

# **St. Paul's Memorial Church**



**Lenten Devotional  
2017**

## Introduction

The meditations in this Lenten Devotional Guide were written by members and friends of St. Paul's Memorial Church. They honor our mutual commitment to lifelong spiritual formation. The authors include parishioners of all ages, students at the University of Virginia, St. Paul's clergy, and people of other denominations whose lives have been touched by, or connected with, St. Paul's. Inspired by the Scripture readings each day, every offering is original and reflects the thoughts, interpretations, and feelings of the author. We hope that these meditations will help guide your journey through the Holy Season of Lent. May our lives be enriched as we share our understandings in these offerings.

**March 1, Ash Wednesday:** Psalm 51:1-17 • Isaiah 58:1-12  
• 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Fat Tuesday. Ash Wednesday. Lent. What does it all mean?

In fasting do we only “give up,” or through fasting can we “receive?”

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a woman, I set aside childish ways. (1 Cor 13:11 . . . slightly modified!)

As we today begin the symbolic 40 fasting days in the 46 days before Easter, I cannot help but think back to how I viewed Lent as a child—giving up candy; and as an adult—giving up alcohol—but not really appreciating the significance of what fasting actually means, nor of the true Christian practice of fasting. I think too often how I violate the message of Matthew 6:5 and 6:16 by making a show of my “sacrifices.”

The past few months and even the past few years have been very difficult; and this is true on both a personal and on a national level. It matters not what side you are on, it is impossible to not see the issues and the problems and be unaware of these things.

Perhaps we may move forward, as individuals, as a society, as a nation, and as people of faith by focusing not on childish things we have traditionally given up, but—rather—on taking Scripture to heart and realizing what can be gained. Let us strive to give up hate and the inability to listen, actually listen, to the needs and desires of others.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

(Psalm 51: 10)

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness?

(Isaiah 58: 6)

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6: 19-21, excerpts)

— Donna Price

**March 2, Thursday:** Psalm 37:19-42 • Deuteronomy 7:6-11  
• Titus 1:1-16 • John 1: 29-34

“Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!”

The choir sang the wonderful chorus “Behold the Lamb of God” from Handel’s Messiah as one of our anthems in January. The rising notes on the word “Behold” as each voice part joined the fugue had really lifted my spirits. I chose the March 2 meditation because this passage from the Gospel of John is the keynote.

In the Bible, the annunciation by John the Baptist of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, savior of the world, is followed the next day (verses 35-39) when John again urges his own followers to behold the lamb of God. Two of them then follow Jesus as his disciples, acknowledging him as “rabbi”(teacher).

I was not at first exalted by my reading of the other verses. Psalm 37: 19-42 contrasts the Lord’s favor for the godly with condemnation of the wicked who shall “perish” and “vanish like smoke.” Similarly, the passage from Deuteronomy identifies the chosen people of God’s covenant of love, who were redeemed from slavery in Egypt, contrasting them with those who hate God and will face “destruction.” Paul’s letter to Titus instructs him to choose elders for the Christian communities in Crete, contrasting the sober, monogamous, upright candidates with false teachers and rebellious people who are unfit for anything good.

All of this comparing and contrasting seemed at first to have little to do with Jesus as Messiah. And yet, after reflection (always a good thing!), I think I was too influenced by what seemed to be harsh and judgmental. God’s larger purpose is not to condemn, but rather to teach us how to bring about His kingdom on earth. We’re not given license to judge or expect judgment upon others. We are not to be proud of our chosenness. Rather, we are to learn what righteousness looks like.

And our great rabbi is Jesus.

— Charles Lancaster

**March 3, Friday:** Psalm 95 • Deuteronomy 7:12-16  
• Titus 2:1-15 • John 1:35-42

Titus 2:1-15, rankles modern sensibilities. What feminist wants young women to be taught to be “submissive to their husbands”? We abhor the very idea of slavery! The sense of a good Christian toadying to her husband, his master, or even to Jesus himself, hearkens back (at the very best) to shame-based schemes of controlling ones “inferiors” that we hope went the way of stocks and pillories.

On the other hand, the NRSV translation, talks about teaching people to be “self-controlled” and of the grace of God “training” us [in] “self-control” . . . whereas the KJV’s God “teach[es] us to . . . live soberly. [To my thinking, sobriety *always* comes via God’s grace, and striving for “*self-control*,” (vs. turning one’s will over to the care of a loving God) gives ego the upper hand, setting one up for failure.] Moreover, “self-control” sounded jarringly modern as an expression for St. Paul to be using, even in translation.

So, wasting an evening with online Parallel Greek Testaments, the digital OED, and Google translator, I found the obvious: KJV’s “sober” should be read as meaning “moderate” or “serious,” not as meaning “not intoxicated.” Perhaps, the original Greek word had more the sense of “wise” or “sane.” “Self-controlled” was an infelicitous late 20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to make that distinction.

