



**Devotional for the
Journey to Easter**

Road Trip!! What you are about to embark on is a journey - a disciple's path. When we think of the first disciples and their journey with Jesus, it was probably a mix of expectation, confusion, hope, challenge, and calling. At the beginning of any road trip, we experience many of the same things. Yet, as we take this journey with Jesus during the final weeks of His life, we will experience the highs and lows and everything in between. He calls us onward into the journey and to the destination.

On the pages that follow, everyday disciples, just like you and I, have taken the time to read and reflect on everyday passages of scripture. You're invited to come back here daily to enter into the story. You're invited to spend each Sunday in worship with others on the road trip. You're invited to find Jesus in the journey. **Let's take the Road Trip!**

Day 1 - Ash Wednesday, March 6

Ezekiel 1:1; 2:1- A Call from Captivity

As we prepare for this Lenten Season today, let's pause and take a moment to reflect on the last year. I wonder how you are. Where do you find yourself in this moment of solitude? Does this question cause an anxiousness to arise in you?

Ezekiel found himself called from priest to prophet at the age of thirty. At a time when Babylon was overflowing with false prophets who were giving the Jewish people a false hope of a quick deliverance and a joyful return to their land. Ezekiel finds himself among the exiles of the captivity of Babylon. We find ourselves much as Ezekiel did in a culture of unrest. Oftentimes this unrest is deep in our own soul.

As we pause for a moment, let's allow the spirit to guide us to where we may be in captivity. Perhaps we find we are seeking the approval of others, exhausted, fearful, burdened by sickness, or too busy to take this moment to reflect.

We are being called out of this captivity. May we humbly come before the Lord and seek in this season of lent to be led out of this captivity. Where are you being led to focus your discipleship in the next forty days? Possibly to time in solitude reconnecting with your soul, to time in the word seeking peace, to time in prayer in the presence of our savior, or to taking the time for self-care.

No matter how discouraging our circumstances, God is still on the throne fulfilling His divine purposes in the world. Ezekiel's name means God Strengthens. May we take this season of Lent to reconnect with God, who strengthens us and is calling us to rise from the ashes of our captivity and seek to hear His voice leading us to the promise of our salvation.

Contributed by: Candy Scarem, Panama UMC

Day 2 - Thursday, March 7

Psalm 91:1-2; 9-16 – Stomping Lions

You will trample upon lions and cobras; you will crush fierce lions and serpents under your feet! Psalms 91:13 NLT

Unless you are planning a lion stomping trip to the zoo, we read these verses and tend to think of them metaphorically. There was, however, an unrecognized hero of the Bible who actually did chase a lion....

There was also Benaiah son of Jehoiada, a valiant warrior from Kabzeel. He did many heroic deeds, which included killing two champions of Moab. Another time, on a snowy day, he chased a lion down into a pit and killed it. (1 Chronicles 11:22 NLT)

Benaiah was a bona-fide snowy-day-fightin', pit-jumpin' Lion Slayer! What causes someone to go out of their way to slay a lion when they probably just escaped with their life? Most of us wouldn't even look into the pit to see what happened, let alone jump in after. But this is just what Benaiah did...went back to finish the job.

We read earlier in Psalm 91 the answer to this question. "If you make the Lord your refuge...no evil will conquer you" The real question is not who would jump in the pit, but rather, do we believe that if we make God our refuge that he will deliver us?

It is a matter of faith, not force.

Prayer: Lord, help us take you at your word and stomp the lions who have attacked.

Contributed by: Nathan Bailey, Park UMC

Day 3 - Friday, March 8

Exodus 6:1-13

Every journey has to go through barriers or obstacles that are standing between you and the reality that God wants in your life. It makes me think of a toll barrier on the highway. You know the type, at least in New York. You're driving along, listening to tunes or an audiobook, and the signs tell you that there's a barrier coming, so you'd better slow down. Now, in order to safely get from one side of the barrier to the other side – where your destination or continued journey lies – you have to go **through** the barrier. You can't stop where you are, unless you don't want to continue the journey. You can't go around because, well, that's illegal. You have to go through the barrier. In the case of the toll barrier, you have to go through the barrier only by paying the toll that is required. If you have an EZPass, it's a little faster and cheaper, but you have to pay anyhow.

This road trip we're on during this season that leads to Easter is all about the journey...and the barriers we face along the way that prevent us from continuing. God promised Moses that the Israelites, who were in slavery in Egypt, would see the power and presence of God through the journey of freedom He would give them. To prove it, God told Moses to tell the people about all the things He would do for them (hear their groaning, remember the Covenant, free them from slavery, redeem them, take them as His people, bring them into the land He promised, give them an inheritance, etc.). The one problem was that there was a barrier in the way: they were slaves in Egypt and Pharaoh did NOT want to let them go. So, instead of trusting in God for the journey, they turned their backs, stuffed their fingers in their ears, and kept slaving away right where they were. They were afraid of the barrier. Even Moses was skeptical of God's plan...and didn't know how to convince the people, or Pharaoh for that matter, that they would get through the barrier if they trusted God. Good thing they had an EZPass, huh?

Where is God calling you to journey during this season? What barriers are in the way? Is it doubt, apathy, pride, or some other obstacle? How do you plan to allow God to carry you from where you are now to the place where He wants you to be, even if it's through barriers that prevent you from going fast? The Disciple's Journey is the way to the cross and out of the empty tomb of Jesus. It's hardship, learning, death-to-self, and yet ultimately new life and freedom and more road ahead. God promises that you will not be alone, and that He will hear you, remember His promises, redeem you, be with you all the way, and give you the inheritance of everlasting life. Be free today, church, on the other side of the barrier, where the journey calls you onward!

Prayer focus: seeing my barriers honestly; humbling myself to see God's plan; learning the lessons of the barriers; taking the next steps on the journey; being grateful for God's companionship the whole way.

Contributed by: Pastor Steven Taylor, Panama UMC

Day 4 - Saturday, March 9

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

“To everything (turn, turn, turn)
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)
And a time to every purpose, under heaven”
The Byrds

Every time I read Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, I sing this song in my head, a song I heard so many times as a child yet never realized was God’s word planting seeds. When I read through the lyrics now, it is this exact scripture that I see with the above chorus sprinkled throughout. What I love most about the added chorus is the word “turn”.

Over and over throughout the Bible the Lord asks us to repent and turn to him. In the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 3, verse 14 tells the Israelites to “return home, you wayward children...for I am your master. I will bring you back...from wherever you were scattered.” No matter how sinful the Israelites were and how far they walked away from the Lord, deeper and deeper into the pit, their Father in heaven never stopped desiring for them to simply admit they were wrong and walk right back into his arms...to turn.

In Luke 15, we find the parable of the lost son. Here, the son leaves home and sinfully squanders all that he has been given by his father. Yet, when he returns home in shame, the father celebrates and welcomes him with open arms. It didn’t matter what he had done, what mattered was that he came back...he turned.

Friends, we are never too far away from our Father to turn around and receive his forgiveness. Like the scripture says, “there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven”. We will have times that are filled with joy and times that are filled with sadness, times when we need to tear down the sins of our past, and times when we rebuild a new us – the us that God sees. We are beautiful but broken, just as Jesus was...perfect in every way, yet broken so that we might be forgiven.

