

# PCNP Lenten Calendar

Date	Event	Time
Wed., February 17	Ash Wednesday Service	6:30am
Sunday, March 28	Palm Sunday Services	9:30 & 11am
Thursday, April 1	Maundy Thursday Service	7:30pm
Friday, April 2	Good Friday Services	2pm & 7:30pm
Sunday, April 4	Easter Sunrise Service	7am
Sunday, April 4	Easter Celebration	9am & 11 am

*The Presbyterian Church at*  
**NEW PROVIDENCE**  
*Christ Centered People Focused*



Lent Devotional 2010

2010



*Real Life,  
Real Jesus*

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# By What Authority

## Psalm 51:1-17

Lent is the 40 day period in the Church where we prepare ourselves for Holy Week and Easter.

The word Lent comes from an old English word meaning to lengthen. It is really a celebration of the season of spring, as the days get longer.

During this season, though, Christians have traditionally done a number of things. Many people decide to give something up for Lent, from chocolate to cigarettes, to talking to their spouse! For many, Lent is a time to reflect on the time that Christ was tempted in the wilderness. And for many others it is a time of serious reflection and introspection, as they consider who they are in relation to a Holy God.

Lent begins today on a day we call Ash Wednesday. It is on this day that many are marked with ashes on their forehead, reminding them that they are dust, and to dust they shall return - a reminder of our humanity. But the ashes symbolize more than simply our humanity. Throughout the centuries, ashes have been used as symbol of penitence. They remind us of our sin and our desperate need of a Savior.

The prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 51 is the prayer of anyone who has ever felt the sting of sin. I think that is all of us!

As we journey through this Lenten season, it is my prayer that we might have the courage to reflect on the state of our hearts and lives, and bring our brokenness before God. For it is only in God, through Jesus Christ that we can know forgiveness, wholeness and cleansing.

Then, when Easter comes, we will be able to rejoice in the knowledge that in Christ our sins are forgiven.

*Ian Rankine*

## Isaiah 59:1-2

The people of Israel had many reasons to believe that God would be there for them. They had the promises and were in a covenant relationship with Him. They thought that their fasting and prayer would earn them God's favor (Isa. 58:3). Now, with calamity at the door, they wondered, "Is God able to deliver us? Will He let His chosen people go through hostility?" He was still more than able to help: The LORD's arm is not too weak. Whether we consider the efficacy or extent of God's power, His hand is as strong, and can reach as far as ever (Num. 11:23). Neither length of time, nor strength of enemies, nor weakness of instruments (which includes us) can diminish the power of God. He was ready and willing to help the Israelites in answer to prayer. His ear is not deaf to your call either. God is still always ready to hear prayer. Not only is His ear not deaf, He is quick to hear (Isa. 65:24).

God was willing to come to his people with mercy, but they hindered Him (Jer. 5:25). Sin hinders God's mercies from coming down upon us. It is a partition that separates us from God. Sin is not only disobeying God's will for our lives (1 John 3:4), but it is any promotion of self even through adherence to the law (Rom. 4:15). Whether inward thoughts or outward conduct; whether actions or failures to act—sin separates us from fellowship with God. (Rom. 6:16; 7:5-24).

At times it is tempting for us to think that God owes us. After all, we are not that bad, are we? We read our bibles, go to church, pray, and tithe. However, God is not impressed with our resumes. No matter how much good we do, none of us are good enough to stand before the Lord (Rom 3:12). But there is hope. We must stop trusting in our efforts and look to the cross. It is only through confession of sin, and acceptance of the atoning work of Christ, that we may stand before Him holy, blameless, and in love. We may have to go through a time of discipline. And God will not listen any more (cf. Heb 12:5-13). But that is not God's final word. As Isaiah states later in this chapter: "The Redeemer will come to Jerusalem to buy back those in Israel who have turned from their sins, says the Lord." (Isa. 59:20).

*Christopher Bedi*

## Ezra 10:6

The entire Book of Ezra is just ten chapters, and ten pages in my Bible. Ezra was a religious man, a leader of the restoration movement after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. Throughout the book God is working through the worldly power of the Persian emperors, through his people and especially through Ezra to restore Jerusalem.

It has been one crisis after another for the remnant of Abraham, Issac and Jacob. And now Israel is being asked to go through yet another wrenching crisis. After the division of David's kingdom and the loss of the northern tribes, the captivity in Babylon, and the return to the site of their destroyed Kingdom, the remnant is now being told that it must repent for it's error in the exuberance of freedom.

A people who had remained free (pure) in slavery had, in freedom, polluted itself and was in need of repentance and forgiveness. God's purpose for the nation was righteousness, but the people had not obeyed. Working against God's purpose was the natural inclination of His people. The holy remnant from Babylon had been intermarrying with the non-Jewish inhabitants of the land to which they had returned. In the midst of the peoples' weeping and confessions of unfaithfulness, Ezra retreats to a lonely room and continues his mourning and fasting.

What happened then, a religious leader ordering the dissolution of all marriages to outsiders, surely wouldn't happen today. What, in this case, was right for them is not necessarily right for us in our church and families today. But, there is still mourning to be done today. There is pain and suffering faraway and close by. There are sins to be forgiven and transgressions to be mourned.

We sin against God and suffer, both through the knowledge of our brokenness before God and through our efforts to clean up our lives. Imagine the suffering that ensued after the breaking up of marriages, and perhaps families with children. Yes, God will redeem the sins of His people, but at what price?

Like Ezra's people, our community has failed to be all that it could be. Our worship is not always perfect, our love not wholly pure. So, even though we are not like Ezra, religious leaders of the priestly class in pre-Christian Jerusalem, we can still learn from Ezra's example and withdraw for a time, to mourn and fast, to contemplate our standing before God.

This could be a depressing experience, if not for the hope that is in Christ. As I pray, and mourn over the shortcomings of my community, my own hurtful actions and the unholy desires of my own heart, I still treasure the hope, in my heart and mind, that is Christ. I do this because of the faith in Christ that has been given to me. If there is such a thing as "Lent", it always leads to "Easter", and to the assurance of grace and mercy, hope and love, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Thank you Father.

*Ron Schneider*

## Psalm 38:18

In his poem "Confession," George Herbert described the futility of trying to hide your sins, of locking them up in boxes inside chests that are stored inside closets in your heart. No matter how well you think you've hidden your secrets, God knows them. Grief, the "cunning guest," knows exactly where and when to torment you. The sufferings that result from sin cannot be kept out: "No smith can make such locks, but they have keys; Closets are halls to them, and hearts, highways." The only way to stop the pain of sin is to confess, to make an open breast. While the pain of sin can latch on to hidden sins to afflict you, "smooth open hearts no fastening have."

In Psalm 38, David is well aware of the suffering that results from sin. His body is overcome by pain, he is covered with festering sores, and he cannot bear up under the burden of sin. Friends and neighbors shun him and his enemies plan his ruin. He recognizes that he cannot hide any of his sins or suffering from God: "All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you." So, like Herbert, David takes the only step left, the only way out: he confesses his sins.

We need to see that there is only one way out of our predicament. We cannot set our sins aside in separate compartments and show only the shiny side to God. We will end up like David, with a broken body, friends far away and enemies at our door. The key step, the pivot of our lives, is confession, opening up to the Lord, realizing he knows all and forgives all. Only when we admit that we cannot deal with sin by ourselves, we cannot segregate our sins and keep them under lock and key, do we receive the relief we seek. By exposing ourselves to the purifying light of God, we can deal with that sin we have kept hidden because we were afraid to give it up.

Lord, I come to you today, knowing that there are parts of me that I don't want you to see, that I don't want to give up to you. I pray that I may make the choice that David did, surrendering all of my life to you, opening all my life to you, that you may be glorified.

*Stow Lovejoy*

*"I confess my iniquity;  
I am troubled by my sin."*

# The Ambitious Heart

## Mark 10:32-52

*Let one of us sit on your right, and the other on your left in glory.* Mark 10:37

If Jesus were to ask you the question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' I wonder how you would respond. Most of us would have a laundry list of items that we would want Jesus to take care of for us – in fact, most of us do have such a laundry list, only we piously call it a prayer list. We list things that we know our friends and family, our mission partners and pastors, the world and the church need. But then after we get through the bulk of the list, we get to the part that is really important, and that is what can Jesus do for me. Many of us want our lives to be so much easier, our spouses to be more attentive, our children to be more obedient. We want to be free from the worry of daily life. We want someone to do the shopping for us, cook and clean for us. We want God to take away the struggles that we have with our emotions and our sin. We want to be elevated above real life and dwelling in the glory of God.

James and John wanted all of the above. They didn't want to have to deal with the mess of life. They wanted to get to the glory, before they had endured the cross.

And Jesus said, 'No!' The life that you are called to live is a life of service, a life of giving. It's the way of the cross. If you want to be great, you've got to give up that desire. If you want life to be easy, you've got to give up that desire.

It is vital and necessary for us to pray, and it is good to have desires. But our hearts desire must be in line with what Christ's desire is for us. He says elsewhere, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.'

If our first prayer is 'for all these things,' then, like James and John, we are missing the point. But if it is to seek the kingdom of God – whatever that might mean, wherever that may lead us, however hard that may be – God will give us his grace to endure. That's His promise. And He will keep it.

*Ian Rankine*

## James 3:13-15

In this passage, James questions us about being “wise and understanding”. What does it mean to be wise? If we have learned well in school, accumulating much knowledge or if we have common sense, are we wise? Perhaps we are, but this passage indicates that there are two kinds of wisdom and that they come from two different places.