The take-home message is in the last few verses anyway: In Christ’s coming, we have been saved, and while we wait for His coming again, we are to live wisely, sanely (maturely?). Christ gave himself for us, to save us from mad worldly foolishness, so that he would have a people of his very own, passionate to do good things. And, Titus: Teach all of this like you mean it, letting no one put you down. (Neither a toadying, nor a hazardously self-reliant message, after all).

— Patsy Goolsby

**March 4, Saturday:** Psalm 42 • Deuteronomy 7:17-26  
• Titus 3:1-15 • John 1:43-51

Psalm 42. “As the deer longs for flowing streams so my soul longs for God.” This is the cry of someone in deepest agony, caught between wonderful memories and present suffering:

“These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.” But now, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night.”

God seems to be so far away, withdrawn into absence, deaf to the Psalmist’s pleas indifferent to the Psalmist’s suffering, vulnerable to the taunts of others who, “say to me continually ‘now where is your God?’”

The Psalmist cries out, “When shall I again come and behold the face of God? I pray to god, my rock, ‘why have you forgotten me?’ My tears have been my food day and night.”

In this season of Lent, we are given an opportunity to recognize that the Psalmist’s story is also our own story. The spiritual journey is not along a clearly marked path with frequent reassuring direction posts, and so we find ourselves thrashing through desolate, unmarked forests hoping to somehow find our way back to God.

This season of Lent with its piercing Biblical texts, its sorrowful hymns and disquieting moments of silence echoes our own lives when we dimly see God on the other side of a deep abyss and cannot find a bridge across it.

Perhaps, then that is where God comes to us, in quiet voice and solemn sounds, in absence just as strongly as in presence. In our desolate longing we become open to God right where we are, but now in new, surprising, life-giving ways. God of our deepest despair and longing as well as God of our glad rejoicing.

Then we too can say with the Psalmist: “Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts. . . . Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

— **The Reverend Paula Kettlewell**

**March 5, First Sunday in Lent:** Psalm 32 • Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 • Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

A Buddhist friend recently asked me to explain the concept of sin. She said she'd always understood it to mean being "dirty," and this troubled her. I fumbled around a bit, but what we settled on was "disordered desire," and this translated for her as a Buddhist. It made sense to me, too, as I've found Paul's conundrum in Romans 7:15 to ring true in my own heart: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate."

By contrast, I've often found this story in Genesis to raise more questions than it answers when it comes to understanding sin. How strange that THE SIN that started it all should be as simple as eating a piece of fruit. Not murder? Not idolatry? Just eating fresh fruit!? And, more to the point, who *wouldn't* eat the fruit? How is the knowledge of good and evil a bad thing? And so on.

But it isn't a really a question of whether Eve and Adam should or shouldn't eat the fruit; the point is that they do. The point is that the inquisitive force that makes us self-aware creatures, that is written into our DNA, also somehow carries with it the ability to lie, blame, and hide, as Adam and Eve will do in the succeeding verses.

Our inquisitive and acquisitive desires are all mixed up together. Being human makes me a conscious creature able to reach out to God and my neighbor and also makes me able to do harm in infinitely subtle and ingenious ways, "by what I have done and by what I have left undone." And by what I did not want to do but did. And by what I wanted but did not understand. And so on.

Whether by paths of righteousness or repentance, God, may all desires lead to you.

— Kate Lichti

**March 6, Monday:** Psalm 52 • Deuteronomy 8:11-18 • Hebrews 2:11-18 • John 2:1-12

Psalm 52 declares: *I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.* A green olive tree exists through the gift of a reliable water supply. Because the house of God is characterized above all by abundance, greenness flourishes there.

A green olive tree brings me a question and a reflection. The question: Can I, do I, live faithfully day by day in the abundance that is the reality of God's being? In these darker days of winter, I tend to find myself in a dark mood. In these early days of a new U.S. Presidency, I tend to find myself in a dark mood. Yet today's Hebrews reading reminds me that it is all too easy to be held in slavery by depression or fear. Such self-confining slavery is a betrayal of the reality of God's presence here and now, revealing glory in our midst.

Reflection emerges from *A Well of Wonder*, a book about Clyde Kilby, a teacher able to convey to his students the reality that all creation is the marvelous gift of a loving, personal Creator. Bringing a drooping dandelion to class, Kilby asks his students, "How many of you believe that God made *this* dandelion for our pleasure on *this* day?" With this and other simple observations, Kilby "threw open the shutters . . . and pointed to the things that troubled the very marrow in one's bones."

I hope there is in you, as in me, a thrill in hearing these words, in the confirmation—at a deeper level of awareness than my petty grumblings—that there is indeed a Miracle inherent in the universe, a Miracle drawing me and you to live daily in something greater than we can ask or imagine. The "trouble in my marrow" is received joyously in the unlimited abundance that is God. May I, and you, this day be green olive trees in the house of God.

