



**Ash Wednesday, February 26**  
through  
**Holy Saturday, April 11, 2020**

**You are about to embark on a journey - a disciple's path. When we think of the first disciples and their journey with Jesus, they probably experienced a mix of expectation, confusion, hope, challenge, and calling. We experience many of the same things. Yes, 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.**

**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 and enjoy some precious moments with Jesus. You're invited to spend each Sunday in worship with others. You're invited to learn and grow along with your brothers and sisters throughout this Lenten time of preparation.**



**Wednesday, February 26, 2020**

**Psalm 51**

Whether we receive the Imposition of Ashes today or not, the name “Ash Wednesday” reminds us of the dark mark on our lives. Today’s scripture is one that names various aspects of the sin and brokenness that mark each of us. We have been drawn into messes by the sin of others. We have personally sullied our hearts by our own sin. At times, it seems like we are drowning in a cesspool of ancient evil and the culmination of thousands of years of human rebellion. Where is our help?

Psalm 51 helps us to name our personal responsibility for our part of the dirt and seek God’s mercy. Bigger than the reality of the sin that is named in this psalm is the truth of grace that it points to. These petitions don’t stop at trying to avoid the consequence of sin, but go deeper in seeking renewal and rebirth. Yes, we personally and collectively have a problem, but thanks to Jesus, that problem is not larger than his ability to repair.

Vs 10-12 should remind us about another mark. These verses call us to remember our baptisms, and the indelible mark that God places on us as we die a spiritual death beneath the water and rise to new life. This image of death and rebirth in our baptisms is present in the season of Lent. The mark of grace never fades, but it sure seems like it gets obscured by our sin. Let us pray slightly modified words from our Baptismal Covenant as we remember what God has and is doing.

Prayer: Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless the gift of water and us who have received it, to wash away my sin, and clothe me in righteousness throughout my life, that, dying and being raised with Christ, I may share in his final victory. All praise to you, Eternal Father, through your Son Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever.

Rev. Matthew French, Springville First UMC. Amen.

**Thursday, February 27, 2020**

**Jonah 3:1-10 – The Word of the Lord came to Jonah  
a second time...”**

God was asking Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to the people because of their great wickedness. Nineveh was a very large city of about 120,000 people. It was the capital of the Syrian empire. It was an important junction for commercial routes thus receiving wealth from many sources.

The people were said to be ignorant of the difference between right and wrong. They were in a bad way and God was giving them an opportunity to repent. They were living their life for self without acknowledging God, doing whatever they felt like doing. God had enough of their self-serving ways and sent Jonah to preach to them the truth so that they could hear God's Word and have an opportunity to choose to repent.

God had called Jonah, but Jonah refused to listen and obey the first time. He thought he could avoid what he did not want to do. As a result, he suffered and thought he would die. God had mercy and gave Jonah a second chance: The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.... how many times does God need to speak to us before we obey?

Who do we know that is in a bad way, living life without a care about God and the life that he offers? God cares about every person even those we think are unreachable. Who is he asking you to share the good news of Jesus with? In Romans 10:14 Paul writes “How can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the one who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them?” Will we go the first time we feel the prompting of God?

Joyce Blakeslee, Findley Lake UMC

**Friday, February 28, 2020**

**Romans 1:8-17**

Reading through today's passage, I was instantly gripped by the four words "I am not ashamed." They danced around in my head and I couldn't shake their hold. Here we see Paul, writing to a Roman audience. To people who were part of one of the most powerful empires the world had ever known. Through sheer might and force the Roman Empire shaped the world. Power was their pride. Power was their pursuit. Nothing else mattered. Power justified them. Power consumed them.

While the empire has since crumbled, man's pursuit of power has not. Self-worth and social standing rise with our bank accounts. We are only as good as our next promotion. Merit has since been replaced with how many social media followers we can amass. We forsake the pursuit of "Him" so we can justify "I." Self-serving and self-fulfilling. The tower crumbles because the foundation is neglected.

Let me call your attention back to Paul's words "I am not ashamed." In the face of an empire, Paul asserted true power. Though solitary in voice, he was affirmed by the gospel. Deemed worthy by faith in Christ alone. Unashamed and unleashed from the expectations of the world. That is the power of the gospel. Power not of personal might, but power through personal surrender.

Saved by grace, restored by Jesus. Empowered to change the world in a way no empire ever could. One who has worth from within will never be without. Thanks be to God.

*Father God, we come before you, with everlasting hope rooted in your gospel. Unafraid and unashamed because our worth is found solely in you. Empowering us to go boldly in your name. AMEN*

Brandon Meacham, Park UMC

**Saturday, February 29, 2020**

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

This is a long passage, so if you didn't take the time to read it through, I encourage you to do that. But here's the general sense of this word from God to the prophet Isaiah: God told Isaiah to call the people out and name the ways that they were not doing what He asked them to do, in the ways He asked them to do those things. The Israelites were trying to tell God that they were doing them the way He asked. So, not only were they acting in a rebellious way, but they were acting like, and trying to convince God that, they were NOT. As you can imagine, God saw through their words and actions and went on a 5-verse tirade about what He thought of them at that moment in their history. God used the words, "As if..." to let the people know that they were lying to themselves, each other, and to Him, and that called their bluff.

It's often hard to hear correction from God or others in the form of a laundry list of things that aren't right in your life. Sometimes, the list is what we tell ourselves over and over when it's quiet. "You're missing it." "You're not good enough." "You're not ready." "You can't handle it." Other times, the correction is from God through conviction in prayer or through a sermon or bible study. Still other times, we receive feedback at work, at home, or in the community. Every time, we have a choice to ignore the feedback. When we do, we find ourselves turning away from the voice and walking our own path.

Yet, God has SO MUCH MORE for us. The second half of this passage (verses 6-12) is God's clear and guiding vision for the people He loves. God gives the people a reminder of what He wants to do in their lives. The people were choosing less. God wanted to give them more.

When you choose the path of less, simply because it's easier, shorter, or satisfies some flesh nature in you, then God raises His voice to call you to turn back to Him. He calls your bluff. He wants to give you His more. God's more is far beyond what you can imagine while you're surviving in the state of, "as if." During this season, stop, listen to, and receive the more that God wants to give you. That more is Himself, in the form of Jesus Christ, the Truth and Way and Life. Then, you can love and serve others in the power He has given to you.

Prayer focus: where I'm settling for less, even though God wants to give me more; turning to God in repentance and receiving God's more; responding to God's more by giving more to others.

Pastor Steve Taylor, Panama UMC

**Monday, March 2, 2020**

**Hebrews 2:10-18**

Use your imagination to think about this time of year as Christmas in March. Why? Doesn't it seem easier to picture and think about the Incarnation - God coming in the flesh - when we hear stories about the baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem than it is to meet the adult incarnated Jesus of Nazareth before his death and resurrection?

The adult Jesus that the writer of Hebrews spotlights has suffered like we do at times during our own lives. Jesus, however, experienced the worst humanity could inflict: betrayal, rejection, abandonment, torture, and finally crucifixion. Our writer reminds us of Jesus' humanity. It's explained that Jesus is our sibling, is physically like us, and was tempted like us and died like we do.

Why is it important that Jesus share our humanity? It is true that by his dying and resurrection Jesus freed us from the power of death and the devil. Certainly by his becoming the final sacrifice for sin, we are reconciled to God.

It is also great to be in a relationship where you can sense and be assured that your friend is always present, loving you and forgiving you. I know that during my daily life when I am suffering or tempted, Jesus is there. I see him give me a nod or wink that says "I know, I get it!" Jesus experienced all the complexities of life. My hope is that you are open to Jesus' presence and can see that "nod or wink."

Prayer: Lord, help me to give up trying to solve everything. Instead, renew my commitment to follow Jesus. You are not always calling me to understand. You are calling me to follow you. AMEN.