What is James talking about in this question? Proverbs 9:10 says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” This is not fear of the Lord in a negative way but is a loving reverence for God that includes submission to His lordship and to the commands of his word. James says that this kind of wisdom will be shown by our “good life” including our deeds. On the other hand, you have actions rooted out of bitter envy and selfish ambition which is earthly wisdom that is not from the Lord, but of the devil.

Let us pause today and make sure that we are all about the kind of wisdom that comes from the Lord. Sometimes it is so natural to act out of envy and selfishness. Let us be mindful that our lives are on display for others to see. We need to pause and examine our motives in a given situation in order to exhibit the wisdom of God. This sometimes involves humility and holding our tongue and it always requires the discipline of spending time with the Lord and reading his word.

*Lord, please help me to be wise and understanding. When I am tempted to act selfishly, please help me to remember how Jesus acted when He walked the earth. Show me how to submit to you and to follow the commands of your word. Amen.*

*Jay Troutman*

## Isaiah 53:1-7

I once knew a rebellious teenager, who did not often think about the future. One can't say he rebelled against God; for to him, God was not even relevant. By the end of 10th grade, any motivation for scholastic achievement had been replaced with other, far less useful pursuits. It was remarkable that he was permitted to graduate from high school with so few days of attendance, and so low a grade point average.

He did, however, like to work and earn money. Even before graduating he was a manufacturing laborer, earning the princely sum of \$3.10 per hour, minimum wage at the time. It quickly became clear that earning an hourly wage in a very small factory was not going to lead to prosperity. Better prospects, however, did not immediately present themselves. For some reason, the owner of the factory, Ron, took notice of this kid. Ron constantly encouraged the young man to go to night school at the local community college. The whole idea seemed ridiculous to the kid! Studying was hard work, he had not done well previously, and besides, community college was expensive. "I'll pay for it," Ron said – but he never offered to say why.

I was that kid. It took three years to re-take basic high school subjects and get a few college level courses completed, all of which Ron paid for in full. Ron also kept up the encouragement. Unlike during high school, I found course studies challenging and rewarding. I left factory work and went on to earn an engineering degree, then on to a master's degree, and later a doctorate of law – much in night school. (Ron didn't pay for all that.) It was quite a ride.

Years later, I went back to that factory to ask Ron why he took such an interest in my education, and to tell him that what he had done made a big difference in my life. But it was too late. Ron had died some years earlier from complications associated with alcoholism – too many years of hard drinking. Even now, 30 years later, a broken alcoholic seems like the most unlikely person to have taken an interest, and made such a positive impact, on my life. I didn't deserve it. But isn't that how God often works?

Isaiah tells us that God wrapped Himself in a plain brown wrapper: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isa 53:2.) Through, mercy, compassion, and action, Christ paid a price for the undeserving: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isa 53:5.) And Christ suffered silently: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (Isa 53:7.)

I don't know why God used Ron to influence my life the way he did. God did not consult with me – and Ron never told me. But I do know that, through His goodness and mercy, God has blessed me, no matter how undeserving. Though He was outwardly plain, Jesus was remarkable: He took on all sin in strength and silence . . . and paid the ultimate price.

Prayer: Lord, we pray for your mercy and compassion on a broken world. May we have wisdom and sensitivity to you leading, so that we may be your hands and feet – ushering in Your Kingdom. May it be so.

## Philippians 2:1-8

As believers, united with Christ, we experience the encouragement, comforting love, and fellowship of His Spirit. Paul says we should, therefore, share this bond of unity with our fellow Christians. Yet, these cords are often severed by our pride, demonstrated through selfishly seeking our own way; thinking we are right and that others are wrong. Humility is the key to unity among believers. Paul is not saying that we must consider everyone else as superior to us, but that the interests and cares of their lives are just as important as ours. Therefore, our concern for others should equal the concern we have for ourselves. As Jesus commanded, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Christ is our supreme example of this humility. Though in every way equal with God, Jesus, by becoming a man, selflessly set aside His power and glory. He who had know no limitations in mind or body, now had to grow in knowledge. He experienced hunger and fatigue. He lived a life at the lowest level of society. In Isaiah 53, He is described as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Amazingly, Jesus, who could have forcefully demanded our worship and service, gave up that right. Instead, He became like us in order to save us. He emptied himself and became a servant. The nature of a servant is to obey. Through Jesus' life we see what it means to learn obedience.

In obedience to His Father's will, Jesus expressed the ultimate humility. He would not only experience death, but the most painful and degrading form of execution ever devised. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and criminals. Hanging on the cross, the victim was subjected to hours or even days of public humiliation. Stripped of every shred of outward dignity, Jesus obediently suffered and died for us.

*Jim Quickstad*

*"...Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves..."*

*Phil. 2:3*

## Romans 12:1

Making sacrifices is difficult. We don't like to cut back. We get used to our standard of living and push back if anyone says that we need to tighten our belts. For many of us though, that has become a harsh reality over the last couple years as we have had to reexamine our priorities because of lost jobs or changes in employment. Sacrifice for some of us has become a way of life. But it has been a forced sacrifice, bound by necessity. Duty. And along with that there is a lot of anguish and bitterness. We don't want to have to make these types of sacrifices. We want things to remain the same. And when our hand is forced, we don't like it.

Often this is how we view the type of sacrifice that the Bible speaks about. We think that God wants us to change so we are going to have to stop doing all the things that have helped to define us over the years. We have a perception that giving ourselves to God means having a complete personality transplant and becoming something we would rather not be.

It's interesting that Paul talks about offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. It is this physical person that God wants. It is this physical person that God actually loves. Not our perception of who we are or who we think we ought to be, but who we are as real people here and now.

The reality is, God loves you. Jeff Ebert has been known to say, God loves you just the way you are; but he loves you too much to let you stay that way.

The key word in all of this is love. God loves us so much that He made the ultimate sacrifice for us. It wasn't His duty – as if God has a duty to us – it was love. His desire for us is that our sacrifice, our giving of ourselves, is an act of love back to Him.

This is how Oswald Chambers puts it: "Sacrifice for love is never conscious; sacrifice for duty always has margins of distress." The nature of love is to give, not to receive. Talk to a lover about giving up anything, and he doesn't begin to understand you!

*Ian Rankine*

*“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship”.*

## Colossians 3:1-4

In Glory, I will appear with Jesus. Wow! No more pain, sorrow, fear, or worry. That time seems far off, but Paul is saying we have already had victory over death and sin so we should live our lives focused on Jesus above. Raise our minds and hearts above our earthly worries and look instead at God. When I fill my mind and heart with God, I think of who He is and what He means to me. He is a God of ultimate love. His motives, actions and reasons are all based on his love for me. How can I not trust in a God who loves me so much. When I look at our earthly situation of our son's car accident, I could focus only on the sorrow and loss. But raising my mind and soul to God and what Jesus did for me, I get renewed strength, peace and trust. Jesus could have said, after dying on the cross, "I'm finished", and left me on my own not being a part of my life. Thank God he didn't do this. He is daily intimately involved in my life as long as I let Him. I remember how He has answered prayer and caused many miracles big and small to take place in my life and the lives of people I am praying for. I believe in the truth of these words from "Our Daily Bread", "God brings good out of evil, light out of darkness, joy out of pain, peace out of fear, order out of chaos, life out of death". What encouragement and love Christ showers on me. So does that mean no more troubles or disappointments or pain? In our Bible Study it was brought out that the verse, "...your life is hidden with Christ in God", means God's hand is wrapped around me and nothing can happen to me without God's consent. So yes there will be troubles, pain, and sorrow in my life, but God is in control allowing things to happen for a reason. I believe He will bring out an abundance of good from the trials and I need to keep trusting, leaning, learning, being thankful and seeking His Living word. Living because it breathes life, hope and joy into me as I read it. So keep focused on God above for, "If God be our God, He will give us peace in trouble. When there is a storm without, He will make peace within. The world can create trouble in peace, but God can create peace in trouble."

Thomas Watson, Puritan preacher

*Denise Sharkey*

## Galatians 5:22

It was such a beautiful autumn day when my then 8 year old daughter, Brooke, and I were walking around the block together. Brooke was sharing with me how much it bothers her when boys try to impress girls. She explained that they “act weird” to get others’ attention and “show off”. I smiled secretly to myself. Some things never change.

I tried to point the discussion towards God. I wondered aloud what God would think about us trying to impress others. Brooke knew that God wouldn’t like that very much and so we discussed how showing off to others is prideful and self-seeking. And we talked about living as if we only had to “show off” to God – what would that look like? Brooke was quick to reply that we do that by sharing our M&M cookies with others! Kids, they keep things so plain and simple, don’t they?

In John 14:16 God promised us that after Jesus died and ascended, “he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth” that is the Holy Spirit. Developing moral character with our behaviors and attitudes by living and being led by the Holy Spirit is a good recipe for growing “good fruit”. It’s an expression of being right with God. John 15:4-5 reminds me that we cannot bear any fruit ourselves. We must stay connected to God in order to bear fruit.

On a good day in our house the fruit of the Spirit looks something like this (although not necessarily at the same time):

- Love – sharing M&M cookies with others
- Joy – squeezing Daddy when he comes home from work
- Peace – apologizing first
- Patience – practicing patience when listening to a child practice their violin in the background, being interrupted by the other at least 10 times, having the phone and doorbell ring all within a matter of minutes and being unable to accomplish anything (which is exactly what is happening as I write this devotion)
- Kindness – not complaining about foreign foods on a dinner plate
- Goodness – seeing it in others and telling them so
- Faithfulness – 17 years of marriage come May
- Gentleness – serving others dinner first before yourself
- Self-control – resisting the urge to show off in front of girls!