During this season of lent, remember the days that Jesus spent in the desert being tempted just as we are every day. Remember WHY he endured the cross and go ahead and pick up yours too. Pick it up and turn...he’s right there with you holding the weight of his cross and yours – holding YOU.

Father God, I pray that we would each have the courage to repent of our sins and turn to you; you who love us in both the hills and the valleys. I pray that we would see our light through your reflection as we keep our eyes steadfastly on you. Amen.

Contributed by: Bri Katilus, Park UMC

Day 5 - Monday, March 11

1 John 2:1-6

This passage is written by the apostle, John. It is clear that the letter, 1 John, was addressed to believers, but it does not indicate who they were or where they lived. So this suggests that this letter was probably sent out to Christians in different places.

John starts out chapter 2 with addressing it to “My Dear Children,” most likely using it as a term of affection for many Christians of the time who were young and new in their faith in Christ. This passage appears to be a reminder to all Christians not to sin. But if you do, you have an advocate/counselor in Christ to stand in the gap between you and God, when being judged for our sin.

Unlike attorneys or counselors we think of today, Christ will not only advocate for us, but he will also take the punishment, and has taken it for your sins. To gain this advocacy we must come to know Christ, and we do this by abiding in his word and following his commands. By doing this, God’s love will be made complete in us and so his truth will live in us.

So, if we call ourselves Christians, we must live and “walk” as Christ did.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for your mercy and grace, and we ask for your forgiveness for our sins. Lord, we ask for your strength and guidance in this fallen world that we live in. Help us to walk your walk and speak of your truth every day! We ask this in the precious name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Contributed by: Jeff Enlow, Panama UMC

Day 6 - Tuesday, March 12

Psalm 17

Psalm 17:1-2; Hear me, Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry. Hear my prayer- it does not rise from deceitful lips. Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.

The Lord hears the cries of our hearts and hears the sincerity of our prayers. He knows when we pray for something out of our own selfish desire and when the prayer comes from an earnest and humble heart. We never have to prove ourselves to God, he already knows what's in the depths of our hearts and calls us good.

Psalm 17: 8- Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

God protects us and keeps us, calling us His own beautiful children. Because we have free will there will be times that we stray from Him, but He has offered us a path back to Him through Jesus Christ our Savior. God sent his Son for us so that he may continue to keep us and protect us, that we may be cleansed of our sin and can enter the Kingdom of God. God has high hopes for us, we're the apple of His eye. Let's take that path back home and examine our thoughts and prayers before God, that He might cleanse us of our impurities, and we can continue on our journey towards holiness and a life lived out for Christ.

Contributed by: Brittany See, Park UMC

Day 7 - Wednesday, March 13

Luke 21:34-22:6

Jesus was telling his disciples to not get involved with the earthly anxieties in the final days. He was telling them to watch the non-believers and what they would try to get the believers to do. He wanted them to see the terrible earthly trials and not get involved with them through sin! He wanted them to pray to keep their faith and stay the path the Lord had shown them even to His death.

Judas did not watch and pray, instead he got trapped by Satan and the earthly luxuries and betrayed Jesus for money! Judas wanted to be rich and it cost him his chance at salvation.

This Lenten season are you watching what is happening in our world around us? Are you praying for Jesus to guide you and your loved ones to the cross? We need to watch and pray to stand before the Son of Man on that final day and thank Him for saving us from sin!

Dear Lord, thank you for your words of wisdom and guidance in your word the Bible. Thank you for giving us the chance to meet you face to face in the final days and not be a Judas. Lord, may we this Lenten season grasp your words and not the earthly anxieties to prepare for the final days on earth. In your name we pray, Amen.

Contributed by: Sam Catanese, Panama UMC

Day 8 - Thursday, March 14

Philippians 3:2-12 – Bite Work Worth Holding Onto

Philippians is my “*happy book*”. Its 4 chapters are replete with the words *joy* and *rejoice*. What’s not to love about Philippians? As I selected the verses Philippians 3:2-12 for my written contribution to this Lenten Devotional I told myself writing it will be a “piece of literary cake”. I was wrong.

For days I struggled with what I could write that would shed light on the Lenten season based on the verses I had selected.

Finally, I admitted to myself “I’ve got nothing”. I don’t have a “pedigree” like Paul. As a woman I have never been circumcised, and well, dogs are my best friends. They are not evil like Paul had written.

I went outside to get some fresh air to clear my head, praying that I would have a Philippians 3:2-12 epiphany. It was then that it happened.

I saw my dog, a Belgian Malinois (pronounced Mal-in-wah) sitting in the sun, holding what I thought was a stick in her mouth. It wasn’t. It was a leftover rotten Lilly plant stalk from my flower garden. Her breed is known for using their mouth in bite work, so she often holds “treasures” in her mouth, clamping down and holding onto them as if her life depends on it. The rotten piece of garden rubbish was her treasure until she saw me holding a piece of nylon fireman hose in my hand. The hose is what I use as her *reward* when we work her obedience commands. She immediately dropped the Lilly stalk and began to bark and shake with excitement waiting for my command in Dutch to “bite” the hose. On command she charged toward me her teeth glistening in the sun. She clamped on the hose and hung onto it until I gave her the command to “out”.

In that moment Tasha became the visual demonstration of Philippians 3: 2-12. Tasha showed me that in “losing” everything - the rotten Lilly stalk, she gained everything - the reward of gaining the prize. She “forgot what is behind”, “pressed on toward the goal” and “took hold of it”.

Dear God, Forgive us for holding onto rotten treasures in this life. Help us to focus on the prize you have before us through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Help us to “bite it” and to “hold on to it” as if our life depends on it, because it does.

Contributed by: Debby Meeder, Park UMC

Day 9 - Friday, March 15

Psalm 27

If you have the time – read the scripture again. It is rich with encouraging words for us today.

With all the distressing news we hear on a daily basis – we may be tempted to fear - to fear for the future of the planet, the church, our families, and for ourselves personally. Why should we fear?

David says – “whom shall I fear?
of whom shall I be afraid?
my heart will not fear
I will be confident”

This Psalm reminds us that God has not been surprised by anything that has ever happened – or anything that will ever happen. He is still on His throne. He is still in control. He is on the job and he cares about us.

The LORD is my light and He is my salvation— Lighting my path day after day – guiding me and keeping me safe . . . and He is my salvation for eternity.

My heart tells me to “seek His face” - to seek after Him where ever and whenever I can. And He always shows up – he always meets me there – when I make a move in His direction – he always shows up and always teaches me something new.

14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.

Prayer – Lord, you are my light – my confidence – my refuge. Help me to not fear. Help me to be confident in You. Amen

Contributed by: Carl Davis, Panama UMC

Day 10 - Saturday, March 16

Matthew 23:37-39 – Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

Here is a little background. Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and crowds enthusiastically greet him, proclaiming, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” and cheering Psalm 118:26, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”. Jesus enters the Temple, rebukes the greedy money changers, and turns the tables. The religious leaders taunt Him and thoroughly examine Him. Jesus does some hard preaching as you read in Matthew 21-23. His discourse concludes with the same scripture the crowd cheered– but with a saddened tone, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Why?