Charles Vredenburg, Springville First UMC

**Tuesday, March 3, 2020**

**Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10 – Jesus – Our Perfect High Priest**

Worshiping God with all of her being, Pam expresses her love for God through her liturgical dance. Each Sunday morning Pam carefully chooses a special colored ribbon for each praise song. The beautiful colors purposefully glide through the air for all to see as her whole body moves in an expressive dance of worship to her Lord. Every Sunday morning during our Praise & Worship you will find Pam dancing with a radiant smile on her face, no matter what burdens or concerns weigh heavy on her own heart, almost as though she is praying to Jesus with each beautiful move. What a wonderful example of a whole body expression of worship!

These past few weeks we have missed our beautiful sister in Christ up on that platform. Due to excruciating pain in her back and leg she is now unable to share her gift of worshipful dance with us. Since hearing the recent news that Pam has been diagnosed with a rare form of metastasized cancer, our whole church family is now doing our best to follow Jesus's example found in this key verse. *Hebrew 5:7. "While Jesus lived on earth he prayed to God, asking for help from the one who could save him from death. He prayed to God with loud cries and tears. And his prayers were answered because of his great respect for God."*

We can be grateful for Jesus's example to us in this passage. Praise God that as we experience our own difficult and challenging news in our lives and the lives of our loved ones we must remember to always approach God's throne of grace with confidence! Our perfect High Priest, Jesus Christ, is there waiting to intercede on our behalf. Yes, Jesus is the perfect High Priest because he was appointed by God and sinless. But also because through His own suffering and pain while on this earth, He is able to understand, show us His compassion, and empathize with our weaknesses in our own times of need.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that we can come to you boldly, with confidence, and knowledge that you do understand all that we experience and go through here on earth. You know how it feels when our own hearts are filled with heaviness for our loved ones. You understand when our hearts cry out to you with loud cries and tears for our family members and dear friends who are broken emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Meet their needs Lord Jesus and heal them in Jesus' Name!

Barb Emory, Findley Lake UMC

**Wednesday, March 4, 2020**

## **Psalm 32**

On these grey, cloudy, winter days I long for rebirth. I want to see the snow melt and the buds pop. I want to watch as the leaves of the crocus push their way up through the soil. A new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate. That must have been the way David felt when he wrote about the joy of forgiveness after a winter of guilt.

We've all felt the sting of our conscience telling us that we have sinned. Sinning has created a separation between God and ourselves. A void. Some of us are quick to repent and ask for God's forgiveness. Some of us can hold off a lot longer, rationalizing our behavior, remaining stubborn in our defiance.

For those of us who are quick to repent and seek God's forgiveness, we are at peace in the knowledge that forgiveness has already come and our relationship has been restored.

For the rest of us who may struggle with pride or self-righteousness, humility is hard fought, and asking for forgiveness is difficult. We think that we are winning by holding out but we are really losing. Losing relationship, losing joy, losing faith. Peace will be a long time coming. As David said in Psalm 32:3 "When I keep silent my bones grow old."

Forgiveness is restorative, powerful and healing. If you have trouble asking for forgiveness, pray for humility and grace, then you will be led to forgiveness. Seek forgiveness from God, seek forgiveness from those you have hurt, forgive others. Reside in the joy of forgiveness!

Prayer: Father God, Awaken me to my sins against You and others. Take away my pride and anything else that would stand in the way of relationship with you. Father, please forgive me and help me to forgive others in the same measure. Amen

Emilie Gifford, Charlotte Center United Methodist Church

**Thursday, March 5, 2020**

## **2 Timothy 1:3-7**

2 Timothy 1: 3-7 - The Message

**3-4** Every time I say your name in prayer—which is practically all the time—I thank God for you, the God I worship with my whole life in the tradition of my ancestors. I miss you a lot, especially when I remember that last tearful good-bye, and I look forward to a joy-packed reunion.

**5-7** That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you! And the special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed—keep that ablaze! God doesn't want us to be shy with his gifts, but bold and loving and sensible.

I thank God regularly for the people He has put in my life – my spouse – family members - friends - pastors – good teachers and good mentors. Some of those relationships carry on to this day – some of the relationships have changed due to the simple way life happens. Some of the people that come to mind were only in my life for a very short but very meaningful time. I praise God for the rich faith handed down to me from my mother Mildred. Our churches stand strong on the shoulders – on the faithfulness - of those who have come before us – who planted our churches and those who remained faithful through the years. Our faithfulness now is required to continue that work and to be the people that those who come after us will be praising God for!

I trust that God has put people like that in your life – I pray that you are drawn to those people – and that you will make time for them in your life. Give them an opportunity to invest in you, to “pour themselves” into your life. When I retired – I made it a goal to attempt to reconnect with some of those people from my past. God is helping out – He had a friend from 40 years ago stop by my house recently and it was a joyful time to catch up with a Christian brother from years ago. I received an email from another friend that I worked with for years – but more importantly he was a brother in Christ who helped me to continue to be a seeker.

Take a moment to recall the people who have been there for you through the years – those who have encouraged you in your faith walk. Remember the saints of the church. Praise and thank God for them. Fan the flames of your faith!

Prayer: Heavenly Father - Thank you for the faith-filled people you have put in my life. I pray that you will put people just like them in the lives of my children and grandchildren. I pray that my children and grandchildren will be drawn to those people and will permit them to influence their lives, and hold them accountable to their faith in You. Help me to not be shy with the spiritual gifts you have given me. Help me to be bold and loving and sensible. Amen

Carl Davis, Panama UMC

**Friday, March 6, 2020**

**Romans 3:21-31**

Our family recently heard the words no one ever wants to hear from their pharmacist, "According to our records, your health care insurance has been cancelled." What?! How could this happen? We did all the things we had to do months ago to maintain our health care coverage. We filled out the forms, talked to the proper people and signed our names on the appropriate line. We did everything asked of us and yet we heard the word cancelled. Health care...there are a lot of hoops to jump through to qualify for coverage and all that hoop jumping may not be enough.

The Roman church may have been struggling with a bit of hoop jumping of their own. Perhaps they were thinking they needed to follow the many laws and the endless list of rules to find acceptance in God's eyes. And sin! Wow! Just when they thought they were on track for getting on God's "worthy" list, they messed up and sinned. So back to the rules of sacrifice they went, checking the rule book twice to make sure they got it right. Maybe tomorrow will be the day they can manage not to sin.

Then Paul wrote a letter to the Roman church. In it Paul said, yes you sinned. You sinned yesterday and you'll sin tomorrow. We all do. We all fail to live a life worthy of God. But you know what folks, Jesus did something pretty amazing just for you. Jesus took every one of our ugly, stinking, crushing sins and carried them on His back all the way to the cross. Not only did He carry our sin, He gave Himself as the sacrifice for all we have done to cause us to be unworthy of God's love.

Because Jesus gave Himself as the sacrifice for our sins, we ARE now worthy in God's eyes. Faith in Jesus wipes our sin from God's memory bank. Faith in Jesus, giving your heart to Jesus, following Jesus...this makes you worthy in God's eye. You are valued by God. You are accepted by God. You are loved by God. You receive this wonderful relationship not through working harder or by jumping through endless hoops. All you need to do is accept the gift of Jesus in your life. There is no paper work to fill out. You do not need to paw through your file cabinet to find a record of your worth. Just accept the gift of Jesus.

Lois Scharf-Newman, Springville First UMC

**Saturday, March 7, 2020**

**Psalms 121:1 (NLT) – I look up to the mountains –  
does my help come from there?**

Ah the mountains, towering, majestic, powerful in stature, beckoning humanity to get closer to the gods. From the beginning of time, humans have likened height to closeness to the gods. The Tower of Babel; the high places in all of Canaan; Mt Carmel where Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal; Petra where it wasn't enough to be on the high point with a stele erected; humans always have needed to work to show the gods their love and devotion.