*Lord, Thank you for the Holy Spirit that lives in me, teaches me and intercedes for me. Convict me this day of my behaviors and attitudes that do not bear good fruit so I may correct them and be right with You. Help me to live my life for an audience of One. Amen*

# The King is Coming

## The King is Coming

### Mark 11:1-25

In this passage, there are three scenes. The first is almost too familiar that we might normally save it for Palm Sunday and then forget about it when there aren't any more palm branches at the door. Jesus rides a colt into the city while people shout "Hosanna!" The second paints Jesus going ballistic at the church gift shop after cursing a fig tree. And the third is "Fig Tree: The Sequel" with a strange lesson about telling mountains to jump into the sea. In reading these twenty-five verses straight through, I was at first a little confused. How do these three stories go together – and what in the world does it have to do with me, with you, with any of us? I don't even like figs, and I don't think I'll be selling trinkets in Parish Hall anytime soon.

When I read it again, I noticed verse 15, but this time it was unsettling. "Jesus overturned the tables and the benches." Some words popped into my head:

Turn over. New leaf. Switch positions. Overthrow. Invert. Opposite. Totally different. Move over. Change the station. Flip. Realize. See. Hear.

Jesus was turning things upside down, rearranging the furniture. More pointedly, he was demanding their attention. The "norm" wasn't normal anymore. Old habits were changing. New ones were being formed. Expectations were flipped over. Power was shifting. Uncertainty was in the spotlight. Trust was essential. Jesus wasn't just angry at the misuse of the temple, he was painting a huge picture, adorned with his purpose, his passion. This was bigger than any New Year's resolution. Christ was here, and everyone was noticing.

In each of these scenarios, Jesus shows his authority and the need to trust and believe him. Cursing the tree, summoning the colt, claiming kingship, flipping tables and chairs, establishing justice in the temple, preaching God's forgiveness of sins when we pray and believe. These all point to how big God is and needs to be in our lives. This is the part where Jesus isn't just telling stories, or doing cool things that people watch from the crowd. This is where the presence of God becomes dangerous and life-altering, uncomfortable and awkward, because all the things that seemed so important before now wither in comparison to his power and dim in the radiance of his glory.

During Lent, as many are giving up chocolate or their favorite reality show, may this be a time that you and I see Jesus. See him as compassionate enough to love us, trustworthy enough to guide us, and powerful enough to change us.

Offer this prayer: *"Jesus, you came to this world to rescue me, to offer me pardon, and to transform me. Your greatness is beyond my reasoning, but I ask that you reveal yourself more each day. Lord, take over the places in my daily life where I struggle to give you control. Sustain me as I trust you, that each step I take in faith and in surrender may be strong. Move me by your Spirit, and may truth echo in my heart. In your powerful name I pray. Amen."*

Chris Fortin

## Revelation 1:4-5

I love the way so many passages of scripture are so sparing in their words and descriptions, but are packed with so much meaning. The passage paints a clear picture of the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit. But it is the picture of the Son that is painted most vividly. John mentions three titles of Jesus – The Faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the Dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the Earth. Each of these titles is packed with information about who Jesus is.

The Faithful Witness – The best witness is invariably an eyewitness. Hearing from someone second or third hand always takes something away from the import of an event. Jesus is described as the Faithful Witness, or as Barclay puts it, the witness on whom we can rely. In Christ God himself has come to us to show exactly who He is, and what He is like. Jesus is not just some story teller passing on second hand information. He is the faithful witness.

The Firstborn from the Dead – Barclay explains this by saying that through his resurrection, Jesus gained a victory over death, which all who believe in Him may share. He goes on to say, that as the first born, all glory power and dominion belong to him. There is nothing that does not belong to him. There is nothing that does not come under his control.

The Ruler of the kings of the earth – Even the kings of the earth are ultimately under Christ's authority. One of Jesus' titles is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Paul says in Philippians that one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

These titles give a wonderful word of hope and promise to us. In Christ we can know God. In Christ there is the promise of new life. In Christ we have the assurance that we are entirely in His hands, both in this life and the life to come.

*Ian Rankine*

## John 10:11

This week we have been thinking about Jesus as the King. We have had in mind the image of a humble King riding into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, being hailed by all those around Him with Palm branches waving in the air, and coats and jackets lining his path. It is not the typical image that we have of a king. We tend to think of someone high and mighty, robed in splendid garments with a golden crown upon his head. We have in mind images of great rulers being in shining carriages being pulled by white horses, followed by attendants and a military entourage. But this is not what we see here.

The type of king that Jesus was to be, was very different from the one in popular imagination. He was to be a king like David. Now, granted, David was a great king, but remember, before he was king, he was a shepherd. And as a king, it was his task to shepherd his people.

This is the type of king that Jesus was. Although He speaks of a kingdom, He never calls Himself a king, others declare him to be so, and He doesn't deny the claim. He doesn't call Himself a King, but He does call Himself a Shepherd. The Good Shepherd. Very often people hired shepherds to look after their flocks. These hired hands were not paid a particularly good salary, so they were quite unreliable. They tended to be people that couldn't find work elsewhere, because, they were unpleasant people to be around. When any danger faced the sheep, these hired hands tended to bolt and leave the sheep to their own fate.

But Jesus is different. He is not a hired shepherd, He is the Good Shepherd. The sheep actually belong to Him, and he will do whatever is necessary to guard the sheep in time of danger, even to the point of laying down His own life.

This is the type of king that Jesus is. One who knows His own, and loves them enough to die for them. This is why He came. It was what His Father had commanded Him to do.

Jesus is the King, but He is also the Good Shepherd. He laid down His life for you.

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

## Hebrews 1:8-9

This Easter season, we will claim Jesus as our God and Savior. We can rejoice, since we have the privilege of giving all glory to Christ. As our friend David Bryant says, "Christ is all." And if there were any doubt about the divinity of Jesus Christ, this first chapter of Hebrews dispels it! Paul's word to the Hebrews reveals the mystery of the trinity, that "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being" (verse 3). And then in this passage, Paul quotes Psalm 45 verses 6 to 7, but with an added twist that leaves no doubt about Christ's reign. He adds the fact that this is quoting what God is saying about the Son. Yes, our God is setting the facts straight. We do not have to debate. The answer is here. Yes, He is and will be reigning forever. Yes, he loves righteousness and hates wickedness. Yes, his name is above all names. Then he quotes this beautiful expression about Christ being anointed with the "oil of joy." What a beautiful image that is for us. In seeking God and in claiming Him, we learn of his awesome and fearsome righteousness. Yet we also know that he loves us and he loves us with joy. I thank Jesus today for the glimpse I have of that joy. Despite any misgivings, fears, disappointments and grief – His joy still shines through – making this life and the promise of the next one that is nothing less than fully complete – filled with joy! Praise Jesus.

Mark Thompson

*"...Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom..."*

*Hebrews 1:8*

## Revelation 21:3-5

We don't have to look far in our world or even in our own lives to find pain and mourning. Our daily news stories tell of tragedy and suffering on a scale that we cannot even begin to comprehend. Recent images of the Haiti earthquake have shocked us to the core and remind us of how fragile and uncertain life is. The continuing violence and unrest in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan speak to us of the dangers that so many in our world face on a daily basis. When we listen to the stories of those within our own community we hear of pain, loss and betrayal, people dealing with illness and disease that wracks their bodies and minds with terrible pain. Often we find ourselves overwhelmed with the needs of our world and our response is one of grief and sorrow.

However, this Scripture reminds us that such pain and grief is not the final word. As we approach Easter we are filled with the hope that comes through the cross and empty tomb of our Lord. It is that hope that fuels so much of our Christian faith. It is that hope which allows us to proclaim words of comfort and peace in the midst of death and mourning. It is that hope which allows us to utter prayers of healing at the hospital bedside. It is that hope which grounds our belief in a God who will ultimately save us, not only from our own sins and pain, but also saves the world from violence, war and poverty.

Ten days after the Haiti earthquake the newspapers showed pictures of worshipers gathered at a Baptist church in the heart of the city. The church building had only a few walls still standing and yet there in the rubble stood members of the congregation and others from the community who had gathered to worship. Gathered not to weep and wail, not to lament their circumstances (although both would be perfectly understandable) but rather to proclaim their faith in a God who has made promises to His people. Promises that are fulfilled in both the joyful and tragic situations of our world, promises of hope, comfort and peace that allowed those people to joyfully sing songs of praise and proclaim that through Christ they would have victory.

As we approach Easter may we feel that victory in our lives and may we claim that for our communities and our world trusting in the powerful promises of our God and clinging to the hope that stands in the face of all tragedy and remains true in all circumstances.

*Maureen Paterson*

## Psalm 8:1-2

Take a moment to reflect on the contrast between our all powerful, all sufficient Lord, and the dependency of the children who praise him. The contrast is striking. Verse one highlights our Lord's majesty, and that his glory, his magnificence, his beauty are above everything; even the heavens. Yet, his ordained praise does not come from kings, not from presidents, not from the powerful, but from babies! Trusting, simple, reliant and needy babies. These same babies the Psalmist poetically states are used to silence the enemy. And in the day of Jesus, the children did just that! As Jesus made his final entrance into Jerusalem as he cleansed the temple from its wayward ways, it was the children who shouted, 'Hosanna to the son of David.' The children had the eyes to see who Jesus truly was, not the teachers of the law, not the 'pious' Pharisees, who were too stuck in their own human traditions to recognize the true King in front of their very eyes.

God has a habit of choosing the unlikely ones for great works, such as young David to fight Goliath and the homely disciples who were chosen to preach the Word of God. Perhaps it is partly because they are willing. They willingly jump from the top of the stairs into the arms of their Daddy. They are willing to walk into the darkest room, in the arms of Daddy. Perhaps it is because they are not clinging too tightly to tradition, thereby allowing God to teach them in every way. Do you trust in the Father, our heavenly Daddy, enough to say yes, to jump for him? Pray now for increased trust, for the heart to see where He may be asking you to trust in him more. Pray for the ability to see the truth of Jesus, no matter in what form it may come.