Jesus longed to be with His people. Isaiah has spoken of God’s redemption and gave God’s intimate expression, “I have called you by name, you are Mine” (Isaiah 43:1). Zechariah told of the good news that the Lord chose Jerusalem as a brand plucked from the fire (Zechariah 3:2). Both prophets came in the name of the Lord, proclaimed His good news of redemption, and met their brutal end at the hands of unrighteous leaders. God calls them blessed!

Looking back with great sadness, Jesus was rejected by the very people He came to save. Our sins brought Jesus to the cross. We often wonder how their hearts were so hardened – even after witnessing great miracles. Many martyrs have suffered before us.

We must examine ourselves, and, “Today if we hear His voice, do not harden your hearts”. (Hebrews 3:15)

“Rejoice Always” (2 Thessalonians 5:16)

Contributed by: Daniel Lloyd, Park UMC

Day 11 - Monday, March 18

John 16:17-33 – ENJOY!

Remember UNSPEAKABLE JOY, our Christmas musical? How about these familiar titles and artists: The Joy of the Lord is my Strength by Rend Collective; Your Love Never Fails by Jesus Culture....there may be pain in the night, but joy comes in the morning; Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee by Michael W Smith; I've got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart. Music is a powerful reminder and allows us to experience joy every day. Read John 16:17-33 to see how the disciples' grief turned to joy.

I was raised in the Lutheran Church: baptized as an infant, Sunday school, VBS, worship, confirmation, marriage...you know the drill. Well, as part of confirmation class we had to outline the pastor's sermon each week. I vividly remember one particular sermon and the topic was joy. As I was completing my "assignment" for confirmation class, it was easy to outline JOY because the pastor created the acronym, **J**esus, **O**thers, **Y**ourself and of course, made important points for each word. Yes, this makes sense! So easy to remember and implement in life. One should put Jesus first, others second, and yourself last. Over the years, I took this sermon so literally that it directed my life. Yet, I was not experiencing the JOY that I was promised by my pastor in the early 80's.

After 28 years of marriage, two grown children, and a successful career, I came to realize that my life was out of control. How could this be possible? I had Jesus in my heart, I served others, but I was not taking care of myself. I had misunderstood that sermon I heard as a teenager. I have come to realize that JOY is not a hierarchy. JOY should be experienced with balance.

Now, with renewed balance in my life, my joy is much more authentic. ENJOY is the new JOY... If you need a spiritual renewal and want to experience more joy and balance in your life, try this...

**Every Night thank Jesus and ask for forgiveness,
be grateful and pray for Others, and
ask that His purpose be revealed in Your life.
ENJOY!**

May you be as happy as a seagull with a French fry!

(by Kate Knapp, taken from a Leanin' Tree greeting card
given to me on my birthday last year)

Contributed by: Barb Tordella, Panama UMC

Day 12 - Tuesday, March 19

Numbers 14:10b-24 – A Just But Loving God / Intercession

When I read Numbers Chapter 14 vs. 10-24, I wondered what this could possibly have to do with our Lenten season. I'm sure you are familiar with the time in the desert when the grasshopper rebellion occurred; that mob of Israelites ready to stone Moses and Aaron because Moses was leading them into a land that seemed too dangerous but a land that God had instructed them to overtake.

In fact this would be the tenth time this contemptuous nation would test God even after the encouragements from their own countryman Caleb that they could accomplish it. So God, in his glory, showed up at a tent of meeting one day furious and declared to Moses, I'm done with this detestable nation of unbelieving whiners. I will destroy them all.

But literally in the middle of it all, God's fury and Israel's eminent rebellion, Moses asked the LORD to save this nation of people in spite of themselves. The LORD relented and because of Moses' intercession the nation was saved except for the core of first generation rebels.

Fast forward 3000 plus years and we see ourselves in the same situation ...maybe even worse: sexual immorality, impurity debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, drunkenness, orgies...just to name a few.

Now if we are honest with ourselves, each of us practice one or more of these sins either consciously or subconsciously. We too need an intercessor but God already knew that. I truly can't understand this but not because of God's fury but because of His love for us. He put Christ on the cross to die for us and intercede as the sin of the world. We now have a choice; listen to God and be an encourager of his word as Caleb was or follow the mob and continue to wander aimlessly in this dark world.

Prayer – Lord, during these 40 days I pray that you will help us to reflect more on how blessed we are to continually listen to your instruction and less on the things of this world that seem to be stealing time with you, Amen.

Contributed by: Harry Loomis, Park UMC

Day 13 - Wednesday, March 20

2 Chronicles 20:1-22

God does not promise a life of ease, free of adversity. While we desire it above all things, deep down we in fact know that we will face challenges, and expect to be persecuted. Unfortunately, the expectation of adversity and persecution often breeds fear. We lament how our culture strays further and further from God and how it presses in on us from all sides. The war on our spirit is all too apparent and wages on. This war comes in many forms testing our faith continuously – health problems, death of loved ones, financial setbacks, worry as parents, strained marriages, uncertainty at work, politics, war, sexual temptation, addiction, work or community drama, change, broken hearts... the list goes on. Sometimes God blesses us with periods of ease and sometimes we face dilemma. We never know when dilemma will strike, when it will pass, or when it will be replaced by more. Mountain tops and valleys.

Do you feel forsaken by God when stuck in the valleys; when the war on your spirit presses in? If you do you are not alone. But do not lose faith; do not lose hope; do not forget that God has promised that he will not leave you or forsake you. In this scripture, Jehoshaphat is an example of unwavering faith. When faced with imminent attack from a vast approaching army, Jehoshaphat gathered his people and prayed “If calamity comes upon us, ...we will stand in your presence ...and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.” “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” He turned to God without a single moment of hesitation. And God answered “Do not be afraid or discouraged.... For the battle is not yours but God’s.” “Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.”

“For the battle is not yours, but God’s.” How easily we forget this and try to go it alone. Life is hard sometimes, but the war on our spirit is not ours to fight, it is God’s. When that war presses in, without hesitation, give it to Him; seek Him in prayer; seek comfort and counsel through scripture; seek support from your brothers and sisters in Christ. Then take a deep breath and, “Go out to face [adversity] tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father. I am overwhelmed by stress, temptation, obligation, and fear. I fear adversity and persecution. I stand in your presence and cry out in my distress that you will hear me and save me. I do not know what to do; please show me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I ask you to ease these burdens and replace them with fortitude and joy. Please help me see what I am to learn and how I am to grow from this. Forgive my sin.

Forgive my lack of faith. I know you haven’t forsaken me. I know your grace abounds and I am grateful for it and all your blessings. Thank you. Amen.

Contributed by: Craig Vollmer, Panama UMC

Day 14 - Thursday, March 21

Daniel 3:19-30 – Only Our God Can Save

The Bible says that the ruthless pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, leaped to his feet in amazement when he saw four men walking around inside the super-heated furnace instead of just the three whom he had condemned. The fourth looking like “the son of God.” Calling for Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to come out of the furnace, he found not a single hair on their head scorched, nor their clothing smelling like smoke. They were perfectly whole. He began to openly praise the God of these faithful young men. Though they had defied his edict, they had put their faith and trust in God, unwilling to bow down to any false gods. Even if it meant their death.

As we approach Lent, a time of remembrance, reflection and introspection, we are incredibly blessed to have a historical record of events like these preserved in the Bible. For it's in these inspired words, placed there for us by our Heavenly Father, we daily renew our faith, our trust, and our source of hope; knowing that the God these young men called upon, is our God as well. His promise to us is sure, as sure as it was to them. The promise that He will never leave us nor forsake us if we place our faith in Him. Our God is mighty to save.