Then there is the real God, maker of Heaven and Earth, and everything in it. Where is He? What does He do? First, he is everywhere, even at the lowest point in the Valley of the shadow of death. I know. He has been with me in that place, even now, as Stage 4 cancer is upon us. He never leaves us or forsakes us! He is with us even at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

He wants nothing more than to show his love by giving protection, keeping us out of the heat of the unwarranted fire from the enemy, to bring us to a place of healed safety. However, we must cooperate. The example of Israel is very instructive. They fell away many times as I have, but in the end, He was always there at the moment of repentance to bring His salvation.

The question for me always is, am I ready to surrender to my loving Lord's will? I have always found the safest place to be is in the middle of his will, even if it is uncomfortable.

Lord, help me to look for you right here. The mountains are grand, but it is only a delusion from the enemy that I have to go there. All of your benefits and safety are here. Help me in this place to see what you are doing on my behalf each day through your all-powerful son, Jesus, who sacrificed himself for me. Amen.

Gordon Post, Findley Lake UMC

**Monday, March 9, 2020**

**Numbers 21:4-9 – To React or to Respond**

The people of Israel were walking through a dry land. They weren't sure where they were going or how long it would take them to get there. They didn't have any water. Just this strange new survival food called, "Manna," or "What is it?"

They were afraid. Were they being lied to? Were they being misled? They began to complain against God and Moses, even though God had brought them out of Egypt, parted the Red Sea, killed Pharaoh and his armies, and had just given them victory over the Canaanites.

They could have called on the name of the Lord. They could have prayed and "let their requests be made known to God", but they reacted with complaining. It was like they were snapping and biting at God like snakes. So, he sent poisonous snakes to bite them. Some died.

When we are faced with uncertainty, desperate needs, bad problems, etc., instead of reacting in self-pity, anger, depression, or complaining; stop. Breathe. Look up. Pray. Then respond. Our heavenly father knows what you have need of before you ask him. Matt 6:8. He is more than willing to guide and help.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive us for our complaining, our fear, our lack of faith in your character, your wisdom, and your love for us. You always know best. Please renew our hearts and minds so that we may do things the right way and be pleasing to you. Amen.

Chuck Wittenbrook, Charlotte Center UMC

**Tuesday, March 10, 2020**

## **Romans 4:6-13**

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them." Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

When Pastor Steve was recruiting people for the Lenten Devotional, I happily signed up and picked something from the New Testament. It has been my experience that verses from the New Testament are more applicable to my everyday life. But I truly had a difficult time understanding the message that these particular verses convey. And, I have to admit, I panicked a little when I read it mentioned circumcision. But, I did some research and I now better understand the message and I hope you will too.

In my research, I stumbled upon an article from Juli Camarin on [jcblog.net](http://jcblog.net) that really helped me. It stated, Romans 4 is proof that faith has always been the means for justification. Paul reflects back to the Old Testament patriarchs who were justified by faith, not works, to illustrate his point. Paul uses this illustration to prove that Gentiles were part of this promise given to Abraham. The whole world was blessed through him because he chose to believe God rather than his circumstances and, because of this, his faith was credited to him as righteousness. Rituals of the law do not bring justification. God will attribute our righteousness to us. There is nothing we can do to earn or merit forgiveness and right standing before God. Righteousness cannot be earned. Paul teaches us that righteousness was bestowed on Abraham by faith alone.

Paul also emphasizes that the atonement of Jesus Christ is a gift God has offered to each of us and it's a manifestation of divine grace. Grace is a gift from God, not a debt. The efforts we make to receive the salvation offered us by Jesus Christ do not alter the graciousness of Atonement. God's grace is manifest even in our efforts. God's grace is offered through the mercy and love of Jesus Christ. Grace provides us with the enabling power that helps us to do good works.

Prayer: Dear Lord--search me, know my heart, lead me. Thank you for your abundant, abounding grace. I ask for forgiveness for my failures and for strength to overcome my stubborn ways. I celebrate Your grace at work in my life. Help me to display Your grace in my life today. Amen

Dawn Sard, Panama UMC

**Wednesday, March 11, 2020**

**John 7:53-8:11 – The God Who Sees**

Let's be clear from the start; it was a trap. The woman, just a tool. Her circumstances, an opportunity to knock the legs out from under this young upstart with a following. Can you picture it? The religious leaders dragging a woman—one who is certain that today she will die—to the middle of the crowd where Jesus taught. They must have had swagger, so sure that this time they'll have him. I mean the law of Moses was clear, and she broke it.

They throw her crime at him and demand a response. But Jesus doesn't engage like they expected. In fact, is he ignoring them? When he does respond, Jesus wisely evades the entire legal debate and confronts them instead with a more fundamental truth—that none of them is without sin.

When the accusers have all left, Jesus speaks compassionately with the woman. He does not gloss over her sin, but in his refusal to condemn her, he invites her to a new place of freedom and a new image of herself. He looked at her and he saw a person, not a tool to be used, not a circumstance to be exploited.

Prayer: Today, Father God, let us see like you do. In the midst of all the chaos that bombards us, let us push aside the noise and see. Let us see the people at the center of circumstances, the hearts amid trouble, and the hands stretched out waiting to be pulled to freedom. Amen.

Angie French, Springville First UMC

**Thursday, March 12, 2020**

**Colossians 1:15-23 – Keep our eyes on Christ Jesus,  
the image of the invisible God and our Savior**

In this passage of Scripture, Paul is reminding the Colossians about the truth of God's word. Jesus is the image or perfect representation of the invisible God, Jesus is the firstborn (supreme) over all creation, all things are created through him and for him, he is the head of the body (the church), he is the beginning and firstborn from the dead, all the fullness of God dwells in him and he is the reconciler of man.

Before we knew Jesus as Savior and Lord—before we accepted by faith his death and resurrection as an atonement for our sins, we were alienated from God. After being reconciled by Christ we are now presented as holy or set apart in God's sight, without blemish/blameless and free from accusation and beyond reproach before God.

Verse 23 suggests a condition: *IF indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.* Salvation comes through faith and faith keeps us from falling away. What we have in Jesus Christ is complete—Jesus said on the cross, *"It is finished."* Jesus IS the way, the truth and the life. Scripture declares that through Jesus Christ we are children of God, holy and blameless in God's sight, joint heirs with Jesus, we have heaven instead of hell, blessing instead of wrath, life instead of death, light instead of darkness, peace instead of chaos, joy instead of sorrow, truth instead of lies and wisdom instead of foolishness. The gospel IS the good news—let us remain steadfast in its truth and give Jesus Christ ALL the glory.

*Prayer: Oh, Lord, help me to keep my focus on you every moment of every day. Keep me from the lies and temptations of this world and the devil. I belong to you. As I walk with you daily, please increase my love for you and for my brothers and sisters in you. Use me for your honor and glory.*

Floyd and Patricia Piazza, Findley Lake UMC

**Friday, March 13, 2020**

**Ephesians 2:11-22 – Unity in Christ**

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Eph. 2:13a

This passage is called the Unity in Christ chapter as it refers to the unity of the Gentile and Jewish believers. Prior to Christ, the Gentiles were without the Messiah, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise and with no hope of God in the world. By the blood of Christ, the Gentiles found a common foundation with the Jews. Thus, peace was created between the two groups.

Our two oldest children rode the school bus together where another boy was picking on Susie and making her cry. The next day Stefan snagged the seat behind this boy, bopping him on the head while saying, "Leave my sister alone!" What would make an orphan boy from Bulgaria step up and defend a little girl from Korea? They were united by adoption!