**March 7, Tuesday:** Psalm 47 • Deuteronomy 9:4-12 • Hebrews 3:1-11 • John 2:13-22

Today's Gospel shows us a Jesus bristling with all the righteous fury of an Old Testament Prophet. Entering what should be a holy place, Jesus finds it instead to be functioning as no more than an extension of the marketplace. Here, we see the Jesus who comes "not to bring peace, but a sword." Like the prophets before him, he has no patience with or respect for worldly authorities (especially those acting with the sanction of the religious authorities) who have violated their covenant, not only with the Lord, but with the communities they're supposed to serve. The merchants and moneylenders are taking advantage of the piety of the faithful, exploiting their captive audience in order to turn a profit. If asked, no doubt they would justify it by saying that if they don't provide the sacrifices needed, if they don't change larger coins into smaller ones, the people would be unable to offer their required devotions to the Lord. But the Temple is not meant to be a place of business, not meant to be a space for the kinds of transactional relationships that categorize the world outside its walls. By setting up their stalls in the courtyard of the Temple, the merchants have profaned a sacred space with human systems of profit and exploitation. By allowing it, the Temple authorities are complicit in this profanity, complicit in violating the boundaries between the sacred and the worldly, complicit in systems that reduce the poor to revenue sources, and base the value of each human relationship on the financial and social advancement it can provide.

Out in the world, Jesus the teacher explains these abuses, quotes the Scriptures referring to God's love for the poor and the marginalized. But in the Temple, in his Father's house, Jesus the prophet, Jesus the Messiah, can no longer patiently explain how deep this betrayal goes, how much the authorities have disrespected God's house and God's law. Like the rich man who insists that Lazarus be sent to warn his sons, these merchants, moneylenders, and Temple authorities know how they should treat the Temple and the Congregation, and have chosen to violate those sacred bonds.

— Beth Molmen

**March 8, Wednesday:** Psalm 53 • Deuteronomy 9:13-21  
• Hebrews 3:12-19 • John 2:23–3:15

*“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> — John 3:5-8.*

Like all mariners, I have known some wind.

One time, fearing I might be ill equipped to handle my sailboat in those orange-hued storms that rise from the humidity of a summer day on the Chesapeake, I decided that I would confront my fear.

So, I left the dock to weather reports of a violent, fast moving cold front approaching with 50-knot winds along its leading edge. I motored to a protected cove we’d used many times as an anchorage, set double anchors, checked my lights, and waited.

Soon, the sky turned gray, then black. I had thought nothing really bad could happen to me, but soon I was not at all sure. The rain turned to hard wet pellets of cold. The wind rose and laid the boat on her side. Lightning illuminated the shore that felt suddenly way too close. I realized my quest had been foolhardy, but now I had no choice. For over a half hour, I followed the swings of the boat using the motor that strained against the forces of anchor line and wind.

I did not know where the wind was coming from or going to, even though the storm was predicted to pass quickly. I did not know if I would make it, and I was terrified. I yelled prayers into the loud storm.

The wind eventually slowed, the black clouds gave way to a clear star-filled sky. Exhausted, but finally calm, I knew that God had not answered my prayer by keeping me safe from physical harm. Instead, I had arrived briefly in a place beyond fear, and prayer, and death, where I was one with the wind-Spirit, and in that one-ness, knew I was ultimately safe.

— **Leslie Middleton**

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek for Spirit is the same as that for wind.

**March 9, Thursday:** Psalm 60 • Deuteronomy 9:23–10:5  
• Hebrews 4:1-10 • John 3:16-21

Are John's familiar words those of Christ, an awestruck Evangelist excitedly moved to describe the wonder of God, or perhaps an unnamed believer who struggles with his own fears and has difficulty seeing God outside his own shadow? Does it make a difference? At first I rejoice, then I tense: condemning judgment, darkness, evil deeds. . . . Is this me? Is this my God?

*Hebrews* dangles the good news for all of a Sabbath rest in God. It seems to support the Evangelist's good-news promise of eternal life. But again, I am discomfited: did God really swear in anger? What is the disobedience that threatens my rest in God?