Kate Oswald

*“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.”*

## Psalm 19:1-4

When I left home, I found comfort in the knowledge that my family, miles away slept soundly under the same moon that shone through my window. How much more comforting is God's presence! And His glorious presence is declared through His creation. Psalm 19 reminds us that God's creation itself declares His glory and His might. Wherever we gaze, we are reminded of God's presence and power. The beauty of the world around us is but one of His precious gifts to all of us. And as verse 3 reminds us, there is no language barrier in nature! The sun, the stars, the moon, speak in a language understood by all peoples. God wants to make Himself known to all people. His creation is so vast that we cannot fathom it, yet we all sleep under the very same moon, loved by the very same God.

*Dear Heavenly Father, creator of Heaven and Earth, I thank you and praise you for the beauty of the earth you created for our pleasure. I thank you for the way your creation declares your power, might and glory to all people. Give us ears to hear and eyes to see. I pray that this day I will see you in some small way whether it be a bird splashing in a pool of water or a child's laughter. Thank you God that your hand is in it all. Amen*

Maury Fryer

*"The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands..."*

*Psalm  
19:1-4*

# By What Authority

## Mark 11:27-12:27

When you read the Scripture for today I would like you to remember that in the King James Version the words, “they discussed it among themselves” is translated as “they reasoned together.” They said to themselves, “If we say this, if we say that.”

This morning I found myself singing, “You are my God, You are my King, You are my Master, my Everything” and I had to stop. I began to think of the many times I just sing or say things to the Lord in my prayer times without really thinking about what I am actually saying. I sang, He is my God and my King, BUT I had to ask myself, “do my actions show that He is REALLY my Master”? Do I treat Him as my Master? How many times I find myself ‘reasoning’ with myself when I sense He is telling me to do something. I think, “Well, if I do this, this will happen, and if I pretend I haven’t sensed His leading, I can just do what I want to do and not be bothered.” But, if He is my Master, my ‘reasonings’ must stop!

I proceeded to ask His forgiveness for all the times I don’t treat Him with the respect due Him. Needless to say I was still bummed when I got to work because I know myself too well. BUT GOD wouldn’t leave me in a funk. He had a sister come to me to remind me that I was His beloved child; dearly loved. I was able to see myself IN JESUS once again, pure and perfect in the Father’s eyes! I know I am not alone in this.

When you are disappointed with yourself because of the times you find yourself ‘reasoning’ for the joy from Jesus redeeming us. Remember Jesus did for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves! He paid the price in full. Praise Him!

*Diane Hill*

## Isaiah 9:6-7

God's grace and justice are described in this oracle from Isaiah. The prophet gives us insight into God's perfect plan for us, which includes redemption and a ruler. Some of the many titles we hear for Jesus are mentioned here: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, but there are also references to the reign of Jesus and his "government." Behind the backdrop our human rulers and all the failures of their governments through time, it can be very difficult for any of us to imagine a perfectly just and righteous ruler! Imagine a kingdom where peace will have no end!

This perfectly just and righteous government is only possible through the return of Jesus Christ and is also described in Revelation. The passage makes clear reference to the zeal of the LORD, clearly indicating that we, God's people, have not done anything to earn His grace.

*Dear Lord,*

*Thank you for your Son, who paid for our sins so we can have a relationship with You and who will return to rule our world in perfect justice. Please open our eyes, ears and hearts for you the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace to transform us as You wish. Your will, God. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.*

*In Jesus' Name,*

*Amen.*

*Chuck Biczak*

*"For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given..."*

*Isaiah 9:6a*

## Ephesians 1:22

The New Testament is filled with different metaphors for the church. Each one expresses something a little different about our relationship with each other and our relationship with Jesus Christ. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus talks about the church being like a flock of sheep, with Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Peter talks about the church being like Noah's ark (Does that mean we are a bunch of animals?) – a vessel of safety on a wild and dangerous sea. The boat itself guided by the hand of God. Often the whole concept of the Church as family comes up. God is our Father and we are brothers and sisters. There is also the concept of the church being the Bride of Christ.

The metaphor that crops up time and again though, is that of the church as the Body of Christ. Paul talks about this in great detail in 1 Corinthians 12. The Body is made up of many parts, each part has a role to play in order for it to function properly. If one part is not working, the rest of the body has to compensate. There are some tasks that can only be performed by certain parts of the body.

The idea of the body of Christ is remarkably helpful to keep us from forgetting who and what we are. Sometimes we tend to think that we can be Christians in isolation but, if we are a body, what we do affects not just us but, the whole body. What we fail to do also affects the whole body.

In these verses in Ephesians we are reminded that yes we are part of the Body, the church, but we are also more than that. It is not just the individuals working together that make up the church. It is the fact that we are individuals working together, with Christ as our head.

Here is the take away for today: As you go about your task as a member of the body of Christ, remember, you are not doing your work! You are not doing God's work! It is God who is doing His work through you.

*Ian Rankine*

*“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church”*

## Revelation 5:12

This is one of the most significant passages on worship in the entire Bible. Thousands upon thousands of angels are gathered before the throne of God, lifting up their voices, bowing down before God in praise and in worship. This is a very real glimpse of what it will be like to be in the presence of God for all eternity. But it also gives us a glimpse of what worshiping in a community of faith can be like.

• God has promised that whenever His people are gathered together in His name, He will be in the midst. What, though, does it really mean to be gathered in God's Name. One answer lies in this verse, and it is contained in one word. Worthy!

God's people gather for all kinds of reasons. Fun, Fellowship, Food (especially Food!) We gather to study, we gather to pray, to sing, to laugh, to cry. Whatever the perceived reason, the overarching reason is to worship. In Ye Olde Englishe, the word worship comes from a root word which means to give worth to something. In other words to declare something or someone as worthy. Twice in Revelation 5 the Lamb is declared to be worthy.

• In a sense, it doesn't really matter the context of our gathering as Christians. But we have to ask ourselves, are we declaring God's worth? Is what we are doing simply for ME? Am I singing to make me feel better about myself? Am I leading a Small Group because I need to feel validated? Am I working with children because I need to feel some unconditional love and acceptance? Am I praying simply to get my thoughts in order? Am I coming to ALPHA just for the food?!

Is this all about Me, or is what I am doing really bringing honor to God?

It's all about the Lamb being worthy, and giving Him all glory and honor, dominion and power and praise!

*Ian Rankine*

*“In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’”*

## Philippians 2:9-11

### “Knee Need”

We were memorizing verse 10 in my kindergarten class. “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” One little boy raised his hand and said, “Mrs. Voorhees, I thought you bow with your waist. How do you bow with your knees?” What a great question!

If we look closely at these verses we see that at the beginning of the verses Paul uses the word “THEREFORE” which is always a clue to look at the previous verses to see what it is “there for.” We see Jesus humbling himself in obedience to the Father which led to the most humiliating kind of death. To the Jew, if you were executed on a cross it meant you were bearing the CURSE of God. In New Testament times you would not find anyone wearing crosses around their necks. But the good news is that the story does not end there but a DIVINE REVERSAL occurs in verse 9. God takes charge and reverses every false accusation against Jesus. He overturns the world’s verdict!

God elevates Christ from the lowest to the highest place. The world vilified Christ so the father vindicated Christ. He also gives Jesus the highest name – LORD. In the Greek language and culture the word LORD has special significance. The Caesar of the Roman Empire was called Lord Caesar because people believed he was divine. This passage comes from the Old Testament passage Isaiah 45 which is about the sovereignty and power of God. Paul’s use of the word Lord was ascribing full deity to Jesus.

That kindergarten student caused me to stop and think differently about this verse. Bowing from the waist is often thought of as a means of showing respect or at times thanks. But to get on your knees is a sign of complete humility and utter dependence on God. It puts Christ in his rightful place in our lives. Try praying on your knees. It is a unique and spiritually invigorating exercise. It shows Christ our complete need for his presence and direction in our lives.

For some of us getting down on our knees is not such an easy exercise! But remember God stooped down from heaven to become a man and then suffered more than any other human being. He shared in all our sufferings and he deeply desires to make things right.

Abraham Lincoln, one of the greatest presidents knew his “knee need”....”I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”

## Colossians 1:15-16

Paul's letter to the Colossians was based on reports to him that the church in the city of Colosse was following false teachings and blending of religions, including worship of angels, focus on the body and rules for behavior based on Jewish law and influences from other cultures and beliefs. Paul took the opportunity in his letter to state the distinctiveness of our faith in Jesus as God and the Creator of all.

We can see parallels in our modern society when people who do not see or know Jesus portray him as only a great man or great teacher. Some of the world's religions, such as Islam, acknowledge Jesus as one of the great prophets but no more.

Paul states in Colossians 1:15, "He is the image of the invisible God". This is not the kind of image that a photograph or video would portray, but through prayer and study of Jesus' life, we can begin to get a glimpse of our God and his majesty. In John 14: 9, Jesus told Philip, "...He who has seen me has seen the Father."

The remainder of Verse 15 and Verse 16 tell us that Jesus was the Creator, who created everything in the universe and within, seen or unseen, animals, plants, human beings, and even the angels that the Colossians were falsely worshiping. Our Lord Jesus is unique and supreme, and the eternal life offered to all who follow and worship him is part of his creation plan.