Prayer: Lord, we pray for peace once again in this world. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

Pete Skillman, Park UMC

**Saturday, March 14, 2020**

## **Psalm 95 – A Call to Worship and Obedience**

I awoke one morning in January just as the first hints of dawn were starting to show. It happened to coincide with a few days of reading Psalm 95 as part of my commitment to prepare a piece for this Lenten series. My kitchen window looks eastward and as the skyline brightened the colors began to evolve into a beautiful combination of pastel pink, and light blue, something you would see in a newborn's nursery. The view from my window was overtaken by these colors to the point I had to walk outside. What I saw was that the whole horizon from North to South and from the East to directly over my head was radiating these wonderful colors. Despite the cold, I stood in wonder for some time trying to absorb the scene and it became almost overwhelming.

When I returned inside I re-read this short, 11 verse Psalm and must admit that in an uncharacteristic fashion I found myself on my knees following the call of verse 6, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker; for he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care."

I encourage you to read this Psalm because you cannot help, even if you are not in the aura of a beautiful sunrise, to be reminded that our GOD made it all by his own hands, the sky, the mountains, the seas, and the universes beyond, just for us, his people. But this Psalm also recognizes our natural stubborn tendencies, like the Israelites in the desert who quarreled with and tested GOD despite his literal provision of their bread and water each day, who's hearts were hardened as opposed to open in worship.

Today, revel in what GOD has made and provided for you and me and all before and after us. That alone should result in our worshiping and praising him. But even better, he sent his son, Jesus to this earth to sacrifice himself for us. He did this so we could not only believe in GOD from the creation he made, but though Jesus have a way to "...enter his rest".

Greg Edwards, Panama UMC

**Monday, March 16, 2020**

**Genesis 24:1-27**

A number of years ago I was scheduled to serve in Ukraine as a medical missionary. I had been looking forward to the trip for months, and when the day arrived, I was excited and nervous at the same time. I remember it well. It was a Sunday. In the morning, during worship, the congregation prayed for me as the pastor anointed me with oil. Soon after worship, I was off to the Buffalo airport. When I got there to check in, the airline representative behind the counter said there had been some changes, and my connecting flight no longer existed. It was one of those, "You can't get there from here" scenarios. She did offer me some other flights options but said she couldn't guarantee I would make it there. I turned to my wife and said I wasn't sure what to do. My wife replied, "God is leading you somewhere. Just go and follow." I knew she was right, and as I touched the residual anointing oil on my forehead, I sensed God's presence and peace. I knew at that moment I could trust God, so off I went. I eventually made it to Ukraine, and that week I saw God work in people's lives in ways that could only be described as miraculous.

In today's text we find Abraham's servant being sent on a journey. Uncertainty prevailed. The outcome was in question. Could God be trusted? You read how it turned out. God was faithful and miraculously led the servant directly to the woman who would become Isaac's wife.

During this Lenten season, we too are on a journey, and there will likely be moments when the day's events bring uncertainty or anxiety. Thankfully, we can rest assured that just as God was with our spiritual ancestors, God will be with us too. Friend, God is ready to miraculously work in your life today. So, place your trust in God and boldly follow wherever God leads you.

Prayer: Let us pray: Holy God, as we travel toward Easter and beyond, we are thankful that You are with us and graciously working in our lives. Help us to trust You and courageously follow You all our days. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Brian K. Scharf, Springville First UMC

**Tuesday, March 17, 2020**

## **Genesis 29:1-14 – Jacob meets Rachel**

Nervous expectation is that 'can't sit still and wait feeling', when we are about to venture to an unknown place or about to try something new. We have all been there, such as taking a new job in another part of the country where you don't know the city or the local customs. Perhaps when you are going away to college for the freshman year. Well for Jacob, he had been told by his father Isaac to go to a foreign land, the land of his mother (Rebekah) to find a wife amongst the daughters of his mother's brother, Laban (Gen 28:1-2). He also had a visitation by God in his sleep and was told that he would receive the promise that was made to his grandfather Abraham (Gen 28:10-15).

So much pressure and anticipation and nervous expectation was riding on this trip to find a wife in a foreign land and to fulfill the promise made to his grandfather Abraham. Perhaps that is why Jacob breaks the custom of the shepherds he meets and why he then kisses Rachel before ever telling any of them who he is or why he is there. But after he explains everything to them and Laban, all his awkward actions are simply a thing of the past.

Many times, in our life we are stepping into the unknown with pressure, anticipation and nervous expectation. Perhaps taking some time aside from our busy planning or packing or whatever and spending time with God in prayer and meditation and allowing God to indicate to us his plan will help guide us through the event. We will have that assurance that all will turn out as it should to fit with God's plan and that is how we live into being a child of God. Yes, we may still take some awkward steps along the path, but we will have the assurance that it is the right path.

Prayer: God, grant me the wisdom to seek your guidance whenever I am stepping into the unknown and may my actions be that of a humble servant doing his awkward best to arrest my nervous expectations and step out with calm assurance that I am on the right path, your path. In Jesus Christ I pray.

Mark Gillings, Findley Lake UMC

**Wednesday, March 18, 2020**

**Psalm 81 – Hearing vs Listening**

My wife often reminds me about things in our family schedule that I know nothing about. She keeps saying, "I told you about this..." She has me at a disadvantage. If it weren't for the fact that I know I have such a hard time paying attention to anything or anyone for very long, I would think she is "mis-remembering" telling me.

Verse 8 "Hear me, my people, and I will warn you - if you would only listen to me, Israel!" Why did the people of Israel not hear him?

For the same reason that husbands and wives don't listen to each other. They aren't paying attention to the one speaking. We listen to them talking, but it doesn't count. We don't hear what they say.

It takes effort to focus, to mute the TV, put down the phone, pull out the earbuds, whatever. But it is so worth it to hear what the important ones in our lives are saying!

Prayer: Lord help us to be sensitive to know when you are speaking to us and help us to stop the distractions, focus, and listen to you. We want to hear what you have to say. Amen.

Chuck Wittenbrook, Pleasant Valley UMC

**Thursday, March 19, 2020**

**Ephesians 4:25-32**

When our grandsons (Teddy 6) and (Calloway 3) come over to visit they don't spend a lot of time at the door hugging and kissing grandma and grandpa. Coats and boots are off and it's straight for the toy box. Everything has to come out and it isn't long before toys are strewn everywhere. For them that toy box is a treasure chest. Everything has to be explored, searched and put together.

In the same way God's word is a treasure chest for us. Let's open it and read Ephesians 4:25-32. I think an entire sermon series is outlined in this short passage. The Apostle Paul spent three years teaching and exhorting believers in Ephesus. This passage is the beginning of his final words of instructions. Believers should have unity in their commitment to Christ. They should have the highest moral standards. They should reject pagan or ungodly practices. I'll try to be as brief as I can on these points that Paul emphasized.

- Put away all falsehood and speak the truth. We live in a world of deception and lying with "half truths" and "white lies". It's so easy to get caught up in this. We need to be careful that we don't fall into this trap. Paul says speak the truth. Lies promote discord, destruction and despair. Since we belong intimately to one another to say things that are not true is wrong. Speaking the truth builds unity in the body.

- In your anger do not sin. What makes you angry? Too often we think of anger as righteous anger, but here Paul is speaking of our emotions. I get angry, sometimes over the simplest things. We are told to control our anger. One of the fruits of the spirit is self-control. Do not let the sun go down... My wife's grandmother gave us this advice at our wedding, "don't go to bed angry" - sadly there have been a few times through the years where I have. It is way more difficult to surrender that anger after it has brewed overnight. Don't let anger simmer and fester or it will lead to places we shouldn't be.

George Anderson, Panama UMC

**Friday, March 20, 2020**

**Ephesians 5:1-9**

We are exhorted in the first part of today's Bible reading to "be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us". Today I watched a video of a darling 2-year-old acting out a scene from her favorite movie, *Frozen*, which she no doubt had watched countless times. Wearing her princess gown, she imitated the gestures and movements perfectly.