The Deuteronomist warns of God's anger against a stubborn people, yet the only actions reported as taken in anger are those of Moses. He smashed the tablets, while the Lord invites, gives and replaces. Moses' fear that the Lord might destroy the people is juxtaposed against solid assurance of God's greatness that rescues with might, power and an outstretched arm. I feel the supportive, reassuring hug of my God! I also feel a tugging guilt as I recall a thoughtlessly unkind word, my despair over actions or circumstances that were less expected or wanted, and the feelings of fear that prompt me sometimes to cower or, as now, to push away. Am I like the Psalmist: allowing my own feelings of inadequacy to mis-color the glories and love of God? A prayer rises in my throat:

*Thank you, O God, for your constant presence in the life of the world, for the gift of my life, and most especially for the Resurrection that validates and proves the life of Christ and your unwavering love. Give me the strength to face my fears and thus overcome the sin that threatens to separate me from you; unveil the grace that allows me to grow in awareness of your love within myself and all those around me, that at an appointed time my soul may know the rest for which you have created me and the world.*

— Jarrett Millard

**March 10, Friday:** Psalm 54 • Deuteronomy 10:12-22 • Hebrews 4:11-16 • John 3:22-36

The psalm in today's reading is about one who feels a course of action is right even though unpopular. Such people are often vindicated by posterity. What I dislike is the offering of sacrifice. Surely it is more beneficial to do something positive for society instead of killing a helpless animal or committing suicide.

The passage in Deuteronomy seems to foresee the forty days Jesus spent in the desert fasting, which is memorialized in the Christian Lent. We also learn what is expected of a chosen people who are urged to "be fruitful and multiply." As the Israelis have known the bitter pill of exile, so they must empathize with those who have been driven from their homeland. This seems relevant to our present refugee crisis.

The Epistle passage clarifies the power of the Word of God which is an ability to know the secrets of our hearts. Jesus took on human form so that He could understand our weaknesses rather than act as a power which ruthlessly judges us.

The Gospel lesson is relevant to today's world with concerns about water. The John mentioned is the Baptist, not the Evangelist. He stresses that he is the precursor of the Messiah. The term "Christ" is not the surname of Jesus but means Messiah who will bring hope to people suffering under some form of unpleasantness. I am bothered by the reference to the wrath of God. Making people follow a course of action out of fear is counter-productive. It is better to understand what is expected and perform tasks out of love.

— Rosemary Balister

**March 11, Saturday:** Psalm 138 • Deuteronomy 11:18-28  
• Hebrews 5:1-10 • John 4:1-26

These readings are all about obedience, and Psalm 138 is about praising the Lord, an act of obedience, but also the ultimate response to obedience. Jesus said, “Give and it shall be given unto you, pressed down, shaken together, and running over shall man give into your bosom” (Luke 6:38). The gift of praise is joy.

I distinctly remember the first time I saw the word “man” in that verse. Shouldn’t he have said “God”? Well, if we are priests after the order of Melchizedek, are we not a part of the priesthood of all believers and therefore united with God? It is in the obedience to that idea that we are blessed.

I have been asked at times to do what seemed like outrageous things. I don’t know about you, but there is a rebellious spirit in me that makes me argue with God. I can give Abba 39 reasons why I can’t do something, but I have learned, over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century, that it’s best to go ahead and do the thing, after I have the peace to know it’s God doing the asking and not my ego or some subliminal thing prompting me to stir up a fuss. In the end, I am always blessed when I am obedient. If I am not obedient, the consequences are often quite uncomfortable.

So, if you feel God is asking something difficult of you, pray about it and when you feel that “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7), just do it. You will be blessed.

— Mary Carolyn Lawson

**March 12, Second Sunday in Lent:** Psalm 121 • Genesis 12:1-4a • Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 • John 3:1-17

It is Lent, a dark time of penitence, of reckoning. My heart is heavy, with illness and death in our family, as well as all the turmoil and uncertainty around us. Where can I find comfort? What do I learn from today's readings?

The psalmist reminds us that our help comes from the Lord, who will keep us from all evil, and is our constant protector. The same Lord sends an elderly man away to found a great nation in a new land. What trust Abraham must have had to leave everything and obey God. We learn that Abraham's faith was paramount; the promise that he would inherit the world did not come "through the law but through the righteousness of faith." Centuries later, Nicodemus, a law-abiding Pharisee, is given the same message: "whoever believes in Jesus may have eternal life." It is faith in God that matters.

How can I understand this seemingly ideal faith? How can I trust in God? Humbly, I offer three pieces of wisdom, which help me.

The first is from Leonard Cohen. "Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." Perfection is not required. God is present despite all my flaws; in fact, that is where I find God.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore writes: "I have scaled the peak and found no shelter in fame's bleak and barren heights. Lead me, my Guide, before the light fades, into the valley of quiet where life's harvest mellows into golden wisdom." God is present in what I already know.

Finally, from Vincent van Gogh: "I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things." So, don't hold back. Appreciate, honor, love those around us, connect to the natural beauty of this God-given world, be open to see new things, for this is how to know God. This I can do. My help does come from the Lord.

— Deborah Healey

**March 13, Monday:** Psalm 57 • Jeremiah 1:11-19  
• Romans 1:1-15 • John 4:27-42

John 4:34

“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”

We love a hearty hot bowl of soup on a cold winter day. It is nourishing, strengthening and energizing to our bodies.

Jesus suggests that our spiritual wellbeing is fed in quite a different way. As his followers, we are asked to participate in a life of discerning God’s will for us and doing the work that follows.