As Brian Wren states in his hymn "Hidden Christ, Alive Forever", "Hidden Christ, alive for ever, Savior, Servant, Friend and Lord, year by year, unseen, you offer life undying, love outpoured. Day by day, you walk among us, known and honored, yet concealed, freeing, chiding, leading, guiding, till your glory is revealed."

Mike Shao

*"...all things were created by him and for him..."*

*Colossians  
1:16b*

## Colossians 1:19-20

Jesus... Fully God, yet fully human. Can you and I even imagine that?....

Fully God.... He was there at the very beginning. By Him all things were created. In Him all things hold together, that in everything He might have supremacy.

Fully human.... Jesus lived and died just like one of us... Well, not exactly.... Fully human? Yes. Here's the difference: Jesus was tempted, just as we are, but He never sinned... We, on the other hand... Well... We sin. Jesus was, and is, sinless perfection.

Reconcile... Patch up... Bridge... Resolve... Settle... Jesus' death on the cross reconciled all things to God. His death paid our debt. Our sin debt. Your debt. My debt. A debt we could never pay. By making peace... Peace... Harmony... Serenity... Calm... Making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.... Wait... What?.... Are you serious?.... Peace through blood?... Peace through Jesus' death?... The death Jesus died for you and for me was about the most excruciating death man could come up with – not likely that any of us would have to die that way.... Peace through that excruciating death... And for One who did not deserve death... Yes, peace...

And Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians that God was pleased...

Though the pain of being separated from His Son, and the pain of a Father for His Son's suffering, must have been way beyond measure... Why go through all that?... Because He loves us. Period.

How great is the love that God has for each of us! How great is the love that Jesus has for each of us! And now, what is our response?....

*John Hannig*

# Top Priority

## Mark 12:28-44

The closet was filled with old clothes, boxes of papers, shelves of books; the clutter of being in one house for twenty years. Everything held onto for a variety of very important reasons. The calendar was jammed with various events and activities; the clutter of being in today's hyperactive culture. All coming from or representing the many idols that dominate everyday life and showing how we hold onto our earthly possessions and fill our time with busyness instead of letting go and surrendering all to God. Our heavenly Father wants all of us. Jesus gave His all for us to spend eternity with Him. He spared nothing.

When the teachers of the law asked Jesus what the most important commandment of all is, Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Jesus added, "The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus makes it very clear. Loving the Lord our God is our top priority. Jesus wants us to give Him our 'all.' So often we hold back. We store things for another day. We are commanded to love the Lord with our all. But more is also required. Just to remind us that God's love knows no bounds, we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Later in the passage, Jesus watches as the crowd brings their offerings to the temple treasury. He observes what the people bring. The rich people conspicuously throw in large amounts of money with the hope of being noticed just like the scribes with their flowing robes and obvious presence in the market place. They don't even miss what they give. However, when the poor widow drops in two small coins that are worth next to nothing, Jesus notices that she has given her 'all.' The woman has given out of her poverty and made a true sacrifice.

Our Father God gave up his own Son out of His love for us. Jesus gave His all through His love and obedience to His Father. We are not to cling to the things of this world by storing up earthly possessions in our closets. Matthew West says in his song *The Motions*, "What if I had given everything instead of going through the motions?" As we consider Jesus' journey to the cross and celebrate His resurrection, we need to prepare our heart, soul and mind to give Him our all.

*Gregg and Joanne Chatterton*

## Matthew 6:33

Worrying has always been something I've done well. However, it is something I've never been proud of, and also something I've worked hard trying to give up. I have discovered through a lot of thought, prayer, and self reflection that it cannot simply be willed away. It is near to impossible for me to tell myself "O don't worry about this or that," and as a result stop worrying. Sooner or later, the worrisome thought creeps back into my mind and has control of me again. The odd thing is I don't like to worry, if you've done it you can attest to the fact that it feels unsettling to do so. Yet, we worry because worry makes us believe we are in control of what we worry about.

It is significant that Christ doesn't simply say don't worry, because we know that willing worry to stop does not work. Instead he gives an active command. He says "...seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness..." Worry always returns, if some other thought is not put in its place. So Christ gives us a tangible solution by telling us something to do in its place – to seek. And Jesus follows this with "... and all these things will be given to you as well." This comforting promise makes it easier for me to follow his preceding command. We can trust that although we may be surrendering control, we are doing so to a God who loves us and is actively caring for us. This is a powerful sentence, it tells us we can give up control for seeking the kingdom and still be richly blessed, not because we worried or controlled our life, but because of God's grace and abundant love.

Amen

*Rachel Heisey*

*"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

## Luke 11:9-10

My granddog Ellie, a Chesapeake retriever, loves to play fetch. She will go to the door and wait, her signal that she wants to go outside to play. Once outside she will dash after tossed tennis balls forever. When I'm ready to end the game, she drops the ball at my feet, tilts her head and stares at me, sometimes picking up the ball and dropping it a second or third time to make sure she is being understood. Her message is clear: "I still want to play." Her persistence is almost always rewarded with several additional throws.

Ellie almost always gets what she seeks. In contrast, Jesus' promise to you and me is absolute. If we ask, it will be given; if we seek, we will find; and if we knock the door will be opened. So why then does it seem that our prayers are not answered?

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus' teaching to ask, seek and knock is part of his response to one of his disciples requesting, "Lord, teach us to pray." This passage comes right after Jesus taught that our prayer is to be to our Father in heaven, asking that his kingdom come and for him to give us our daily bread, forgive our sins (because we forgive all who sin against us), and to not lead us into temptation. (See verses 2-4) Is that what we pray or do we skip over these basic petitions and jump into a detailed list of our current worries and fears?

Jesus never promised that we would get everything we pray for. When I think back over some of the stupid, selfish things I've asked for, I'm thankful for that. His promise is that God, who loves us, hears and answers our prayers by giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Pain, sadness, loss and disease are part of life, and evil will continue to exist, but as Christians we can gain comfort from Jesus' promise that the omnipotent creator of the universe loves us and gives us himself in the form of the Holy Spirit to be present with us every moment of everyday.

*Father, I pray as your Son taught his disciples. Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give me each day my daily bread. Forgive me my sins, for I also forgive everyone who sins against me. And lead me not into temptation. Help me to see your gift of the Holy Spirit present in my life today.*

*Doug Trump*

## Acts 17:27

My son has never been all that enthusiastic about getting up early on a Sunday morning to attend church. I was the same at his age, but my wife and I have been trying to get the kids to understand about a relationship with Jesus that I did not have growing up. I know it all comes to each of us when we are ready, but sometimes we wonder if our words make any difference what so ever.

A few years ago, my son had a nasty wart on his hand that was ugly and in a place that was painful. When he put his lacrosse gloves on, it would rub and get irritated. He would sit at night trying for months to cut it out. Three times he went to a doctor to have it frozen off. We tried numerous over the counter remedies but nothing would get rid of that persistent wart. It lasted over 2 years. We finally decided to have it surgically removed before lacrosse season started.

I walked into his room to ask him when he wanted to schedule the surgery and he told me that he had been tired of trying to cut the wart off and so one night in bed, he decided to pray. He prayed that God would take his wart away. He then showed me his hand and the wart had gone away within a few days. I was dumb founded. I asked him if he knew the significance of this event.

The usual answer for a 14 year old boy. "Nope".

But, what I tried to explain to him was that God was telling him He was listening. God didn't cure a cancer or do a miracle like saving his life. But something as profound, He just let my son know He was listening, that He was always there and would always be with him, no matter where he was.

PS- Not sure what this means, but after 35 years without a wart, one grew on my hand in the same place where his went away. I leave it to you to explain this significance!

*Ted Ake*

## Jeremiah 29:13

What a great promise. It was a promise made by God to the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon. The people were displaced and disheartened, not sure what their future entailed. Sounds like much of our world today. Many are asking where God is these days, with the tragedy in Haiti, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, hunger, hardship and AIDS in Africa. Yet God promises He will be found when we seek Him. So why can't we find Him?

I think the key here is the phrase with all your heart. The NLT says in earnest. I like the way the Message says it best. "When you come looking for me, you'll find me. "Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed." How often do we really seek the Lord to that degree? Only when we hit a crisis? I'd like to think that I seek Him earnestly on a daily basis, but if I'm honest, I know I tend to coast when things are going well and instead rely on myself.

This past Fall, our family faced some challenging circumstances, and I was serious about pursuing the Lord for comfort and guidance. And He made sure I wasn't disappointed. A close friend dropped by unexpectedly when I had been praying for someone I could confide in. Another friend sensed something was wrong and dropped off cookies. Someone else recommended some resources that met our needs perfectly. Coincidence? I don't believe so. Our problems didn't go away, but we knew God was walking us through them.

Since then I have been more deliberate at looking for God in my daily living, and I see Him there, in the good and the bad, in big and small ways. I'm convinced God likes to show up in the details of our lives, to demonstrate how completely He knows us, our wants and needs. I believe God truly wants to bless us with the knowledge of His presence if we would just seek after Him. Try it for yourself and see if He doesn't show up for you in abundance!

Dear Lord, thank you that You want to reveal yourself to us and increase our faith in You. Increase our desire for You, and may we be eager to share with others the things You've done in our lives that we may give You the glory. Amen.

*Sue Turner*

## Hosea 10:12

Most of us are less than successful at tending houseplants, let alone planting, tending and growing a field of wheat. Up until very recently, and still in many parts of the world, people have to know how to successfully live off the land.

Growing crops is a long drawn out process. You have to prepare the ground. Break up all the hard soil, mix in some sort of fertilizer. Then you have to sow the seeds. Once the seeds are in the ground, the rest of the process is pretty much out of the farmer's hands. Hopefully there will be rain, not too much, not too little. Hopefully there will be sun, again not too much, but not too little. And over the course of time the seeds will start to produce, first tiny shoots, then stalks, and leaves and ultimately a fine crop that will sustain the farmer, his family and the community for the seasons that lie ahead.