Children learn by watching and observing others. God's dearly loved children are to look on Christ and the sacrificial love that He has for us. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay his life down for his friends." Because Jesus loved us so much that He gave Himself up for us, we are to live a life of love. We learn how to love by observing and listening to God's holy people, studying God's word, and submitting to His will.

The Apostle Paul warns the Ephesians to not be misled into acting out deeds of darkness by watching, listening to, or partnering with those persons who are immoral, impure, greedy, or idolatrous.

Prayer: Help us, Holy Spirit, to live in the Lord as children of the light. Open our hearts and renew our thoughts to be more like You. Let Your light shine through our actions into the darkness of the world and be an example to others.

Dave Ploetz, Springville First UMC

**Saturday, March 21, 2020**

**Psalm 23:1-6**

Psalm 23 is a beautiful description of how God is watching over us.

He is the one true shepherd, who cares for each of his sheep. As he looks over our lives, he desires for each of us to be refreshed, safe and secure with his guidance. God is looking for each of his sheep to thrive and prosper in life. God encourages us in these verses to put our faith in him. We should expect tough times in our lives with the understanding that God will be there to protect us from the enemies of life. There is hope in knowing that God's goodness and love will follow us through our entire lives on Earth. Verse six encourages us to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Life can be similar to a roller coaster ride. At times in our lives, we experience excitement, joy and love in overwhelming ways. On the flip side, our lives can also be filled with stress, anxiety, confusion and crazy turns. We all experience these ups and downs on a regular basis. The important question to ask is.... How do you deal with your different life situations? Do you try to take on life responsibilities on your own, and carry your load on your own shoulders? No matter what happens in your life, God should be at the center of your life. He is always watching and waiting to hear from you. God wants us to include him in all parts of our lives. We should find refuge in knowing that he is the only one who can give us the strength to accomplish and overcome the daily struggles and success. If we allow God to take control of our lives, we will find peace in knowing we are not alone.

I am completely guilty for always getting in my own way. I try to do things on my own, and I usually end up failing. My life is a very crazy roller coaster ride that often is out of control. I find myself reflecting of the verse: Jeremiah 29:11 and how I know even in the crazy parts of my life, God still has a plan for me. God is the only real Shepherd who can take care of me. The more trust and faith I put in my Lord and Savior, the closer I feel to him. I encourage you to take a step of faith and put your complete trust in God. Just know, he is with you always. He is always ready to listen, to love, to heal, to rejoice, to forgive and to save you from your struggles in life. Don't try to take on the world by yourself. Have God as your trusted Shepherd to guide you through the turns of life.

Prayer: Dear God, I pray for guidance, love and strength. Life can be filled with many different events and I pray that I can have peace and hope in knowing that you are watching over me. God I thank you for your presence in my life. Amen.

Amy Kriner, Findley Lake UMC

**Monday, March 23, 2020**

**Acts 9:1-20**

Every day as I drive to work, I pray a simple prayer to the Lord "use me where you need me." They are just a few simple words, but they are heavy words. Heavy words because sometimes where the Lord may need me are places or with people I may not want to be with. Where the Lord may need me is not always a comfortable spot or warm and cozy. It isn't a warm summer day. Many times it is a snowy blizzard or in the middle of a choppy ocean. It isn't always a pleasant or easy task. Sometimes where the Lord needs me is with people I don't feel deserve my help or with people who I feel may have wronged me so I do not feel they are worthy of my help.

I have learned though, even at a young age, that it is not my duty to decide who is deserving or undeserving of my help. If I feel it is God's will for me to help someone, I help them. Sometimes the only way that individuals hear or see even a little speck of the Lord is through people like me who are receiving an answered prayer to "use me where you need me" or who are following God's task.

In Acts 9, Ananias did not want to go to Saul like the Lord was asking him to do. But he did it anyway. He had faith in the Lord and because of his faithfulness to God another man, Saul, was born again. You have heard the saying I'm sure that our words and our actions are powerful. That they are. But our words and our actions through what God has put into our hearts is the most powerful of them all. Sometimes it takes some forgiveness. Sometimes it takes some grace. Faith. Hope. Whatever it takes, we have to remember that it is not our will, but the Lord's. We must obey. We never know who may reap the words or actions. We never know who may be born again.

Prayer: Lord, I pray that you continue to use me where you need me. That you put peace into my life and forgiveness into my heart. I pray that you give me the strength to spread your word, your love, and your hope to those who I may not always feel deserve it. Open my eyes and my heart fully to you, and continue to give me tasks. I pray that my ears never lose hearing of you and my eyes never lose sight of what you need me to do, even with the hardest of tasks. All the honor and glory is yours. In Jesus name, Amen.

Kari Gustafson, Park UMC Sinclairville

**Tuesday, March 24, 2020**

**Isaiah 42:14-21**

It's so easy to coast along every day in life and not really think about what you do or say or how you act. It's routine. But God knows that his plan can't be accomplished without changing our hearts. He allows things to happen to help us remove obstacles that keep us from walking with him. No obstacles within us will prevent God from accomplishing his plan.

I recently had a job situation that threatened to take away my job that I truly enjoy and feel called to do. I unfortunately made a mistake that made me realize that I have a lot to still learn in my job.

Praise God the situation was resolved but it made me stop and think about my actions and reactions. I realized that I had become prideful and judgmental thinking I did my job better than other people could. I thought my way of doing things was better. However, I realized that my way is not the only way and that other people look at and do things in different ways and still have positive results.

Praise God that he takes my hand through the darkness and brings me into light so that I can see, understand, and listen to his words. He is my personal guide who will never leave me and will remove obstacles within me to accomplish his plan.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I am often blind and deaf to your plan for my life. Please help me see, hear, and understand what obstacles in my life keep me from your will. Thank you for always being there for me and never leaving me. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Tina Akam, Panama UMC

**Wednesday, March 25, 2020**

**Psalm 146**

I am a music lover. I especially enjoy sacred music. I find that most every situation has a song to go with it. Often as I read scripture a tune or lyrics will come to my mind. So as I read Psalm 146, I found myself singing a song from my days in the church choir – “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!”

God has done great things for me for which I am eternally grateful. As a teacher, God carried me through the “challenging” classes and sustained me during a bitter work strike. Looking back to my youth, I can see how God's presence guided my through tough peer pressure situations.

More recently, I have begun asking for the Holy Spirit to fill me, sometimes to overflowing. (Why was I so late in life to realize the power of the Holy Spirit?) Then, one day, the Spirit prompted me to realize that my devotions often ended with the typical “shopping list of requests,” always asking him to do this or intervene in that situation. Now I end my day by just praising God for the ways He had blessed me that day.

Psalm 146 continues: “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.” I could not live a day without God's help. God is faithful and I thank Him daily for that blessing.

“Great is your faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed your hand has provided. Great is Your faithfulness, Lord unto me!” As we experience this Lenten season, let us look for God's faithfulness in our lives.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, your faithfulness is overwhelming! To know that the creator of the universe cares for me is awesome. Thank you for the countless ways you bless me and care for me. I praise you and bless your holy name. Amen

Don Orton, Springville First UMC

**Thursday, March 26, 2020**

**Revelation 10:1-11 – Sweet to Bitter**

“Repent you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” This was the opening statement of a message delivered by my good friend, mentor, and previous Pastor Jim Pegan as he began to speak at a Camp Fire for Christ gathering at the Panama UMC several years ago. Much to everyone's surprise the words rang out quite abruptly and were even a little loud, he then paused for a moment, and as you might expect you could have heard a pin drop while the people attempted to digest what they had just heard.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ chapter ten speaks of a little book and while its contents are highly subjective it is believed to contain a prophetic message describing the sins of mankind while offering mercy to those who repent and a stark warning of judgement for those who do not. The messenger delivering the book is described as a mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire. When he spoke his voice is described as when a lion roars. The writer is then instructed to take the little book and eat it and when he does, the taste in his mouth is described as sweet, as sweet as honey, but when digested it becomes bitter in his belly. The message of the little book is clear, repent you brood of vipers for judgement is coming.