Contributed by: Rell Johnson, Park UMC

Day 15 - Friday, March 22

Revelation 3:1-6

“I know all things you do, that you have a reputation of being alive-but you are dead. Wake up!”

Ouch! The lord was talking to the church of Sardis. I wouldn't want to be them! Or are we just like them?

What you should know is that a ½ century before John wrote Revelations there was an enormous earthquake which devastated Sardis and Sardis was still not recovered in John's day. Believers and non-believers had to work hard. The Sardis church worked especially hard. The scriptures tell us that they a great reputation. They had a reputation of being alive; being within God's will. These are people who were doing things. They were helping the lost and feeding the poor. However, despite outside appearances, despite the good works that they did, God said they were dead. They were outside of God's will.

As I think about all the good programs we do such as community outreach, Sunday School, food pantry, or Vacation Bible School, we certainly do have a good reputation. But, are we alive?

To answer that question, let's look at verse 4. “Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” Let's ask ourselves some questions. Are we walking with the Lord? Do we ask Him first before we make a decision? Are we spending time with our Lord? I mean really spending time with him, more than on Sunday mornings or a 10 minute devotional. Are we engaging in activities that are outside of his will?

Verse 2 states, “I know all the things that you do....” God knows when we do things that sadden his heart. I guess we may not be so different from the people of Sardis. Yet there is hope! Our scripture verses tell us we can repent and turn to him again!

I don't know about you but I want the Lord to call me worthy! I want the Jesus to announce my name before the Lord and his angels that I am his!

Contributed by: Jackie Haines, Panama UMC

Day 16 - Saturday, March 23

Psalm 63:1-8 – Thirsty?

As I sat atop one of the massive dunes and looked into the vastness of the wilderness that was before me, I immediately began to thirst. Not because I didn't have access to clean water, but because I found myself thirsting for more of the Lord.

Our host had told me that the desert is a special place where God does some of his best work. To be honest I wondered what my new Muslim friend was going to teach me about God, but when he invited me and the others I was with to go and find a spot to pray, I took immediate action. I climbed to the top of the tallest dune I could find and began to pray...

Lent is a season of preparation, a time when we allow the Lord to prepare us for Easter. Our passage today comes from Psalm 63 and is often believed to be written by David while seeking refuge in the wilderness from Absalom. It dawned on me while I was sitting atop that dune that the very sand that was beneath my feet was quite possibly the very sand that was beneath his!

Psalm 63:1 says, *“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.”* You might not be experiencing physical thirst, but you may know what it is to feel all alone and in a barren land. I would encourage you to venture into the “wilderness” with the Lord this Lenten season and allow God to prepare you for what is coming!

Holy God, I thirst for more of you. Come and fill me. Fill me up during this season of preparation. In Jesus Name Amen.

Contributed by: Pastor Joe Pascoe, Park UMC

Day 17 - Monday, March 25

Jeremiah 11:1-17 – False God's

It was not news to God that His covenant had been broken by His people in the land of Judah. God created us and gave us free will. He knows us and the choices we will make. He knew He would need a plan for us to save us from our bad choices, our sins.

Because I am electronically impaired, owning a smart phone is not high on my priority list. All nine of my grandkids have and need a smart phone in order to navigate in today's world. I am so excited to see them and hear from them when they come for a visit. But that stupid phone keeps getting in the way. Sometimes I can't help but wonder after they leave, "What was that all about?!" Usually the phone was their priority and it put a wedge between us during a visit. Is this how God feels about me when I put other things ahead of Him in my day?

What if we turned to God, and not these other things, for comfort, encouragement, acceptance, friendship, love, joy and peace? Today's world has lured us into believing that there are so many other things that are more important to us than God.

If we are not careful our possessions come to own us and our God becomes "other things." Whatever we put ahead of God drives a wedge between us and Him. Whatever we put ahead of God is idolatry.

Just as God had asked the people of Jeremiah's time to obey Him and to remember Him, He asks us to do the same thing.

From the beginning, God knew He would need and had planned to implement His new covenant with us through the blood of His Son, Jesus. When we continue to live in idolatry, we cheapen God's incredible sacrifice.

God still wants us to put away our idols and worship Him, because this is what leads us to our wholeness and peace in "the land of milk and honey."

Easter is our "Salvation Blessing" from God.

Dear Heavenly Father, Help each one of us to come to personally know that God has a plan – a plan to prosper us and not harm us – a plan to give us hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Contributed by: Pauline Edsall, Panama UMC

Day 18 - Tuesday, March 26

Romans 2:12-16

Having an older brother came with benefits, however, some were overstated on my part.

Growing up, I had an example of what I could and could not get away with when it came to my parents. For the most part, I got to stand back, watch him push the boundaries and subsequently suffer the consequences. You would think that this would have acted as a deterrent to trouble. Not so!! Although I had a prime example of action and parental reaction, I tried to use this for my personal gain. If I could skirt the boundaries, and avoid the right questions, I could at least claim plausible deniability when trouble found me.

As you guessed, this line of defense never seemed to work, and I am still grounded for things to this day. I am now 35.

Thanks be to our merciful Judge and His grace.

Father God, reign in my heart so that my actions are propelled only by your faithful love. Let the internal state of my soul be reflected externally at all times. In the name of Jesus, AMEN!!

Contributed by: Brandon Meacham, Park UMC

Day 19 - Wednesday, March 27

Psalm 39

Expectations. We expect our lives to go a certain way - maybe go to college, get a job, get married, have children, and eventually our children will do the same things. We expect that we will be healthy without sickness, long-term illnesses, or cancer. It's hard to accept the pain and heartache when our expectations fail. We wonder about God's goodness. It's hard to keep quiet when trials come. Our anger sometimes spills out in destructive words ultimately creating more pain. Unfortunately it doesn't change the situation - only God can do that.

As I reflected on the reading of Psalm 39, I understood David's battle and could relate to my own - the battle to speak my mind and the battle to keep my tongue. I know that God is in control and he has a plan. He knows my past, my present, and my future. I can't control the painful situations in my life, but I can choose to show God's love through my words and actions. I do have a choice to put my love, faith, and trust in the one who gave it all for me. Jesus knows my pain and he took my pain to the cross and died for me. I can choose to show others that even though things are painful and expectations are not as I would want them to be, God is always with me. He is the great healer for our pain; we just need to trust in him.

Dear Heavenly Father, When we feel we can't take any more pain from the fallen world we live in, remind us of your love and the pain you let Jesus, your son, endure to show your love for us. You are in control. You have a plan. Help us to show your love to others and trust your plan. In Jesus name, Amen.

Contributed by: Tina Akam, Panama UMC

Day 20 - Thursday, March 28

Joshua 4:1-13 - Monuments

Last year, monuments were headline news as people demonstrated and protested statues honoring Confederate soldiers, labeling them as unwelcome vestiges of a racism they claim is all too alive and well today. The question that never even got asked is the one in today's text: "What do these stones mean to you?"

In our modern way of thinking, they mean whatever our PC culture says they mean. But for Israel, God instructed them of their meaning. This monument was to be a testimony of God's deliverance. So what might this signify today?