None of this happens quickly. It is a long slow process, from planting to harvesting. In our culture we are not used to waiting for something to happen. We want results instantly. We have no patience. Even in our own spiritual development, we want to see results NOW!

But it doesn't work like that. God wants to bring about something beautiful in all our lives. And for that to happen, it takes time. We try so hard to make it happen, that more often than not we spoil the crop. We cannot make anything grow in our lives, it is God Himself who brings about growth. In His Good time. It is for us to prepare our hearts, to seek the Lord, and wait for the showers of righteousness.

*Ian Rankine*

*“Sow for yourselves righteousness,  
reap the fruit of unfailing love,  
and break up your unplowed ground;  
for it is time to seek the LORD,  
until he comes and showers  
righteousness on you.”*

## Zephaniah 2:3

Very few people are satisfied with where they are and what they have in this life. We are always looking for the next best thing. We always seem to think that there is something better just round the corner. When we were in High School, we thought that things would be better in our lives when we graduated and went off to College. For many of us, when we got there, we found it was different, but just as bad as High School. We thought things would be better when we graduated and got a job. Maybe if we got a better job. Maybe things would be better if we got married. Maybe if we just had some children. Maybe we need a different husband/wife. Maybe we need different children. Always looking for something else just around the corner, and the thing we think will satisfy us doesn't quite do it.

In the midst of all the looking, hoping and seeking that we are doing, this word from Zephaniah comes as something of a challenge. He says that there is only one thing that is worth seeking, one thing that will save us, one thing that will satisfy us. That one thing is to seek God Himself.

Who are the people that seek the Lord? Zephaniah talks about the humble and the obedient. If we are looking all over the place to find satisfaction, it strikes me that there is an element of pride involved in that. We are implicitly saying that we can achieve happiness by ourselves. That we can find fulfillment in ourselves, and by ourselves, that we do not need anyone else, let alone God to make us complete. That sounds to me a little like pride. The humble are the ones who seek God. The ones who know that they cannot do it by themselves. The ones who know that there salvation can only come through God. Then there are those who are obedient. God wants us to seek Him. That is his desire. In fact, I think we could say that it is his command. We are told to seek Him.

It is only in God, through Jesus Christ, that we can know wholeness and peace. Seek Him in humility and obedience.

*Ian Rankine*

*“Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,  
you who do what he commands.  
Seek righteousness, seek humility;  
perhaps you will be sheltered  
on the day of the LORD’s anger.”*

# Watch!

## Mark 13

*“Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come...If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”*

When we read Mark chapter 13 and hear Jesus talking to the disciples about a time when there will be great calamity in the world; natural tragedy, discord among nations and families, darkness and general mayhem it is easy for us to understand where the Hollywood images often portrayed in Armageddon type movies comes from. This is definitely one of those Scriptures that can strike fear into our hearts when we read such descriptions of our world which can so easily cause us to be distracted by questions of where, when, how and why? Unfortunately, we have no answers to those questions, either here or elsewhere in Scripture. We just don't know.

So, the real question we must ask then, is what relevance does this Scripture have for our faith. If we cannot find any answers to the 'end time' questions, then does it have any meaning for us? I think it most certainly does. Our Christian faith should be much more than simply an insurance policy that we utilize after our death or at some future time when God's kingdom is realized on earth in some apocalyptic fashion. Our relationship with God should make a difference in our ordinary, everyday lives. And I think this Scripture can speak to this.

Jesus warns the disciples to “Be on guard! Be alert!”, he doesn't want them to be so distracted by what is happening around them that they take their eyes of God. Jesus directs them to stay awake and be watchful. Advice that I believe would we well-taken by all of us at any point in our lives.

Think about the daily distractions we face in this technological age. How often do you sit down at your computer to check one thing, do one quick search, send one short email and before you know it an hour has passed? Our cell phones which were once simply used in case of emergency now hold us hostage to our work environments or the beck and call of others 24/7. With all the electronic noise around us we are so easily distracted from the people and situations around us. We fail to connect with our families, friends and even the stranger in our midst because our attention is pulled in other directions. And in the midst of that we lose sight of God.

We find ourselves wrapped up in the things of this world and we no longer pay attention to what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We might be awake and alert to everything electronic in our lives but we are asleep to God. Let us make the effort in these coming weeks to switch off some of those distractions and find ways to reconnect to God and to others in meaningful ways. Let us “watch” and “wait” for God’s presence.

*Maureen Paterson*

## Ephesians 6:13

There are two significant thoughts that come to mind when I read this verse.

The first is that it is a sober reminder of the fact, that as a Christian, I can expect that I will be attacked by spiritual forces of evil. For me, this typically comes in the form of a temptation to sin. Sometimes it is a subtle temptation like telling a little white lie and at other times it is more overt like lashing out in anger at someone. It might also be a situation that requires a protracted battle that brings with it a certain amount of suffering. I like how this attack is described in 1 Peter 5:8 where he says the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The second aspect to this verse is the challenge to me to “put on” the full armor of God. The onus is on me to take action, to seek God’s protection and fully equip myself with his armor. If I fail to do this I leave myself weak and vulnerable to the attacks of evil spiritual forces. Just as I tend to the daily needs of my body, so I must daily strengthen my faith in God through prayer, study of his word and obedience to his commands.

I believe God honors our honest attempts (as feeble as they may be at times) to seek him and love him with all our mind and soul and strength by filling us with his power, wisdom and courage to stand firm against all the temptations we face each day by the world, the flesh and the devil.

*Paul Boyer*

## 1 Thessalonians 5:4-7

There is much written in the Bible about the second coming of the Messiah, and we know that it's going to be a terrible time for those who choose to turn away from Christ, but an indescribably rewarding time for those who love Him. Paul says in the book of Thessalonians that when Jesus comes again, He will come like a thief in the night with no warning. No one other than God knows the timing of this second coming. Will we be ready? Will we recognize Jesus? Many religious people didn't recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah when he came over 2000 years ago.

Sometimes, when reading these Scriptures, I feel a twinge of fear rising within me. What if I'm caught unprepared? Doing the wrong thing? Not watching and waiting?

As believers in the risen Christ, we are all promised a place in eternity with our Lord. Even with this promise, Paul is warning the Thessalonians that they must remain self-controlled and watchful. Any honest Christian would say that, despite the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us, this is impossible to attain all the time.

How can we then, as Christians, better ready ourselves for the day when our Lord returns? We can try our best to be obedient and loving, and this is important, but I believe the answer lies in the attitude of our hearts.

For those of us who are parents or teachers, we know that we can scare our children into being obedient, or we can inspire them to be obedient and listen to us out of a relationship of love and respect.

My prayer as we enter into this season of Lent is that we all seek to better understand, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, just how much Jesus has done for us on the cross. If we can more fully grasp the blessing of our salvation through His suffering, I believe that we will not need to be a people having to work harder and harder to be ready. We will live with our hearts full of such gratitude and a sense of God's grace that our daily actions will be an overflow of thankfulness from our hearts. Obedience on it's own is good. However, a life of trust lived hand in hand with self control, flowing from our understanding of Jesus' love for us is far better.

Prayer:

*Lord, as we come to you in prayer, please help us, through the power of your Holy Spirit to more fully understand who You are and all that You have done for us. Please give us a new revelation as we look to the cross, and out of this, please fill our hearts to overflowing with a renewed love for you. Help us to remain in the light and to be ever watchful, anticipating your coming again with joy.*

Amen.

# 1 Corinthians 10:12

In his letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul reviews the experience of Israel as they came out of Egypt indicating that it should serve as an example and a warning to the Corinthians. Their forefathers had seen many miracles and manifestations of God's love, but they repeatedly turned away from Him. Paul says that they were subject to "temptations" of idolatry, grumbling, and trying God, all of which Paul describes as "common to man" (verses 1-10,13).

The apostle John, in his first letter, warns us: "Do not love the world or anything in the world". We must recognize that in this world and our culture, we have multiple forces working against us daily, hourly. Simply put, John identifies the premier temptations we face are worldly values, the flesh, and the enemy. (1John 2:15-16)

And these were the very same Jesus faced and overcame in the wilderness experience at the outset of his ministry (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus is our model, and He is our strength, and He stands ready to enable us to overcome just as He did. But we must choose to come to Him when we encounter temptation. This is frequently not our first response, as these temptations are attractive and appealing.

The remedy is as always, Jesus! He is our Rock! Have we built our lives on Him as our Rock or have we built them on the sand of this world (Matthew 7:24-27)?

- The world says we should be seeking power, pleasure, fame and fortune, rather than His call on our lives.
- The world provides many distractions to eat up our time and energy, drawing us away from communication and time with Him.
- The world sets value on competition and our being better than others and being so recognized, rather than His direction to love them.
- The list goes on...! Do you see a pattern here?

Do we buy into these as values, priorities, and measures of value for our lives? Yes, we do, if we are not on the alert, as our culture sends these messages daily, hourly! How do we stand firm, on our Rock, and be careful that we do not fall? Each must call upon our Lord when you feel drawn into these worldly values – He will rescue and redeem! Some suggested steps are:

- Regularly invest time in reading and praying the Scriptures as a "guide book"!
- Listen to the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit as your "Coach" to recognize temptation!
- Call upon our Lord when you feel drawn into these worldly temptations, and He will rescue and redeem you!

His redemption is freedom and rest, and a deeper apprehension of Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self Control. These are the Fruits of the Spirit, and as Paul has said, "...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:16-25).