As I have attempted to do this, I know I am on the right track when I am strengthened and energized by what I am doing. Conversely, if after some soul searching I am drained and resentful, I am in the wrong job for now.

Throughout my life, that which has nourished me has changed. Organizing community action which “fed” me in my thirties and forties led to group work in spiritual formation and growth, parenting and teaching, Hospice volunteering, working with at risk pre-schoolers and, most recently, training as a Stephen Minister. There were times when I outstayed my “calling,” not willing to examine my feelings and perhaps acknowledge that it was time to leave. I don’t particularly like change and it was threatening to let go of something before I knew my next step. But . . . the step always appeared.

As I age, I believe I now have another job to work on . . . to be a gracious receiver; one of my new cups of “hot soup”!

As we pray at the end of our communion service, “. . . grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart.” Amen.

— Brenda Peterson

**March 14, Tuesday: Psalm 62 • Jeremiah 2:1-13**  
• Romans 1:16-25 • John 4:43-54

The psalm for today opens with “I waited patiently for God to save me; I depend on him alone.” In the epistle reading, Paul, echoing the psalm, expresses his own faith that the gospel is God’s power to save. Do we, like Judah, as we grow older, lose the faith of childhood, that God is totally dependable, that he will provide for our every need? Perhaps so, but if so, we fail to see God’s power reflected in the good done by those of God’s creatures who join with Him in creating his kingdom on earth, as so many do. A wonderful hymn reminds us to open our eyes and see the many saints of God who are his hands on earth in bringing the kingdom to fruition each and every day. The hymn speaks of doctors, shepherdesses, queens, soldiers, priests, those now dead, as the saints that people our lives and reminds us that we meet them everywhere we go, “in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.”

I would add nurses and many other sorts of caregivers to the doctors named in the hymn as saints of God, since they also bring healing to both body and soul, just as Jesus did for the government official’s son in the gospel story of his second miracle. May we daily recognize the hand of God in the blessings we receive each day from neighbors and loved ones living out their roles as God’s saints in this world, and may we be ever thankful for them all.

— Jean Kane

**March 15, Wednesday:** Psalm 72 • Jeremiah 3:6-18  
• Romans 1:28–2:11 • John 5:1-18

**Psalm 72**

Always resolve your differences with others in a civil manner.  
Two wrongs do not make a right.  
Pray for your enemies.  
Always give folks an equal opportunity.  
Jesus will forgive us and save the souls.  
Violence does not resolve any issues.  
Allow the earth to become filled with glory.  
Live an abundant life.

**Jeremiah 3.6 - 3.18**

Both men and women should become faithful to each other.  
Always remain calm, cool, and collected regardless of the situation.  
A heritage is a present from your parents after they passed away.  
Always refrain from discrimination against others.  
Jerusalem gathers the nations together.  
When you have meaningful rapport with others, please keep in touch.  
The covenant of the Lord should be remembered by everybody.

**Romans 1:28 - 2:11**

There is no excuse for discrimination against others.  
If you jump to conclusions about others, the lord will judge you at the end  
of your life.  
Glory, honor, and peace work in your favor.  
Avoid evil behaviors such as adultery, murder, theft, and disobedience to  
your parents.  
Always follow the laws to avoid legal consequences.

**John 5:1 - 18**

Pray for the sick, injured, and paralyzed folks.  
Jesus heals the sick and injured folks.  
There is always a feast for the Jews and Jesus.  
Jesus asked the sick and injured people, “Can I make feel you feel better?”  
Jesus said to the sick and injured, “Rise Up, take up your bed and walk.”  
Once the sick and injured folks have recovered from their illness and injuries,  
they are able to return to work and resume their normal activities.

— Rhonda L. Corbin

**March 16, Thursday:** Psalm 70 • Jeremiah 4:9-10, 19-28  
• Romans 2:12-24 • John 5:19-29

My sister described to me an experience she had several years ago, when she attended Ash Wednesday services at St. Peter's in the Loop in Chicago. The line to enter the church circled the block, which gave her time to "interview" others as to why they were there to receive ashes. To her surprise, a large number of them were not Catholic—and some not even of similar faith experiences. To a person, they all described a desire to use that symbolic moment as a time to reflect on their lives and their relationship to God. That was a point in time for those individuals, that day, that year—but not a new phenomenon.

Since the time of the apostles, some form of Lenten observation to recognize the death of Christ has been an important part of the church calendar. That is over 1800 years, year after year. And 40 days after 40 days, from Ash Wednesday until Easter. Over 72,000 days. What is so important about Lent that so much time and effort are devoted to it?