There can be no monument if there hasn't been a deliverance. Too many of us want to erect a monument to a deliverance that never really happened.

The monument was to aid in instructing their children who would see it and ask about it. Too often our lives fail to provoke the questions we should be provoking, especially in our children.

Too often, we build monuments to our fears and failures, instead of our faith in Jesus Christ. The only monument worth building is the one we erect to the grace and power of Jesus to deliver us.

What monuments are you erecting in your life? Do they honor what God has done in you? Do they point others to Jesus? Have you torn down the monuments to your fears and failures?

Contributed by: Jim Bailey, Park UMC

Day 21 - Friday, March 29

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

2 Corinthians 5:6-15 is so rich and full of beauty. I had to read and study these few verses to grasp what was being said. There are several elements throughout, so I want break it down so we fully reflect on what the scripture is telling us.

Holy Confidence - Paul, the author of these verses, reminds us that this earth and our bodies are temporary. Paul tells us that our earthly bodies are not our true home. The first few verses of this section tell us to *always* be confident. While we are away from our true home, God will reveal Himself to us, but we must walk by faith and not by sight. We have to trust that our sovereign and gracious God loves us dearly and will not forsake us. We have to be confident in the future that God holds for us. Discouragement, fear and worry are all things that will come. And sometimes those things get the best of us because we can't always see Him working. But we must live with a holy confidence that God has greater things for us than we could ever imagine.

Pleasing - I really enjoy a band called Housefires. They have a song that declares, "Life is a gift and the giver is good." I love that. He is so good to us. That in itself gives me the motivation to please Him in everything that I do. Verse 9 tells us that our desire should *always* be to please Him. Every act and every word that comes from our bodies here on earth, should be done to please the Lord. He has never given up on us. We fail over and over but He keeps giving. There is so much beauty in serving Him! In verses 10 and 11, Paul reminds us that we will appear before the judgement seat of Christ for everything we've done, good and bad. It is important to remember that God hears every thought, sees every action, and still desires our hearts. What a joy He must feel when He sees His children serving one another and building His Kingdom.

All to Him - Verse 12 says that we give Him an opportunity to boast on our behalf! It is not me but the Lord at work within me. These last couple of verses remind us to give Him all the glory. The work that we do for Him is not about us. It is about telling and showing people how welcoming, loving, gracious, and merciful our Father is. I love verse 15 because it is about devotion. It is about devoting our lives to pleasing Him. We should no longer live our lives for ourselves but for Him because He gave Himself up for me and rose again. How beautiful.

Contributed by: Kelsey Johnson, Panama UMC

Day 22 - Saturday, March 30

Psalm 32 – God is Looking at Us

God is looking at us. *Of course* you say. But I found this a comforting thought as I read Psalm 14:2, which says, “The Lord looks down from Heaven to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.”

I thought of an auctioneer who scans a large crowd of potential buyers to see if any make eye contact with him, thereby showing their interest in what is being offered. Of course, only one person at the auction will get what they seek. God’s salvation is for all who seek it. All who understand the importance of what is being offered.

David understood this well in Psalm 32:1. He said, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Also notice in Psalm 32:5 David says to God, “I acknowledge my sin to you, and in my iniquity I have not hidden.” I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

This was big stuff to David, to be forgiven by God after his sins of adultery with Bathsheba and causing the death of her husband Uria as a cover-up. But he had the assurance of forgiveness through through his faith.

We have that promise from God in 1st John 1:9. If we confess, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Thank you God, for this wonderful gift you offer to all who seek your forgiveness and peace- Amen

Contributed by: Dennis Wilson, Park UMC

Day 23 - Monday, April 1

Leviticus 23:26-41

My Bible, The Women's Study Bible says, "The laws of Leviticus point to the cross of Christ." They do? All those sacrifice rules, sabbath rules, do this, do that, don't do this and don't do that - point to Jesus?

Leviticus 23:28 says, "And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God."

Atonement means making restitution (penance) for our sins. We are to take time to admit our sins to God and repent. Then, we are to do no work. If I'm doing no work and repenting of my sins, then I will be refreshed, cleansed from my sin - ready to face another day.

The Feast of Tabernacles also requires a sabbath day on the first day and the eighth day. When is the last time you had sabbath rest? I think God knew that we would go and go all the time and that we would forget about Him, and not rest. We all need a day of rest.

So how does this point to Jesus? Jesus came to be the atonement for our sins. We still have to recognize our sin and repent, but we don't have to offer blood sacrifices. He was the sacrifice for our sins. We are forgiven because of Jesus. And why is all this sabbath day of rest stuff important? It is important because we need rest. We need to be reminded to focus on Jesus and to take time to rest and be in God's presence.

During this Lenten season, take time to do just that, rest and repent in Jesus' name.

Contributed by: Stacy Taylor, Panama UMC

Day 24 - Tuesday, April 2

Psalm 53

“A fool says in his heart there is no God...God looks down and sees from heaven...Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt... they are overwhelmed with dread when there was nothing to dread.”

Have you ever listened from the back of a chorus concert and tried really hard to hear the individual voice of your child among the cacophony of song?

Your head is turned, your eyes are glued and your ears are keenly listening. You can see the lips move, the rhythm of the music in the swaying of the body, but it is only with an extraordinary voice that your ear may be able to hear your child's voice in the song. Most would agree how difficult it is to single out the thread of the song from the crowd.

God, however, sees and hears it all in a glance, the unrighteous, the fools. He looks down from heaven. He knows His children. Me! He sees me at my worst and best and yet, because He loves me and sees me making my choices, He still chooses me. He looks and sees the SIN, and I am sure He looks and sees the love I have for him as well.

But, this Psalm reminds me that we are all corrupt at one time or another and that we have spent time in disbelief saying there is no God or living like we don't know God, being overwhelmed when we could live in His peace.

I know I don't deliberately ignore God's presence but I also know my focus is not always on Him. I crowd Him out with misplaced priorities. I also fail to credit God when I am going through a storm. I am overwhelmed when He really has me in His hand, and has all along.

“Oh God, please continue to look from heaven to earth and may my words and actions be pleasing to you.”

Contributed by: Linda Carson, Park UMC

Day 25 - Wednesday, April 3

2 Kings 4:1-7

Here is yet another story – true story – from the Bible that is full of lessons for us today. The widow does the right thing by humbling herself, and making her need known. I am always surprised to learn of someone who is in need and yet they never let that need be known. It even happens in our churches. I'm sure it is frustrating for our pastors. Know that the people of God want to pray for you – and more than that, they want to help – they want to be the hands and feet, and ears of God. Don't cheat others out of the blessing of using their gifts to help you.

I also like Elisha's response to the widow – “How can I help you?” Not how can I solve your problem for you – without you. How can I assist you in getting the help you need – in this case – from God rather directly in the form of a miracle. The man of God provided the details by which that help – that miracle - was to occur. Listen carefully and be willing to do your part – whether you are the one being helped or the one doing the helping. What seems like “nothing at all” to the widow was more than enough for God to use to resolve her problem. Don't underestimate what it is that God has already given you.