The consumption of the little book reminds me of sin. As we nibble at it and savor it, it seems so sweet swirling around in our mouth, but after we have swallowed and digested it only bitterness remains. Fortunately we serve a God who wishes that none should perish, no not one. He gives one last chance even here as scrolls of judgement are opened and trumpets of wrath are sounded. God is offering another chance to repent and be saved.

Prayer: Father God let us not tarry in seeking out Your righteousness but repent of all our transgressions as we all know that the return of our Lord Jesus Christ is near. May we find favor in Your eyes and serve you in a way that is pleasing as we spread the good news of the gospel and patiently await the promised redemption that we so long for oh Lord our God. In Jesus' name, Amen

Wayne Emory, Findley Lake UMC

**Friday, March 27, 2020**

**Revelation 11:15-19 – It's almost time...**

As you are reading this, March madness is fully under way! In fact, if you are indeed reading this on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, one of the sweet sixteen games will be taking place this very evening. March madness brings with it a whole new layer of crazy in the world of college basketball, hence its name. It's that time of year when anything can happen. Teams that no one thought would amount to anything are all of a sudden making a run for the national title, and likewise those that everyone thought was a sure victor, have succumbed to the game. In every single game there is one certainty though. When the final buzzer sounds, there is only one victor.

Our word from the Lord today comes from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Revelation. It is in this section of John's Revelation where the seventh and final trumpet is sounded. It's at the sound of this trumpet though that something very different happens from the previous 6. Rather than the previous earthquakes, locusts, and fire breathing monsters disrupting and destroying the world, there is a great rejoicing in the heavenly realms. The final horn has sounded and the battle is over...there is victory! Until that day comes though, we find ourselves living in this period of time between the resurrection and this final victory...in Kingdombtide.

So what do we do with this passage in scripture and this season in Lent? We wait....Some people will find themselves waiting to see who will be crowned champion of the NCAA basketball tournament. And others will find themselves waiting for the King to receive His final crown, the One "who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty!" What are you waiting for?

As Easter is rapidly drawing near, don't rush the process friends. We aren't quite there yet, remain faithful, it's almost time....

Prayer: Holy God, it's almost time, keep us faithful until the final trumpet sounds. In Jesus name, Amen.

Pastor Joseph Pascoe, Park UMC

**Saturday, March 28, 2020**

**Luke 24:44-53**

Scholars, often providing us with a wide range of interpretations, have scrutinized every word of scripture including Luke 24:44 – 53 which refers to Jesus' appearance to the Disciples after his death and resurrection, the task He gives the Disciples and finally, His ascension. These few verses contain diverse theological themes.

After His death and resurrection, Jesus appears to the Disciples and reminds them that He is fulfilling the words of the Old Testament. He opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures and receive the message that repentance and forgiveness applied to their sins and they were instructed to preach this in His name to all nations. Scholars can pick apart the words, grammarians can give meaning to the punctuation, and the color commentator can interpret the details, but it all comes down to this: **The message of repentance and forgiveness of sins granted through Christ must be preached in his name to all nations.**

What a joy to know that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. He came to save all people regardless of race, age or culture. It does not matter who we are, we are welcome in God's Kingdom. AND, we are all encouraged to tell others that repentance and forgiveness of sins are available to everyone.

The simple truth is scripture was fulfilled, relationships were mended, and the Disciples had their mission laid out for them. The words are clear, we just have to be willing to accept them and do as directed. Ah – and therein lies the biggest difficulty! It is not the interpretation of the words that is so difficult – it is putting the words of scripture into action.

Prayer: Almighty God. The words of scripture pass on information and the imbedded stories provide guidance for our lives. We are thankful for the written word and pray our interpretations and fulfillment bring glory to you. Amen.

Carol Hay, Panama UMC

**Monday, March 30, 2020**

## **Psalm 143**

I stood in the crowd in the cold of downtown Buffalo on New Year's Eve, watching the ball drop, marking the end of 2019. I thought to myself, I'm glad it's over, let's move on.

It was my most difficult year. I lost a lot of the vision in my left eye several years ago, and in May, I started to see the same deterioration of the retina in my right eye as well. In June, I started getting other symptoms, that I thought were the effects of the medications I was given to protect my remaining vision. I was daily losing my vision. I started getting muscle and joint aches, flu-like symptoms, dizziness, restlessness and insomnia. I later found out that I also had Lyme disease. For several weeks during the summer, these symptoms would start every evening and would subside to some extent in the morning. I couldn't see well enough to watch much TV or read, so the only way I could get through the sleepless night was to walk. I would go out and walk about 1 to 2 miles, often 3 or 4 times each night.

The words of David in Psalm 143 were very much like my pleas to God in the dark hours of those miserable long nights as I walked. I felt distant from God and close to God at the same time. I was discouraged by the unpredictable pain, by my diminished vision, and by the real possibility that I would not be able to drive or work again. I was discouraged that I would never see clearly again.

We all encounter pain and suffering at times in our lives. The age-old question is "why?". I don't have any answers to that, but I found solace in the fact that we are all in this together. My encouragement came from the prayers I received from my family, friends and even strangers. My encouragement came from those who reached out to me and offered me assistance, and from the medical professionals who genuinely wanted to do whatever they could. Many people reached out to me in many different ways, and each one, in their own way, "co-suffered". That is the meaning of compassion, co-suffering. That is what Jesus asked of us when He commanded us to love our neighbor. "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You" (Psalms 143:8)

Prayer: Gracious Loving Father, guard our hearts and minds with the peace that surpasses all understanding. Lead us to unity with each other in empathy, compassion and love.

Paul Williams, Springville First UMC

**Tuesday, March 31, 2020**

**Ephesians 2:1-10 – Good Work**

As a couple, we've always worked – to put food on the table, clothing on our kids' backs and keep the farm going. We also served in our community, Jeff as an Asst. Fire Chief and me as an EMT and Fire Department Treasurer. Way back then, the thought of God having a hand in preparing any of it specifically for us was not even on our radar.

*“He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.”*

*MSG. Eph 2:10*

To fully accept that God has planned the work, totally takes the burden off of us. We just need to show up. And be willing to act, or serve, or go, or whatever. We don't need to wait until we are good enough, holy enough, healthy enough or any other “enough” the enemy tries to hold us back with. Nothing set before us today is unimportant – God has prepared the work for us, knowing full well our circumstances right now.

So through unplanned job changes, multiple major surgeries and life altering events, we can trust that God will fully equip us for the work he has already planned for us to do. And the closer we walk with him, the more aware we are of the “work we had better be doing”!

Prayer: Father God, thank you for your saving grace, for taking us from sin and death to everlasting life. This scripture tells us your love brings us into life, with purpose, through faith, for good works. Help us to see clearly each and every day the works you have prepared in advance for us to do. Let us recognize that you have already provided us with the tools we need, and grant us the confidence to carry out your will so we can give you all the glory and praise. In Jesus name, Amen.

Jeff & Marcy Park, Findley Lake UMC

**Wednesday, April 1, 2020**

**Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41 – Living the Active Faith**

It was the most turbulent time in Judah's history. Wicked kings had ruled the kingdom and led God's chosen people into idolatry. The Armies of Babylon surrounded the Holy City. Bloodshed and destruction were common scenes, the Temple was being destroyed, and the people were driven from their land.

