Holy Saturday

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD: VIGIL OF EASTER

Richard, Bishop of Chichester, 1253

Job 19:21-27a; Hebrews 4:1-16; Romans 8:1-11; Psalms 43 & 149 (AM); Psalms 23 & 114 (PM)

^{8:3}By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

– Romans 8:3-11



This day we refer to as Holy Saturday is one for which we have little detail. It is the day between two significant days — Good Friday on the one side and Easter Sunday on the other. What happened that day, in the saving and redeeming work of God, we cannot say for sure. What significance it holds for our lives today, it is hard to make any certain and secure claims.

We do, however, speak of it in the Apostles' Creed. We confess each week that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again.” The original text of the creed says that “He descended to the dead.” What does it mean when we confess that Jesus “descended into hell” or “to the dead?” Some speculate that Jesus completed His battle with Satan and his legions. Others find significance in His descending to the deepest depths before, in His ascension, being raised to the highest heights. Martin Luther was bold enough to claim that after the events of Good Friday, “God’s very self lay dead in the grave.”

We may never know what happened on that Saturday in between. But what we do not know does not matter. What matters is what we know. What we know is that Jesus was victorious over sin, over death, over the power of the devil. What we know is that His victory is now ours in the Great Exchange that happened on the cross. Our sin was given to Him. His righteousness was given to us. He was rejected and we were made right. He died and we live.

On that day in between those two most significant days, we know without question that whatever happened was for us. And so, we trust in God. And so, we believe in His promises. And so, we find our security and hope in what was accomplished for us in Christ.

Prayer: Lord God, on this day about which we know so little, thank You for accomplishing so much ... for us. Amen.

Lenten Response: Before moving on to the celebration of Easter, think back on the journey of Lent and what you learned.

Easter Sunday | April 4, 2021
THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD
Martin Luther King, Jr., Renewer of Society, 1968
Benedict the African, Friar, 1589

Exodus 12:1-14; Isaiah 51:9-11; Luke 24:13-35; Psalms 93 & 150 (AM); Psalms 136 & 117 (PM)

^{20:19} On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

– John 20:19-23



The passage for this day of celebration took place on the evening of our Lord's resurrection. It was Easter evening. It was only a few short hours after our Lord had been raised from the dead. He appeared to Mary. His tomb was empty when Peter and John went to look. And yet, even with all of that, the disciples were afraid. That is when it happened. In the midst of their fear, Jesus appeared to them. Behind locked doors, boarded up and afraid to come out, Jesus came in. He showed them His hands and His side. He gave to them the gift of peace. And it says, "They were glad when they saw the Lord." As surprising as it must have been, the disciples should not have been surprised. Many times, Jesus had promised them His presence. "Where two or three are gathered," Jesus said, "there I am in their midst." He said, "Lo, I am with you always to the close of the age." He also said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Did you know that those three little words, in their original language, "never," "leave," and "forsake" are not such little words? What they are is a combination of several thoughts and ideas combined into one. The word "never" is a combination of five negatives all brought together. It is a forever never which has no exceptions. The word "leave" actually means "to leave behind, to abandon, to give up on, or to send back." And the word "forsake" means to leave a person "in a helpless state, to disregard, or to relax one's watchfulness."

Put those three little words together and what Jesus is telling us in His resurrection appearance on that first Easter night, in its most literal translation, is not so little. What He is saying is "I will never, no not ever, no never give up on you, abandon you, leave you behind, cause you not to survive, leave you helpless, nor shall I ever relax concerning My presence with you." In other words, you and I, as followers of Jesus are never alone. Jesus died for our sins. He was raised so we could have life. And now He has called and chosen us to live for Him. "As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit." From that moment on, the Church was born. And until Jesus returns, the Church has a mission. We are a sent people. We are a people saved and redeemed and sent by the Risen Christ. And we are not alone. We will never be abandoned. And there is nothing, no not anything, that will never, no not ever, separate us from Him.

Prayer: Almighty God, we thank and praise You for raising Your Son, Jesus, from the dead, and for the promise of His presence and power until He returns. Amen.

Lenten Response: Take five minutes and read the Easter story in John 20, and then take an additional five minutes to sit quietly in the presence of the Risen Christ.