Another lesson I see there is that we always have a part to play in meeting our own needs. We always have a part in the solution to our problems. We don't just sit down and wait for our needs to be met. We must be active – we must be obedient – we must listen closely and look after the details – and we must be willing to humble ourselves. Part of me wonders if the widow got enough jars, did she have enough faith? Here is another lesson – that God gives us all that we need when we need it

and in this case a little more so that you will not have the same problem in the future. The widow also went back to the man of God for follow up instructions – additional guidance. Solving the complex problems of our lives is rarely a “do this once and we're done” thing. It is often a process – and sometimes it is a life-long process.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the people of God you have put in our lives. Help us to humble ourselves enough to share our struggles with them. Help us to clearly see our role in the details of the solution to our problems. Help us to clearly see the opportunities we have to help others, and make us willing to give of our time, our resources and our gifts to do that. Amen

Contributed by: Carl Davis, Panama UMC

Day 26 - Thursday, April 4

Isaiah 43:1-7 – Do not fear, for I have redeemed you!

God's most frequent command is "Do not fear" as it appears over 80 times in scripture.

It was a time of peril for God's people in Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel - led by King Pekah - attacked Judah. During the reign of King Hezekiah, Assyria defeated the Northern Kingdom and was threatening Judah. Hezekiah's son and successor – King Manasseh - was a wicked king, sacrificing his children to pagan idols. It is apparent that God's people needed a prophetic voice to tell His people not to fear as it is written 16 times in Isaiah.

We are created in God's image – to live in a loving relationship with Him. When Adam first sinned – God Himself declared His plan to redeem mankind. (Genesis 3:14,15).

Isaiah was the first major prophet to proclaim Messianic prophecies – Isaiah is quoted 55 times in the New Testament. A couple of his redemptive prophecies include: "He will swallow up death for all time" (Isaiah 23:8), "The ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10),

Isaiah 43:1 could very well be the central theme of Isaiah's ministry "But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and he who formed you O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!"

I challenge you to be the source of hope for those who are in perilous times, point them to the true hope which is redemption in Christ Jesus!

Contributed by: Daniel Lloyd, Park UMC

Day 27 - Friday, April 5

Philippians 2:25-3:1

The book of Philippians is another of Paul's letters written to a church – this one in Philippi. Epaphroditus had come from Philippi to help Paul, and then he became ill. Word had gotten back to the church in Philippi and the people were concerned. Paul is sending Epaphroditus home so his friends can see he is okay and Epaphroditus will deliver Paul's letter to the church. Throughout the letter, Paul praises the work of Timothy and Epaphroditus and encourages the church to listen to these messengers. Paul urges the church to keep preaching about Christ, to do things in the interests of others, and to work without complaining or arguing.

I love to write letters. Writing down my thoughts and allowing others to read them can be intimidating. Once words are committed to paper and sent away, they cannot be taken back. I often write short letters to my grandchildren – praising their recent accomplishments, offering a bit of advice, and planting a seed for reflection.

Unlike Paul's letters, mine will not survive decades to be reread by others. But I hope my grandchildren will internalize some part of the letter to help them be better followers of Christ, to serve others selflessly, and to use their talents wisely. Putting these ideas on paper as messages to the grandchildren, also reminds me to do the same things. I wonder if Paul's letters were reminders for him and a form of self-encouragement to be thankful in all things and continue to persevere with the work of the Lord?

Paul encouraged his friends through letters that were hand delivered by messengers like Epaphroditus. Do we offer enough encouragement and words of wisdom to each other? It is easy nowadays to text, send an email, make a phone call, and even write a letter and mail it so we can give praise and inspiration to someone. Our words may not physically survive eons, but if they provide the advice or guidance needed by that person at that moment, that is valuable. Paul's letter tells us to be thankful no matter our circumstances and to show our love for Jesus by being a strong church. As we go through each day, let's make an effort to remind others we love them and give each person meaningful words of support.

Prayer: Jesus, I am your servant. I am grateful for the blessings you have given me. I want to share your story and help others find joy in following you. Draw me closer to you each day. Amen.

Contributed by: Carol Hay, Panama UMC

Day 28 - Saturday, April 6

Psalm 126 – Songs of Joy

Verse 5 – Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy

Songs of joy come so easily when we have been waiting what seems like a lifetime. We pray when we are waiting for the end of a season in life, restore physical and mental health, prayers fulfilled, and tears of distress to be channeled with pathways of hope. In faith, we trust in the Lord and give Him our concerns. In faith, we feel calm during a storm, peace during turmoil, and love in our hearts when someone has given us no reason to love them.

We pray during these times and we learn our own strength and what we are able to endure. There are times we are unsure we can make it through this season in life. Our will is strong and when we know we are not alone our will seems greater. Whether we choose to live without something or something has been taken from us we need determination and strength to get through. Our prayers give us peace, patience, self discipline, and clear our hearts and minds. When we take the time to prepare, pray, and spend time with the Lord there is peace. We will sing the songs of joy and give praise and thanks to our Lord.

Dear Lord, guide us through the journey of life. Let us sing the songs of joy and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Contributed by: Varsi Peterson, Park UMC

Day 29 – Monday, April 8

Hebrews 10:19-25

Some quotes from Swindoll:

“It’s not known who wrote the book of Hebrews, but it is clear the purpose is to encourage the weary and that Jesus is superior over everything and everyone.”

Chapter 2 gives us a warning to pay attention so we don’t drift away. This book was written at a time when some of the Jewish converts were tempted to turn away from their faith.

In Chapter 10 verse 8, Jesus reminds us that he has come to be a sacrifice for all. In verse 17 the Holy Spirit reassures us, ‘Their sins and lawless acts, I will remember no more.’

Verse 19 tells us to persevere and draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, ‘Let us hold securely to the hope we profess because He who promised is faithful.’ We are to encourage one another.

I quote from the contemporary English version, verse 18: “When sins are forgiven, there is no need to offer sacrifices.”

10:19 - “My friends, the blood of Jesus gives us courage to enter the most Holy place by a new way that leads to life.”

10:21-25 – “We have a great High Priest who is in charge of God’s house, so let’s come near to God with pure hearts and consciences free from evil and our bodies washed with clear water. We must hold tightly to the hope we say is ours. After all, we can trust one who made the agreement with us. We should keep encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord’s coming is getting closer.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, We give thanks for your promises and encouragement. It gives us a security that no one or anything else can give. I’m so thankful to have your word to guide us and give us the strength in what we do and ask your forgiveness for our failures. Amen.

Contributed by: Eloise Smith, Panama UMC

Day 30 – Tuesday, April 9

Judges 9:7-15 – A Lesson from the Trees

I wonder why the trees decided not to take the position of leadership. They deserved it. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine were all symbols of the life of Israel. They were some of the most respected and honored plant life in scripture. If anybody deserved promotion it was them!

But they voted to continue to serve. They found their value in their purpose, not in their position. They knew that leaving their positions of service would actually decrease their worth.

How many times have we found ourselves tempted with gain, status, or position that would end up making us less useful in the Kingdom of God? How often are our busy schedules and our self-defined importance hindering us from the full service and honor that God is calling us to?

This Lent, let's flip the script. It is possible to re-align our hearts to God's heart. It's simple, but difficult. We must go back to our mission of serving God as our Lord, putting His priorities first while forsaking our positions in our own kingdoms. We can learn from the trees, and remember that serving God and others is the highest honor that can be obtained. After all, the last shall come first in His Kingdom.