That is a question which each person needs to determine, year by year. It may be to show thankfulness for the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, on the cross. It may be to increase the depth of our faith in a Supreme Being, or the passion with which we commit to be Jesus' feet and hands on this earth. It may be to use Lent as a time to reflect on the direction of our lives, or to gain respite from the secular world rushing around us. Whatever the reason, we engage in Lenten devotions, readings and activities as links across time from the days of the Apostles until the end of time. Person by person, day by day, year by year, eon by eon. We act, not just for ourselves but as a link to the people before us and those who follow us. An unbroken line.

"The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father." John 5:22-23

— Diane Wakat

**March 17, Friday:** Psalm 73 • Jeremiah 5:1-9 • Romans 2:25–3:18 • John 5:30-47

Romans 2:25-38

We Christians have a troubled relationship to the Jewish people. The last century made this fact horrifyingly clear; but in truth, the Shoah was merely the culmination of a long history of violence, exclusion, and persecution that stretches back to the first-century break between the nascent Christian communities and the Jewish synagogues in which they worshipped. Lent is a time for confession, and this is certainly among the sins that we as a people must confess. Yet we come to our readings today, and seem to find our own supersessionism reflected back at us: Paul tells the Church in Rome, “a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal.”

These words of Paul’s place us in grave danger. We are at risk of seeing the LORD’s election of Abraham as merely a primitive people’s mistaken understanding of their tribal god. Surely God has not chosen one people out of all the earth? This must just be one step toward our own (Christian) understanding of God’s universal love for all humanity! Yet Paul swiftly disabuses us of this notion: he tells us, “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” God has chosen this people for a special purpose within history, and has called them to a special intimacy with Godself—nothing can revoke this relationship, or these promises.

To the extent that we Gentiles are also included in this work—for God does indeed love all of humanity—it is as an alien people, a wild olive shoot grafted onto roots that precede us, and from which we continue to draw life (Rom 11.17). If God has said “you are my people” to those of us called “Not my people” (Hos 2.23), how could we possibly exclude others from God’s blessings? Seeing the Jewish people as the elect people reminds us that we are outsiders who have been welcomed into the family of God, and teaches us that our task is to welcome others in, too.

— Joe Lenow

**March 18, Saturday:** Psalm 76 • Jeremiah 5:20-31  
• Romans 3:19-31 • John 7:1-13

I always have a hard time with the season of Lent. I start off ready, willing, and almost excited to give something up. However, after some time passes, I quickly revert to my old ways and habits. One year, I tried this revolutionary idea of taking something on rather than giving it up. That seemed more logical to me. I'd pray and do a daily devotional instead of giving something up. After all, the purpose of Lent is to grow closer to God. So, if I could do this without giving something up, why not try it. Surely, I would "succeed" at the season of Lent by doing it this way. Wrong. Again, after a few days, I quickly got lazy and did not complete daily devotionals. This often left me feeling disheartened, each year thinking I "failed."

In today's reading, Psalm 76 line 11 says, "Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them." With my own self-critiques and lines like this in the Bible, it is easy to feel discouraged. Even the Bible is telling me to keep my promises to God. And rarely can I keep them.

However, when I take a step back and look at the bigger picture, I realize that this season is not just about my ability to keep Lenten promises. For me, it is more about recognizing and reflecting on God's sacrifices. Part of this was recognizing just how hard it is to make even small sacrifices.

I never want to start the season of Lent with mal intent. I do want to make promises I can aim to keep. Then, try my utmost hardest to fulfill these vows to God. But thankfully, because of God's sacrifice, I know that I will still be loved and forgiven even when I fail.

— Jennifer Schmid

**March 19, Third Sunday in Lent: Psalm 95 • Exodus 17:1-7 • Romans 5:1-11 • John 4:5-42**

When we first moved into our house, I was overwhelmed by the yard. Its welcome was lukewarm at best: lots and lots of trees, encroaching moss, a half-dead rhododendron, and soil mostly composed of clay. I retreated behind resentful indifference for years. The rhododendron died.

When my eldest was small, we took a picture of her sitting among the leaves in the yard and smiling. It was right before Halloween, and she was dressed in a daffodil costume. Soon after she turned four, our Christmas card was a photo of her standing in a tree bordering our driveway. Its forked trunk framed her red-coated figure beautifully. Several years later, we watched our middle daughter build fairy houses nestled in the moss underneath a different tree. Then, having exhausted the range of outdoor settings currently offered by our yard (trees and leaves), I surprised myself and planted a few bulbs. In a brief fit of optimism, I also put in a scraggly hydrangea on the side of the house facing east. And that was all for a while.

The following spring, we had some tulips, and yes, daffodils, and I was ridiculously pleased. It seemed like magic. Still, I took it slow. I don't know when the apathy turned to pleased disbelief, and then to hope, and then to expectation. Maybe it was after I saw a large white flowering bush in my side yard (that scraggly hydrangea from a few years back). But these days, when I put a bulb into the ground, I trust that it will come up in the spring. Perhaps not always, but most of the time, it will.