Call upon our Lord when you are tempted – He will rescue and redeem! And He will show you and enable you on the “narrow way”. (Matthew 7:13-14)

*Donald Williamson*

## Colossians 4:2

God provides a timeless instruction to all believers in Paul's letter to the church at Colosse.

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

Prayer is the foundation of power in our Christian life. It seems unbelievable, but is true that the God of the universe desires our fellowship! Prayer is not a luxury, a ‘nice to have’ but is essential to our spiritual being and growth.

The letter to the Colossians and to us points us to the Supremacy of Christ demonstrated in the work of the cross and in His resurrection. If we are to understand what it means to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to participate in a resurrected life, we must spend time in prayer.

We are commanded to devote ourselves to prayer in a watchful and thankful manner. Here are some thoughts on what that might mean:

Devote –

- We must be persistent, constant and earnest in prayer
- We must continue, not be weary – we must persevere
- We must be open to what God wants us to be and do

Be Watchful –

- We must be intent and vigilant in prayer
- We must be prepared to resist temptation, discouragement, hindrances
- We must be alert to the spiritual issues around us

Be Thankful –

- In response to His grace, we should always be thankful
- In response to His mercies, we should acknowledge His benevolence
- In response to His love, we should be eternally grateful for our salvation

As we journey together on the road to the cross, let us pray often and regularly remembering that our Lord delights in being in relationship with us, and that “this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus”. (1 Thessalonians 5: 17)

# 1 Peter 5:8

We don't hear too much about the devil these days. He's not politically correct. We're more likely to hear a sermon about the importance of living a moral life, evangelism or how God wants to bless our health and finances than about THE DEVIL. That has not always been the case, however. Mention of demons or evil spirits occur more than 20 times in The New Testament. What happened to the Devil? Is he an artifact of the early Church, someone that we enlightened, rational 21st century believers no longer need to be concerned with? C.S. Lewis, in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, offers the following observation:

- "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

Fortunately, the Bible provides insight into the nature of Satan and his demons, how they operate and how we can defend ourselves.

Who is Satan?

As our spiritual enemy, Satan is depicted as a devourer (1 Pe 5:8), a liar (Jn 8:44) and tempter (Mt 4:3). The word "Satan" means "adversary" and "devil" means "accuser". The Bible also tells us that Satan and his followers are organized and structured to come against us at multiple levels, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph 6:12)

How does Satan attack us?

The Book of Common Prayer defines three domains in which we are vulnerable to attack; the world, the flesh and the devil and Satan (or more likely his demons) can use all three. He can attack us through our physical condition and circumstances (Job) or the people we associate with (Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial of Jesus). He can exploit our weaknesses (Ananias in Acts 5:3), or speak directly to our thoughts (temptation of Jesus, Mt 4:1-10). He can come as a deceiving "angel of light" (2 Co 11:14) or strike fear into our hearts (Ro 8:15).

How do we defend ourselves?

First, acknowledge your position of authority in Christ, recognizing that we are "seated with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6) and that God's power working through our faith "can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." (Eph 6:14). Rest securely in Christ's promise that "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (Jn 10:28).

Second, put on the armor of God (Eph 6:13-18); the “belt of truth”, “breastplate of righteousness”, “feet fitted with the readiness of the Gospel of peace”, the “shield of faith”, “helmet of salvation” and “the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God”. Consider how you can bring your life into alignment with each item. For example, how can you spend more time in the Word, be truthful and righteous, share the Gospel, etc.

Third, examine yourself and be honest about any areas of disobedience that may provide Satan with grounds for harassment. Our faith through obedience releases God’s presence and protection:

- “In your anger do not sin”. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, [27] and do not give the devil a foothold”. (Eph 4:26, 27).
- “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one that was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. (1 Jn 5:18)
- “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Heb 12:14)
- “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. [8] Come near to God and he will come near to you” (Jas 4:8).
- Bitterness and unforgiveness give the enemy a foothold. Consider if there is anyone that you need to forgive. “[13] Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col 3:13). Remember that forgiveness is a choice, not an emotion.

Finally, Honor God with praise and thanksgiving. God inhabits the praises of His saints (Ps 22:3) Praise is a vehicle of faith which brings us into the presence and power of God. “Be joyful always; [17] pray continually; [18] give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Th 5:16)

*Earle Moreland*

# 1 Corinthians 16:13

In many of the epic movies made in the 1960's, you could always tell which characters were the Christians. Apart from the obvious, being fed to lions and crucified, you could tell them by their browbeaten, sorrowful expressions. They had a pitiful fatality about them. There was nothing joyful or exciting. Mind you I can't imagine it would be particularly pleasant to be thrown to the lions in the Roman arenas.

They always seemed to be caught off guard. They never had any kind of strength. They did have faith, but it was a faith in knowing that they were about to die.

This image flies in the face of the type of Christians that Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to be. He paints a picture of people who are constantly on their guard for dangers that they face both externally and internally – most often the internal dangers, temptations, etc. were/are as bad as the external dangers. He says that they are people who stand firm in the faith. Not people with a fatalistic resignation, but with a sure and steadfast belief that they belong to God. He tells that they are men and women of courage. In the face of great danger, even although they may very well be afraid, they face it in the knowledge that they are not alone, that Christ has gone before them, and His Spirit is with them. And finally that they have a deep strength, not of their own making, but a strength that comes from the Holy Spirit.

So be on your guard; stand firm in the faith, have courage and be strong.

*Ian Rankine*

*“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith;  
be men of courage; be strong.”*

# Love's Extravagance

## Mark 14:1-11

Mary, the sister of Simon the Leper did a very unusual and a very extravagant thing. She lovingly came with an alabaster jar filled with very expensive perfume and poured it over the head of Jesus. This perfume cost about one year's wages. It was a beautiful love gift from her heart.

Not everyone saw the beauty of this – Judas certainly did not – he saw it as a waste of money. It was immediately after this anointing of Jesus that Judas contacted the chief priests and made a deal with them to betray Jesus. Some scholars believe Judas reported to these officials that Jesus had just been anointed as the Messiah who would overthrow Israel. They knew this was one of the signs of the coming Messiah. This would have enraged his political enemies and added urgency to their plot to kill him.

Where are you in this story – practical or extravagant with your love for Jesus? Would you have been one of those practical folks present who saw this as a great waste of precious resources? Think of the many people who could have been fed or clothed with that amount of money.

Judas joined his voice in with this crowd because he was becoming more and more disillusioned and disappointed with Jesus. Jesus was talking of coming to serve, not to be served, going to a cross – a death, a burial, a resurrection. How silly because criminals went to crosses – not the expected Messiah. Even more offensive Jesus continually spoke about humility, serving, giving – Judas wanted power and had been patiently waiting for Jesus to overthrow Rome. He did not want to hear about loving, serving and turning the other cheek to his enemies. He was very angry, disillusioned, disappointed in Jesus.

Or are you filled with extravagant love for Jesus? Mary had experienced first hand the love of Jesus, - his forgiveness, and his message of hope. He was the way, the life, the truth... She gave all she had to this man Jesus who had changed her life... The magnificence of her gift flowed out of the abundance of the love in her heart. Her love pleased Jesus so much he said she would always be remembered...

Many of us have experienced the disappointment of unanswered prayer, unfulfilled dreams and expectations and some have asked Jesus to change things which have not been changed. We are not planning to betray Jesus but perhaps we do struggle with diminished trust and love for Jesus because of some disappointment in our faith.

This season we can choose to renew our faith and love as we meditate on what Jesus has done for us. We can choose to kneel at the foot of the cross with all of our questions, concerns, all our grief, losses and disappointments and allow them to flow

into the sufferings of Jesus who suffered for us and who suffers with us. As we do this, Jesus will come to us and renew us. If we can't find the answer at the cross, we won't find it anywhere else. Let us pause – like the woman in this story and pour out our love, thanks and adoration and experience His words of love and hope.

*Colleen Fletcher*

## 1 John 4:7-9

Really, what is love?

Love is the Ever-existing One deciding to create you and I in His image, being capable of communing with Him, and being lavished by His love and goodness.

Love is this Exalted, Magnificent, Glorious One, for Whom and through Whom everything was created, leaving His Exalted place, surrounded by His Glorious light, willingly diminishing and humbling Himself to become like you and I - in our world of darkness.

Love is this Spotless, Sinless One, devoid of any contamination, allowing the ravishes of hell to be heaped upon Him. The Highest Being of all allowing Himself to be degraded, maligned, stripped naked, spit at, beaten and hung on a cross for you and I, to buy you and I back, to pay the consequence of your and my sin.

Love is Almighty God resurrecting Lord Jesus from the dead that we might have life through Him.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear Friends, SINCE God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

*Diane Hill*

## 1 John 3:16

In this passage John is not speaking only of physical death just as Jesus is not speaking of literal crucifixions when He says that if anyone would come after Him they must take up their crosses and follow Him. Both are speaking of something that is costly, something that our natural minds resist, and something that unites us with Jesus.

When Jesus laid down His life, He did not do so because those that He came to save were deserving or worthy. He obeyed the Father unto death. In the same way we are to suffer with and submit to one another not because of human merit or superiority but out of reverence for Christ. It may sound funny, but often when Don and I have disagreed, I have prayed "God, I will forgive not because Don deserves it, because he doesn't, but because You do."

Neither do we lay our lives down because of what we get out of it or because "it works for" us. We do so because Jesus has commanded it.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. John 15:12-14.

But of course there is a reward for obedience. The reward is friendship with Jesus. He invites us to live in the kind of deep intimacy with Him that He has with the Father. Also as we lay down our lives for His sake, we become involved in His supreme enterprise of redemption and salvation.