Lord, please guide me. Help me to stop seeking social and financial status for myself and help me to serve you first. Help me to put myself aside and focus solely on you. You are the King of the world and the King of my life. Please always remember me, your servant. Amen.

Contributed by: Dan Skinner, Park UMC

Day 31 - Wednesday, April 10

Habakkuk 3:2-15 – Hang on!

In this book, it appears that Habakkuk understands WHY God is punishing his disobedient people, but he certainly does NOT understand God's methods (of using a wicked nation as his instrument of judgment).

What is it that God is allowing right now that has you totally baffled? Maybe you're dealing with such overwhelming frustration that you've even been tempted to simply "throw in the towel and quit." Take time to share everything with God. He knows anyway, so you can be brutally honest with him. Even when we totally cannot understand WHY he is allowing what he is allowing, our only hope of any kind of peace at all is to yield and trust.

I encourage you to take time to contemplate Jesus' violent road to Calvary and ultimate death on the cross. Who but God could have turned all that brutality and hatred around for his honor and glory and our good?! Who but God could have imagined using such ugliness to provide a way for us to live with him forever in eternity? Who but God can supernaturally use our current circumstances, no matter what they involve, to provide us with a spiritually abundant life?

Will you make this your prayer with me? Father God, Help me remember all the times you have delivered me from chaos in the past and used it for my good. Thank you, Holy God, for being in control, no matter what. Continually give me your strength and power to trust you and yield to you. Thank you for loving me enough to NEVER leave me where I am. Thank you for using everything to grow me more and more into your image.

Contributed by: Debbie Johnson, Panama UMC

Day 32 - Thursday, April 11

Psalm 31:9-16 – Why Lent?

But I trust in you, LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’”

Psalms 31:14 (NIV)

When I was a child, our family did not practice Lent. Some of my friends did, though. When they announced they were giving up candy for Lent, I remember wondering why on earth would you want to do that? My sweet tooth would have bitten my tongue off before I could promise not to eat candy.

Observing Lent is new to me. I understand that it is more than just choosing to sacrifice something for the period leading up to Easter. But what is Lent for? It is a season of preparation, a time set aside for self-examination, spiritual discovery and repentance. A time to re-align myself.

I chose this scripture to write about because I could relate to it. Distress, sorrow, grief, anguish. Feeling broken like a piece of pottery. I’ve been there. You may be there right now. Certainly Jesus was there during the days leading up to his crucifixion. He didn’t have to be. BUT. He chose to be in that broken place. For me. For you.

Jesus suffered. BUT he trusted His Father. And when I trusted Him, He saved my soul. He saved my soul! At times, I get caught up in the sorrows of this world. I forget the wonderful, eternal significance of the cross. BUT I can re-focus. I can ask forgiveness and say: You are my God, and I will trust in You.

Prayer: Lord, please help me use this time of Lent for sincere soul-searching to prepare my heart for the Easter celebration to come. Amen.

Contributed by: Beth Hadley, Park UMC

Day 33 - Friday, April 12

Isaiah 54:9-10

God loves you and knows everything about you. We also love God, but when we get down to it – we really don't know as much as we think we do about Him! I believe God is constantly trying to reveal Himself to us through the Holy Spirit. We received the Holy Spirit at the moment we made a conscious decision to follow Christ and let Him be the Lord of our lives. The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God is faithful to all of His people. He is full of goodness, faithfulness and compassion. We need to learn how to use these fruits to bring him the glory he deserves! There are times when our emotions try to tell us that God has forsaken us. The enemy wants you to believe this – we need to keep the faith and trust in what He promises us. Especially when things seem to be falling apart around us, when something as solid as the mountains and hills shake, God's love will not be removed. We know this to be true because He never gives up on us.

No matter how many times we fail Him in our lifetime. We need to remember that we have been created in His image and that we are to be like Him. Making a conscious effort to use the fruits of the Spirit, we now have what is needed to show others what the Lord has for them. We need to love on His people whenever we can! I think we need to ask ourselves....“now that we know all of this, how can we show it?”

We can show God's goodness, when we do things for others out of the generosity of our hearts and not feel as if it's an obligation. We do it as an individual out of our thankfulness and gratitude for what He has done for us. We need to demonstrate to others our concern and compassion for all of their needs. This most likely means we will have to sacrifice some of our time! We may desire to be more faithful with God and others, but we will continue to fall short.

The good news is....God promises that His love will never depart from us!!! When God created us, He KNEW we were going to fall short, yet He still created us. God knew He was going to have to exercise a great deal of forgiveness toward us. God's love will not be removed. He loves you because of who He is... that's what He does!!! I pray you find peace in knowing He will always love you.

Father in Heaven, we put our trust in what you have promised each of us. Thank you for your mercy, grace, forgiveness and most of all sending us your son that we may have eternal life with you forever and ever. Amen.

Contributed by: Susie Davis, Panama UMC

Day 34 - Saturday, April 13

Luke 22:1-13 – When We are Judas Ourselves

Today we see Jesus at his absolute best in my opinion. Moving his disciples closer to himself, even Judas. Jesus did not fail to extend grace and opportunity for reconciliation to everyone, even Judas, as he was about to enter into his passion. He prepared an intimate place to share his last meal with his disciples, even with Judas.

How many times have we all been in the same position as Judas? Actively preparing to betray the Christ as he simultaneously continues to offer us all closeness, grace, and reconciliation. That's good news. Even when we are new age Judas Iscariots, Jesus is still Jesus. Now and forever.

Father God, please look down on us sinners this Holy Week. Extend to us your unfailing grace as we extend our greatest praises upward to you. Allow us to feel your closeness. Grant us your pardon in the midst of our sinful nature. Amen.

Contributed by: Matthew Slaven, Park UMC

Day 35 – Monday, April 15

Isaiah 42:1-9

In the times that we are currently living in (and hopefully through), it is all too easy to question everything we see, everything we read, and everything we hear wondering if it true? Can we have confidence that what is being promised will be fulfilled? Will the action match the rhetoric?

While there is ample evidence to support these concerns today, this passage in Isaiah proves to us that our faith and hope is in our God, that what he says is true, and he fulfills all his promises. This knowledge is crucial to us right now as we spend this season of Lent preparing ourselves for God's ultimate promise that he sent Christ to earth to die as a way to provide us with an opportunity for life forever with our God in Heaven.

Here is the good news. This portion of the Scriptures in Isaiah is undeniable proof that over 700 years in advance God promised his people that he would send his servant to bring justice on earth (v. 1-3). He told his people then and now that he has the power to do all he says (v. 5). He then commits to holding our hands and promises to keep us safe so we can be a light to others, open others eyes to his love, release people from the prisons of unbelief and the darkness of sin (v. 6-7).

While we have the crutch of not fully committing ourselves to other things in life because we are not sure, we have almost 2,800 years of proof that God delivers on his promises. What more could we ask for? So during the season of Lent we need to focus on this proof, fully appreciate Christ's death and resurrection, and know that he has called you and me in righteousness, he will take hold of our hands and keep us as we become a light of his love for others.

Prayer: "God we can believe you and your promises. You said you would and you did send your Son as our savior. Through his sacrifice we have a way to be with you in Heaven, but first we have your work to do here on Earth. Empower us through your Holy Spirit to better understand this sacrifice, and through that fully commit to you and the work we have to lead others to faith in you and the promise of life everlasting. Amen."