***What was Jeremiah's response to the chaos?***

Jeremiah bought a field in Anathoth. How would such a decision make sense? The prophet had painfully lamented the brokenness of the people as they have forsaken God's covenant.

The mission was to proclaim God's purposes to pluck up, destroy and then build and plant. God has called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12). God has promised a future King and an everlasting Kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12, 13). Isaiah the prophet proclaimed that the tribes of Jacob will be a light to all nations – bringing forth God's salvation (Isaiah 49:6). In spite of the dreadful horrors of that day, Jeremiah had such an uncompromising confidence in God's promises that he paid a valuable seventeen shekels of silver for the land. The land would not be for him – but for future generations to come.

Jeremiah proclaimed God's promise an everlasting covenant for His people (Jeremiah 32:40) – living actively in confidence in God's salvation. From the fall, it was God's desire to redeem mankind and it was only through His Son – the Promised King – that the redemption would come to pass. The law was only a picture of God's perfection (Hebrews 10:1) and could not bring righteousness (Galatians 2:21). As Christians, we are not defined by dreadful circumstances. My prayer is that as a church we will actively live with confidence in the everlasting covenant through Jesus Christ.

Daniel Lloyd, Park UMC

**Thursday, April 2, 2020**

**Psalm 31:9-16**

When I first read this passage, I was pretty lost about what I might write that would be related to a Lenten devotional. For example, when I read “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am distressed” I was just not sure how this would lead me. It just seems like a “downer” passage and I will admit being disappointed because I picked the passage from Psalms thinking it would be more “praise” oriented. After all, praise is a BIG part of my faith life and this sort of threw me.

However, after reading it from five different interpretations, I have gained a better perspective of how this applies to preparing our hearts and minds for Lent.

At any rate, I'm going to steal some insight into these verses from some of the versions I read and prayed about. In times of stress (and we ALL have those), depending on God requires complete commitment. Pastor Steve, this follows along with your recent sermon series as we have learned about exploring, following, becoming and centered and its relationship to our lives as followers of Christ. Half-way just doesn't “cut it” and we need to be “all in” when it comes to our reliance on God and his plan for us.

I'm sure many of you have felt helplessness and hopelessness when you have felt hated or rejected – whether it be by close friends, relatives or others in your life. But, as Christians, adversity is easier to accept or absorb (but not necessarily like) when we recognize our relationship with God. He loves us in spite of all our faults and failures. This truth will NEVER change!

For all of these reasons and truths, I'm asking you to put your whole trust in the Lord, by saying “You are my God and my future is in your hands. I know if I put all my trust in You, You will save me!”

During this Lenten season, I encourage each of you to FROG (Fully Rely On God) and put all of your trust in the one and only Father God who loves you more than you can understand or imagine!

Dear Father God – please forgive me for trying to do life on my own. Help me to let go and put my trust in you knowing that all of life's circumstances are under your control and make your light to shine on me, your faithful servant. Thank you for the sacrifice of your Son and your unfailing love for me! Amen.

Paula Komarek, Panama UMC

**Friday, April 3, 2020**

**Philippians 1:21-30**

As I meditate on this scripture and ask God to speak to me through it, I am drawn to three verses in particular.

Verse 21: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." How can living be dying, and dying be living?

Verse 27: "Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . ." How do I do this?

Verse 29: "For He has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for Him as well."

I have never had to suffer for the sake of Christ, so how can I relate to this? I have never prayed that God would gift me with suffering for the sake of the gospel. But, He has given me the privilege of witnessing first-hand those who have fleshed out these words of Paul's.

In Poland in 1991 my husband and I worshipped in a tiny dark flat with twelve other believers who stood firm in the faith under communist atheism. As we sang (in Polish) "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place," I knew I was standing on holy ground. To them, living was Christ.

In 2013 I had the privilege to share in ministry with youth to "the least of these my brothers" in El Cercado, Dominican Republic. The youth were living "in a manner worthy of the gospel." As I washed the feet of the forgotten, Jesus was washing away my sin and pride.

More recently, I was fortunate to join a mission team to Jamaica. My encounters with Mas Nevel, a blind man, who sang praises to God for blessing his life, and Harold, a missionary, exemplified the blessing for the sake of the gospel.

Mas Nevel, though blind, dared to sing in the neighborhood, "I am blessed, I am blessed, every day of my life I am blessed!" Harold, called to take the gospel to the Jamaicans, lived a life worthy of the gospel and was brutally murdered while serving his Lord.

Prayer: Lord, as we examine our hearts during these 40 days of Lent, may we truly live for you in a manner worthy of the gospel. Help us to see that "there is far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There's also suffering for Him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting." (The Message vs. 29) In the name of Jesus, who suffered to give me salvation, Amen.

Shirley Orton, Springville First UMC

**Saturday, April 4, 2020**

**Lamentations 3:55-66**

Jeremiah had for years been freely moving about in Israel shouting out things the populace and their leaders didn't want to hear. They got sick of hearing things concerning sins, repentance, and judgement to come. To the self-satisfied he must be not only wrong, but silenced. The answer for dealing with Jeremiah without doing bodily harm was to put him in a pit with muck in it. Neither could he escape, but what was even better for his adversaries, his incessant shouting and cries for help couldn't be heard.

I wish I were more like Jeremiah in broadcasting the Lord's will, but I'm not even close. Perhaps you're more 'Jeremiah' than I, or want to be more. But for every one of us who aspires to greater obedience to the Lord, there is an enemy who would mire us in a pit from where our voice, and perhaps even our inner voice, cannot be heard.

I've been in a pit on occasion and without a doubt, so have you. Maybe you are in a pit right now and can identify with the feelings Jeremiah had. Feelings of isolation and loneliness, of rejection, abandonment and helplessness, of disappointment. Who but the devil finds glee in this?

Brother and sister in Christ, may our response to finding ourselves in a pit always be the same as Jeremiah's. "I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea." The Lord, the Lord Jesus is in the pit with you and hears even a faint whisper from you pleading for release. After you have made your plea, the Lord may also hear your imprecatory prayers (curses) concerning the one who has been laughing at you in your situation. May we always experience the victory that is available to us in the Lord Jesus as we call to him in our distress.

Prayer: Heavenly Father you are my rescuer. When I am in the next pit help me early to recognize the fact and remind me in my spirit of your presence. Remind me also, before I try to escape in my own power, that you will provide the way. I do trust you and want to call upon you and trust in you when I'm in shallow and deep pits. I pray through Christ who has shown me how to trust you.

Keith Hagenbuch, Findley Lake UMC

**Monday, April 6, 2020**

**Isaiah 42:1-9 (NIV) Bruised Reeds and Fading Lights**

“...a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench...”

We are all bruised reeds or smoldering wicks at one time or another. Like an injured stalk, we can become bent low by life's problems. The Servant of the Lord is like a gardener who binds up the injured stem so that the weakened part can heal rather than breaking it off to throw away. He tenderly cares for our hurts.

Hard times can cause our faith to dim like a dying ember in a candle's wick. The Servant of the Lord won't put out this flickering faith. Instead, he carefully tends the faltering flame until it reignites and holds steady. He fans our faith so our light can burn bright again.

Jesus is the Servant of the Lord, chosen by God to be bruised and broken so that we can be healed and restored. He is full of compassion towards us and won't abandon us in our weak moments.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for caring for our hurts. Please help us to show compassion towards others. Thank you for reviving our faith. Please help us to bolster the faith of those who are faltering. Thank you for going to the cross so we can be healed and restored. Please help us to be your instruments of healing. Amen.

Beth Hadley, Park UMC

**Tuesday, April 7, 2020**

**John 12:20-36**

As we progress through this Holy week, there are many things happening in our lives, Just as it was for Jesus and his disciples two thousand years ago. In our scripture verses today, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Jesus uses a metaphor of a kernel of wheat dying and being buried only to produce many more kernels. Jesus also tells those gathered that He is the light walking with them.