Whatever we are being asked to lay down He has already given up. Consider all that He relinquished. The glory that was seen on the mount of transfiguration was hidden; the authority to summon twelve legions of angels in Gethsemane was put aside; the words that had spoken the universe into existence were silenced before His accusers; the power to come down from the cross was forfeited; the favor of His loving Father was forsaken. Even those closest to Him constantly misunderstood. His own family thought that He was mad. His apostles argued about who among them was the greatest. His friends slept when he asked them to stay awake for an hour and later deserted Him. His disciple betrayed Him with a kiss.

No one else may see and comprehend what you are being asked to lay down and there may be no apparent effect on the recipient, but Jesus sees. He knows the cost. He has borne the crushing weight to enable you to bear the easy and light yoke of sacrifice with Him.

As you do it for His sake, He is well pleased. May His pleasure and friendship be your true comfort and reward.

*Joanne Williamson*

## Romans 5:8

After reading, praying and meditating on this verse, I began to dwell on the last words... "Christ died for us." Christ died for me and for you. Why? I know that I am a sinner. I know I place too many things of this world before Him too often during my busy days. I know that I have not always loved Him, trusted Him, thanked Him, glorified Him, obeyed Him and placed Him at the center of my life. I could go on and on and I am sure that those of you reading this may have similar thoughts. It is all of this sin that separates us from Him. Christ died for us to take on the burdens of these sins, to take them away, so that we could be reconciled and restored to God. This is why Christ died for us. It is important to note that Christ dying for us indicates that this was not a passive act. He chose to die for us. He did it willingly. He did it because He loves us.

It is also interesting to note the mix in tense in this verse:

"God demonstrates (present tense) his own love for us..." and "Christ died (past tense) for us."

God loves us today, right now, right here through the past of His son dying for us on the cross. This is God's enduring love for us despite our sins because of His son's sacrifice for us. A sacrifice and a love that we surely do not deserve, but accept thankfully and whole-heartedly through our belief and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you Lord Jesus for your unselfish sacrifice for us, so that we could be restored to God. Despite my sin and my falling far short of your perfect holiness, I know that you love me today and will do so for all of my days forward. Amen.

*John Iannetta*

*"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

April 1<sup>st</sup> 2010

*Mauudy Thursday*

# Powers

Mark 14:12-72

Imagine these headlines on your 6 o'clock news -- Man Calms Turbulent Seas! Carpenter's Son Feeds Crowd of 5000! Girl Defies Death...Stranger is to Thank! Perhaps if we had been around in Jesus' day, we would have been intrigued by these daily headlines, but for Jesus' disciples, these reports were a part of their everyday lives. They walked closely with our Savior, developing individual relationships with Him. They talked with Him, dined with Him, prayed with Him, and traveled with Him. They were Jesus' closest of friends who promised to "be there" through thick and thin, saying things like, "Surely I wouldn't betray you?" (paraphrase of Mark 14:19), and "Even if all fall away, I will not." (Peter to Jesus in Mark 14:29). In today's terms, perhaps we'd say Jesus had found Himself some BFFL's (Best Friends For Life).

But then...Gethsemane! This is Jesus' darkest hour as he prepares Himself for the cross ahead. If there is any time Jesus needs His friends, it is here in the Garden where He is about to go before His Father and beg God to "take this cup" from Him. He passionately prays, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." In the midst of His distress...He asks only one thing of his 3 closest friends, "Sit here while I pray," "Stay here and keep watch." Yet, here in Jesus' hour of greatest need, we find Jesus' closest friends fast asleep. Jesus was about to go through torture – arrest, flogging, mockery, humiliation, physical pain, crucifixion, etc. but that was the Roman soldiers... Gethsemane was his closest friends.

For me, Gethsemane is where Jesus seems most human. Not only do we find Him asking God to consider a Plan B, but we find Him facing the devastation of close friends who "check out" when He needs them most. As humans this is an experience every one of us can relate to. Our human relationships, wonderful as they may be, will at times disappoint. Friends will "check out." Family members will "fall asleep."

This Easter Season, how awesome to realize that Jesus willingly stepped into human shoes and experienced it all. "We do not have a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses," (Hebrews 4:15) but one who truly understands.

*Christine Voegeli*

# The Aweful Penalty

## Mark 15:1-47

It was agonizing. In many ways it was like having to go to the dentist, something you knew had to be done but you just wanted it to be over. I can remember walking in, finding a seat, looking around at the other people who happened to choose the same time as Amy and I to do it. The lights went out, the music began, and for the next couple of hours it was like we had become eye-witnesses to the worst moment in the history of the world. If you saw *The Passion* in a movie theater, you know first-hand how horrible the experience of watching it larger than life was. For me, a few moments stood out above the rest.

- The fact that it was not in English:  
The power came from the events themselves. Watching them unfold on the screen was devastating.
- Watching the film reflected on people's faces:  
From time to time I turned around and looked at people's faces aglow with the flickering light of the film. What I saw was a combination of shock, sadness and so much more.
- Listening to people's reaction:  
From gasps to crying to crying out, people couldn't help but verbally react to what they were seeing. At the end, I heard a number of people praying, singing, it was almost like being at church.
- Thinking about what I'd seen:  
The scenes of the film stayed with me for days..haunting me.
- Processing:  
So many conversations with others that had seen it. I think I'm still processing it in many ways.

A couple of thoughts as you go thru Good Friday 2010. Watch *The Passion*. Read thru Mark 15:21-41 and specifically watch for how people react to the events unfolding before their eyes. Write down the people and try to describe their reactions to Jesus and his crucifixion. Pray. Thank Jesus for what He did. Thank the Father for what He gave. Thank the Holy Spirit for what He's doing.

May this day be one where you wrestle with the gravity and implications of all that Good Friday holds in preparation for a great celebration on Easter morning.

*Mike Flavin*

## Psalm 40:1-3

Some time ago I was crossing Springfield avenue with my two boys. We were on the cross walk, and it was taking us a few minutes to get to the other side – boys will be boys! We were about three quarters of the way across, when, from a few cars up on Passaic Street, there was an angry honking. We had the light to cross, but this guy also had the light to go straight on. He couldn't because we were crossing. It made him mad. Impatience. Sound familiar?

Another time I was in a grocery store. I only had a couple of items to check out, so I went into the express lane. Three customers ahead of me was a little old lady. She didn't have much to check out, so I thought we would be quick. Her items were rung up in no time at all, but then the trouble began. I'm not sure how many times she had to ask what her total was, but it felt like 10. Then she pulled out her pocket book, and started counting out dollars and coins. Of course she had to ask again, 'How much did you say?' The rest of us in the line were looking at each other rolling our eyes. The girl on the checkout was shaking her head apologetically at the rest of us. Eventually we had our own items paid for. It seemed to take forever, but in reality, it can't have taken more than a few minutes. Impatience. Sound familiar?

It seems like the Psalmist is able to do something the rest of us are incapable of. He waited patiently on the Lord. He was in a tight spot. And he wanted out of it. Most of us find ourselves in tight spots from time to time. Some of the time our troubles are of our own making, sometimes we find ourselves in situations completely outside our control. But most of the time we want out of our bad situation as fast as possible.

Patience, on the part of the Psalmist, suggests that this is a situation in which he has found himself for quite some time. There is no sense for the type of situation he is in, other than that it is not where he wants to be. And yet, even in the pit, he waits, and he waits patiently.

We often try too hard to get ourselves out of our own pits, and find ourselves falling into them time and time again, whereas, the Psalmist found himself standing on solid rock, with a new song in his mouth.

Waiting patiently on the Lord is about putting our trust in Him, and having the faith that he is with us, even in the pit. Remember the Psalmist also wrote that the Lord is with him, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Wherever we may find ourselves, can't we wait patiently on the Lord instead of trying to drag ourselves out our own way? Perhaps then we will know the transformation the Psalmist is speaking about. And we will find our feet standing on solid rock, and we will sing a new song to the Lord.

*Ian Rankine*

## *A Rumor of Hope* A Rumor of Hope

### Mark 16:1-8

Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection opens with the words "when the Sabbath was over." The other gospels do not mention the Sabbath (Saturday), but Mark gives us this brief account of it. The Saturday before the resurrection must have been the darkest day these disciples had ever experienced--a day of shattered hopes, broken dreams, guilt, shame, desolation, and fear. It was a day in which the future looked like a blank wall, devoid of hope or possibility. Why go on? Why bother with living? The Lord was dead, and the disciples had abandoned Him and failed Him. All the once-bright dreams of a coming kingdom, with Jesus as King, were ended forever, or so it seemed.

Perhaps you have some inkling of what the followers of Jesus felt on that Saturday between the cross and the empty tomb. Perhaps you know the shame and guilt of having abandoned or denied your Lord. Perhaps you know the depression and hopelessness of seeing your goals set aside, your dreams shattered. It may be that someone you loved and had been building a future with has suddenly been snatched away from you. Now your future looks like a blank wall. You wonder, why go on? Life seems like a dreary, endless Saturday, and Sunday is never coming.

But Sunday morning came and the women went to the tomb. They found the empty tomb. They met the resurrected Jesus. Mark says they were bewildered and afraid. If you had just stumbled onto the proof of the resurrection, proof that the one you loved and thought dead was miraculously alive, what would you feel? Exactly what those women felt: trembling and awestruck. They were caught up in an ecstasy of wonder over the discovery they had made: Jesus is alive!

Where are you this Easter? Are you stuck on Saturday? If that is how you feel, then this story is dedicated to you. You may not be able to see it now, but there is a resurrection in your future. I can't tell you what shape or form it will take. But God is in the business of turning dark Saturdays into glorious Sundays. Christ is risen! He is alive and can be alive in you! Your open tomb is coming. Prepare to be amazed.

*Jeff Ebert*