And my daughters? Well, the moment the first daffodil blooms, my youngest gets so excited she picks it immediately and gives it to me. But it was never about holding onto it after it bloomed, was it?

*[H]ope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:5)*

— Rowena Zimmerman

**March 20, Monday:** Psalm 79 • Jeremiah 7:1-15  
• Romans 4:1-12 • John 7:14-36

Today's psalm on the one hand is a lamentation on all the woes that have befallen Judah for its failure to heed Jeremiah's warning, On the other hand, it is a celebration of "the wideness of God's mercy, which is compared in a much-loved hymn to the wideness of the sea. It ends as a song of thanksgiving that "we are thy people and the sheep of thy pasture," needful always of God's loving kindness and mercy. Thus, the psalm sums up central beliefs that we Christians hold, first that we are sinners, secondly that God, our creator loves us and redeems all our sins through the gift of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The epistle reminds us that is our faith in God's redeeming power and his mercy alone that leads to God's saving action in our lives. It is that faith, likened to Abraham's when he trusted that God would provide the sacrificial lamb when he led his beloved son up the mountain. That reminder is a central paradox of our faith; faith without works is assuredly dead, yet it is not our works that lead to our salvation. Our faith is entirely sufficient to assure our acceptability in God's eyes.

Yet, like Thomas, our faith is sometimes plagued with doubts, rather than being totally sure. We need not fear that God will abandon us on that account. While God is just and our all too human failings offend his sense of justice, his love and mercy always and forever vanquish his wrath and temper our accountability before Him.

The one requirement is faith, not performance. We affirm that faith when we "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness," when we accept God's merciful forgiveness for the wondrous gift that it is, and go on believing despite troubling doubt.

**March 21, Tuesday:** Psalm 78:40-72 • Jeremiah 7:21-34  
• Romans 4:13-25 • John 7:37-52

“Rivers of Living Waters,” the title of this meditation, speaks to me, an inhabitant along the Rivanna, a sojourner to islands near and far, a dreamer yet a pragmatist.

By contrast, the Psalm’s image of rivers of blood introduces the plagues unleashed by God because of human disobedience—locusts, lightning and drought wiping out cattle and sheep, vineyards, and trees.

I think of 21<sup>st</sup> century disasters exacerbated, scientists say, by climate change due to human activity. Yet a truth remains: we reap what we sow. While the Old Testament God also destroys innocent children, the firstborn in Egypt, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, we humans are complicit in the violence and unrest around the globe. Do we not bear responsibility to help the innocent people seeking refuge from violence and oppression whether from Central America, Africa or the Middle East?

As a nation, we are polarized over climate change, women’s reproductive health, immigration from Mexico and the Middle East. These concerns invade my meditation.

For solace, I turn back to Scripture—this time to the gospel of John and the streams of living water of which Jesus speaks. I need this metaphor of the living spirit. “If any one thirst let him come to me and drink. . . . He who believes in me as the scripture has said ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

More than ever I thirst for this spirit to enliven me and to help find a way to respond. Before I turn to my personal tasks, I need time to reflect. And beyond daily living, I have work to do: letters to write, calls to make. God, give me the heart and strength to witness my beliefs in the world. Today. Now.

— Kay Slaughter

**March 22, Wednesday:** Psalm 81 • Jeremiah 8:18–9:6  
• Romans 5:1-11 • John 8:12-20

Gospel of John, 8:12: I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life.

Let us reflect on the image of light. In the Tridentine liturgy of my Roman Catholic childhood, every Eucharist ended with an addition called “The Last Gospel.” It was the prologue to the Gospel of John. The daily repetition of its Latin words has written these words on my heart: *In Ipso vita erat, et vita erat lux hominum. Et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt.* In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not comprehend it. My 20 years of working at Tandem Friends School taught me much about the Quaker search in silence for “the inner light.” When the students want to pray for someone they use the Quaker expression: “Holding the person in the light.”

This powerful image of the light finds expression in our Advent wreath, our candles at every liturgy, on our dining tables for special dinners. Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism all have places for candles and light in their worship.

In a podcast I listened to just last week, I heard the words: “There is only light in the context of darkness.” How does a Genesis creation story begin? Darkness covered the waters. And then God said: *Fiat Lux*: Let there be light.

Our darkness may be personal and psychological. It may be political and public. But the Christ offers a presence and power of light that the darkness does not comprehend.

— David Slezak

**March 23, Thursday:** Psalm 43 • Jeremiah 10:11-24 •  
Romans 5:12-21 • John 8:21-32

If you hold to my teaching, you are really  
my disciples. Then you will know the  
truth, and the truth will set you free.”

— John 8:31-32

Repeatedly in the Gospels, the Pharisees asked Jesus questions, looking to accuse him of heresy or treason. In one story that appears in the other three Gospels, the Pharisees asked Jesus whether a Jew should pay taxes:

They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you  
are a man of integrity. . . . you teach the way of God in  
accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial  
tax to Caesar or not?”