Contributed by: Greg Edwards, Panama UMC

Day 36 - Tuesday, April 16

Psalm 71:1-14 - Perspective

It's all about perspective. How many times have we believed the lie because we only look at a situation from our own limited point of view? Verses 1-4 of Psalm 71 strike me as just that. The writer begs God to turn his ear to him, to save him, to be his refuge. What he doesn't realize is God already is those things. God already listens, he's already saved, and he is already our safe place. It isn't until verse 5 and beyond that the writer's perspective starts to change. He remembers the times in his youth that God has come through (v5). He recalls God's reliable nature (V6). He remembers the refuge God has been (V7).

That Easter Sunday so many years ago, those who wanted Jesus dead claimed his body had been stolen, but his followers knew better. They had a perspective that aligned with God's purpose and plan. They saw what really happened. Christ arose!

So this year as you ready your hearts to receive what God has done for you, remember what God has already done for you and align your perspective with the truth of who he is. Ask God to open your eyes. As the old hymn says, "Be thou my vision." I've always thought of that phrase not as us looking at God, but us seeing the world around us through God's eyes. Only then will we have the hope that can only be found in Christ Jesus.

With the hope he's planted in us, let us have the same response as the writer of the Psalm - to go and praise more and more (V14).

Contributed by: Jessie Anderson, Park UMC

Day 37 – Wednesday, April 17

Hebrews 12:1-3

This particular verse was a source of strength and inspiration to me when I was training to run a marathon. Long is your journey to crossing the finish line. It is imperative you choose a training plan that builds your strength, stamina, and endurance leading up to race day. You must remain focused and committed to your goal. I began to realize there were many valuable parallels between my marathon training and my Christian life.

The writer of Hebrews urges us to keep our eyes carefully focused on Jesus. It takes training, perseverance, and commitment to put our faith into action. As we run the race of our lives, we must run with our heads up and our eyes focused on Christ. God is the one who sets the course, so just run your race at your own pace. Yet we should be mindful that the race that God sets for each of us is unique. Our race might look different than it looks for others.

During our Christian life, we will encounter obstacles against which we must persevere. It takes dedication and courage to stay the course. We must resist the distractions of sin and focus on Jesus. If you're going to make it to the finish line, you'll have to draw close to God and lay aside your sin. There will be times when you feel as though you aren't able to run even a few more steps, let alone another mile. Let us resist sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Remember that Christ, who is our very life, always runs with us.

When referring to the great cloud of witnesses, remember we are in this together, to encourage one another, and to continue to keep each other's focus on Jesus as the solution to sin. God calls us to practice kindness and compassion for others. Our Christian life is about serving others and shining the light of Christ into the lives of people around us. So, run that extra mile -- you are not alone and He is strong!

Our Father in Heaven, help us to persevere when we face challenges. Please give us strength to overcome our stubborn ways and resist the distractions of sin. Help us to focus on Jesus Christ to live the way you would have us live so that we might be a testimony to others.

Contributed by: Dawn Sard, Panama UMC

Day 38 – Thursday, April 18

John 13:1-17; 31b-35 – Beams of Life

A couple of weeks ago I was in the bathroom at my university. I went to go into the larger, as some would refer to as the handicapped accessible bathroom, when I stopped myself. I stopped myself because I remembered the moment last semester when I walked into the bathroom and there was a girl waiting. One of the stalls was still open, but it was a smaller one and because of her wheelchair, she couldn't fit. I was able to go to the bathroom because I didn't have that obstacle in the way. I was able to go into any bathroom stall I wanted, with no restrictions. She could not.

Whenever I go into the restroom, I think of that moment. Most of the time there isn't anyone in the larger stall and most of the time the girl who was in the wheelchair that one day is not there. I still make a conscious effort not to go in it. If I go into the bathroom and all the stalls are taken except one designated to being more wheelchair accessible, I wait. Just like Jesus would wait. I used to love going into the larger restrooms because there was a little extra room, but I always think about her - having to wait.

I thought about this same girl again when I was flying recently. I was thousands of feet up in the air. From above, you can't tell what kind of cars people drive - if they are new or old. You can't see how much their house is worth. You can't see if they have a wheelchair to help them get around or if they are blind or deaf. You wouldn't have been able to tell me apart from her. All you can see are beams of life.

I truly believe that view is what God wants us focused on. We are all beams of life. We shine not to provide light for ourselves, but to be a symbol of light along the path for others - so that they may take that light and shine through the dark for someone else.

Prayer: I pray Lord that during this season of lent that you help me get rid of any leftover pride that I have within me. Open my eyes and the eyes of those around me to live as you did. Help me to take the light that you so selflessly gave to brighten the path for others. You gave us all the same lights. Guide me to shine it as you intended. In Jesus name, amen.

Contributed by: Kari Gustafson, Park UMC

Day 39 - Good Friday, April 19

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

We live in a “day and age” of scammers (criminals who commit fraud) bombarding us with unwanted solicitations through phone calls and e-mails. The scams are convincing as they assure us of easy and great opportunities to become rich quick. The 2017 Better Business Bureau reported over 47,000 scam crimes associated with financial loss. To protect ourselves we are reminded frequently, “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is”.

We are told that Jesus Christ loves us unconditionally. No matter where we’ve been, no matter what we’ve done, His love has no limits. It’s sometimes difficult to fathom that Jesus will love and forgive us for our sins. We feel his forgiveness is “too good to be true”. We may ask the question, why would he ever love a sinner like me” Why should I deserve His lavish love?

Remember, Jesus has been where we are. He knows the temptations and struggles we face. He knows our sin, yet he still went to the cross for you and me. Because of His sacrifice, we have the opportunity of eternity in heaven. Praise God! During this season of Lent, follow the instruction from Hebrews 4:16 “Let us approach the throne with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and grace.”

Yes, Jesus love, forgiveness and mercy for you may seem “too good to be true”. But this time it is true, JESUS IS THE REAL DEAL!

Dear Heavenly Lord, I come before you broken, but in awe of who you are and the privilege to approach your throne boldly. There are days that I don’t completely understand your unfailing love for me, but I thank you for it. May I never take for granted your incredible sacrifice, for the forgiveness of my sin. All glory and honor be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!

Contributed by: Brenda Ireland, Panama UMC

Holy Saturday, April 20

1 Peter 4:1-8 – Why Lent?

The first time I heard about lent was as teenager who had been forced to attend a local Catholic church. There was a paper bowl with some quarters in it, that had pictures of dark-skinned children in the entrance of the church. I asked the priest about this. He said we put the value of the food that we went without during the time of Lent. It would then be used for charity. “Go without food?” I thought to myself. “Why would I do that?”

Like so many practices we have in church, we need to diligently explain and teach new Christians why we do what we do. They must be given a, “reason for the hope that is in you.” 1 Peter 3:15

The practice of denying our fleshly desires isn’t just for the season of lent, but all year round, each day of our lives. Lent is a season to remind us, to renew us, to refresh our focus and understanding of, “what is, that good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.” Romans 12:2

“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” 1 Peter 4:1,2 God’s will may feel like suffering now, but it brings satisfaction in the end.

Lord, help us today to please you, to focus on your will and do those things that will bring you joy, as well as give us joy. Amen.

Contributed by: Chuck Wittenbrook, Park UMC

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