Jesus prays, "Father glorify your name," as God answered those standing around to hear God's response. Some thought it was thunder, others said it was an angel.

This scripture is what I would like to focus on - verses 20-23. <sup>20</sup>"Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. 'Sir,' they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.' <sup>22</sup>Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus." These Greeks were most likely converts to the Jewish faith and came to talk to Philip because Philip's name was Greek.

They felt comfortable going and talking to him (Philip). As we travel together this week, be ready to be a 'Philip.' Be approachable, be ready to share your faith. Be the light that Jesus told us to be.

Prayer: 1 Peter 3:15 "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

"Seek the light!"

Howie Wheeler, Panama UMC

**Wednesday, April 8, 2020**

**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

Isaiah 50:4-9 is all about our journey as Christians. Similar to *Pilgrims Progress* by John Bunyan, our journey is not always sunshine and roses. Our time on earth (thankfully short compared to eternity!) is often full of tough times and hardship, but at the same time is filled with promise and hope. This passage is a six-verse snapshot of our time as Christians here on earth.

In verse 4, we begin with our call as servants. The sovereign Lord has given us an instructed tongue (read: right words to say) and has awakened our ears to hear. This is paralleled in the gospels when Jesus says, "he who has ears, let him hear!" Our ears have been awakened to hear! We are able to hear the sovereign Lord as he instructs us, what an incredible blessing this is! Not only that, our gifts (instructed tongue and opened ears) are not solely for our own benefit. As obedient servants, we are to use our God-given words to sustain the weary. Every morning, the Lord awakens us to hear and understand. Implied here is a command: to use it to bless his people! This is the same promise and command he gave to Abraham: you will be blessed to be a blessing!

Verse six is the hinge verse of this passage. While verses 4-5 highlight our call to become obedient servants, verse six reveals what will happen when we do. It's not a pretty picture. Not only is the servant in this passage beaten and his beard pulled out, he is spit on! Even worse, he voluntarily took it! The text says he offered his back to be beaten. No one forced him, he accepted it willingly. This is our future as believers while in this world. We are not guaranteed safety; we are not guaranteed comfort. As obedient servants who seek to sustain the weary, we will face opposition. If this passage ended here, it would be hopeless!

Thankfully this passage ends with verses 7-9. The Sovereign Lord has promised his help, leading the obedient servant to declare that he will set his face, determined to do his will. He is resolute in the face of trouble, firmly staring down prosecution. The servant (us!) will be vindicated by the sovereign lord. No one can declare to be guilty what He has declared innocent! In this whole passage, it is God who calls us, God who equips us, God who sustains us, and finally, God is the one who gives us hope!

As we look toward Easter, celebrating what God has done on the cross, let us not forget that we have a part to play as those he has called. As Jesus said, "in this world, you will have trouble, but take heart for I have overcome the world!"

Dan and Miranda Vaccaro, Miranda grew up at S1UMC and they are missionaries in Kenya at Rift Valley Academy. Check in with their family at <https://trackthevaccaros.com/>

Dan & Miranda Vaccaro, Springville First UMC

**Thursday, April 9, 2020**

**1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – “I Ate the Bread”**

Some time ago, a young mother from a previous congregation noticed how helpful and obedient her five-year-old son was acting one Sunday afternoon after church. He was using good manners, picking up after himself, and being kind to his siblings. She wanted to affirm his good behavior, so she said, “My, what a good boy you are today! You've been perfect since we arrived home from church.”

The little boy responded matter-of-factly, “Well, Mom, I ate the bread.”

Even at a young age, this little boy understood that Jesus had acted on his behalf to fill him with love and enable him to live differently. Communion is a time to remember Christ's sacrifice for our sins, and to experience his grace and presence in a life-changing way.

The Last Supper took place at a Passover meal when Jews would commemorate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. At Passover they remembered, “We were slaves in Egypt, but now we are free.” Every time we share the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the freedom and identity we have through Christ who sets us free from slavery to sin and enables us to live lives of joyful obedience.

Jesus has offered his broken body and shed blood to cleanse us of our sins and make us one. By his grace, may we live into our new identity as holy and redeemed children of God, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Prayer: Father, thank you for sending Jesus to rescue and redeem us. We receive your grace anew today that washes away our sin, heals our broken lives, and enables us to live and serve as one body united in Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Pastor David Cooke, Findley Lake UMC

**Friday, April 10, 2020**

**John 18:1 – 19:42 – GPS**

If not for using the Global Positioning System (GPS) when traveling, I would end up lost somewhere in the middle of a corn field, or in the creek bed of a muddy gully surrounded by vultures. The fact is, I am not a homing pigeon with an internal compass. I need directions when traveling. GPS technology is my trusted traveling companion. I don't leave home without it!

The system is not new. A divine GPS system existed long before the current GPS technology was installed in my vehicle or on my hand-held devices. I call it *God's Positioning System*. God unveiled it to the world right after the fall in the Garden of Eden. He spoke through the Prophets mapping out the way He was making to restore our relationship with Him through a Savior - his son Jesus Christ.

And when the time was right, God's GPS tracking system guided Jesus from his home in heaven to a manger birth. It stayed with him, leading him step-by-step through his ministry on earth without one wrong turn or missed landmark along the way. It took him to the temple as a child, wedding celebrations, stormy seas, a desert wilderness, cheering adoring crowds, the last supper and it traveled with him on the road to fulfill the mission for which he had been sent. God's GPS took him to the Garden of Gethsemane, then on to the Chief Priest's Courtyard, then to the Governor's Place, then to the Stone Court Judgement Seat, then to Golgotha's Hill where he died on a cross. And finally, it took him to the Tomb where he buried the sins of mankind as far as the east is from the west, opening up a new road home for those who would seek his forgiveness and make him Lord of their lives. It was exactly as the Prophets had foretold because God's GPS is perfect. It is once and for all, does not need updating, and it will never fail to give accurate directions to our final destination – our eternal home.

Prayer: Lord as I view my GPS when traveling here on earth, let it remind me of the divine GPS directions you gave to your Son in John 18 & 19. Help me to know Jesus followed those directions and died willingly because he loved me enough to show me the way he made for me to go home on the road named "Restoration and Redemption."

Debby Meder, Park UMC

**Saturday, April 11, 2020**

**1 Peter 4:1-8 – Living for God**

So how do we go about living for God in our daily lives, especially living in this world full of brokenness, temptations, and sin? God sent his son to us in human form, to live, and DIE!; as an example for us to live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God the Father. Christ teaches us to live our lives with an attitude of humility and love, so that we will all glorify God and abide by his will. Christ suffered for us to the fullest extent by giving his life willingly on the cross. But this was not the end, it was a new beginning for any who choose to follow him. This was an unjust death, but it was all part of God's plan to draw us closer to him.

As humans we tend to be our own worst enemies, we live our lives in ways that fulfill our own selfish-sinful desires. We tend to come to God for help when we are deep in trouble or fears. God wants us to come to him in all things. We need to remind ourselves to use his word and Christ's example on how we should live our daily lives all the time. This world offers many splendid wonders, joys, and blessings created by God, but it also offers many pitfalls created by man. When we will face temptations and sufferings in this world, we must allow a Christ-like attitude and following God's will to prevail in our lives. God offers us comfort and hope in a far better place, our eternal salvation.

Prayer: Lord our God, help us to focus on your "purposes and goals" for our lives, all day, every day. Guide us in ways so that all we do will glorify your name! Help us to live your Word and put on your armor.

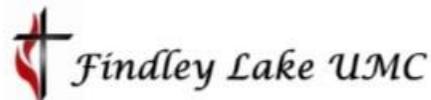
Jeff Enlow, Panama UMC

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