Mark 12:14.

To the Pharisees, “truth” meant “law.” Not so for Jesus.

In John’s Chapter 8, the Pharisees were quizzing Jesus about Jewish law—“Should we stone this adulterous woman?” But Jesus wasn’t there to preach about the law, which the Pharisees didn’t seem to understand. But some of those present understood, and “to the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching . . . then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

What is “the truth” that Jesus had taught to his followers? Not whether to pay taxes, or even what Leviticus says about stoning adulterers. When Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching,” he had taught his followers about “the truth” of a loving God. And THAT is a truth that sets us free.

— Lloyd Snook

**March 24, Friday:** Psalm 92 • Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-20 • Romans 6:1-11 • John 8:33-47

Have you ever tried to explain something to a friend, or tried to relate something pivotal or profound that has no context in their life experience? Let's say, they ask you to explain what it was like to look down into the Grand Canyon at sunset. Or, maybe someone asks you about your silent retreat. Or, they want to know what it was like the first time you delivered a baby. Our attempts to describe deeply moving experiences, when there is no shared context, can sound foolish, empty, superficial. The words may not convey the experience as much as the passion or emotion that accompanies the telling. If the person is not prepared to listen, or they doubt and challenge us, the whole thing falls apart. But, when the other person engages with our passion for the telling—with openness, curiosity, and wonder—there can be synergy that is bigger than both of us.

**John 8: 42-43:** Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. **43** Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.”

What if we understood righteousness to be listening for the word of God, in everyday life? What if we committed ourselves to building context by being present to that person who is hoping to share their story, and we met them with the enjoyment of a shared openness, curiosity, and wonder? What if we committed to allowing righteousness to flourish?

### **Psalm 92**

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,  
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;

13

planted in the house of the Lord,  
they will flourish in the courts of our God.

14

They will still bear fruit in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green,

— Jim Plews-Ogan

**March 25, Saturday:** Psalm 90 • Jeremiah 13:1-11  
• Romans 6:12-23 • John 8:47-59

I was dismayed when I read today's passages: lots of divine wrath, burdens of sin, my way or the highway theology. Fishing for inspiration, I googled "lesser feasts and fasts" and found that today is the commemoration of the Annunciation to Mary. Good news! But the next question is: If this is Annunciation Day, why these readings? Do the folks concocting these calendars talk to each other?

I recalled Augustine's brief discussion of the significance of Mary's purported virginity, in an essay he wrote both to affirm those called to celibacy and to oppose those claiming that married people were, at best, second-class Christians. Augustine didn't belabor the issue of her virginity itself, much less whether it was perpetual (a hot topic at the time), but rather marveled at what amazing things—like God being made manifest—can happen in and through a person who is so entirely given over to God, so unquestioning and content in obedience.

Today's Jeremiah passage ends with God saying "I made the whole house of Israel . . . cling to me . . . in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen." Jesus says (John 8.47), "Whoever is from God hears the words of God." In these ancient writings, seeing is the favored metaphor for understanding, but to *hear* is to obey. Obedience is not the way I generally like to think about my relation to God; grace is more my style. But, as Paul says (Romans 6.15), "you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness." So it goes in this bad news/good news, law-and-gospel faith.

And then there is Mary, holding it all together: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

— Margaret Mohrmann

**March 26, Fourth Sunday in Lent: Psalm 23 • 1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Ephesians 5:8-14 • John 9:1-41**

It has been said that Christ came to earth to turn everything upside down. After all, he came to earth, not as the expected glorious king come to save his people with military genius, but as a humble peasant who became an itinerant preacher.

Two of today's readings are marked by this element of surprise. Samuel is led by God to go find a king to succeed Saul among Jesse's sons. Seven perfectly good candidates are paraded in front of him, but God prevents Samuel from picking any one of them. There's one son left, the youngest, so insignificant he's been left tending the sheep. As soon as David shows up, though, the Lord says to Samuel: "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." It's certainly the most unlikely choice, but David goes on to become, as Frederick Buechner says, the king "that Israel lost her heart to."

The reading from John's gospel tells the story of Christ curing the man blind from birth. We're used to Christ performing miracles, but this one seems almost crude as he spits on the ground to make the healing salve. And, it's the miracle nobody wants to believe. Immediately, there's doubt about whether this man who can now see is the same as the beggar they knew. He has to keep asserting, "I am the man," and then he has to review the whole process. Since this miracle took place on the Sabbath, an obvious breach of the law, he's brought before the Pharisees. The former beggar, though, turns the tables on the Pharisees: you're telling me Jesus is a sinner when you know a sinner couldn't have done what he did? Because the Pharisees have the actual power, the beggar is kicked out of the synagogue. But Jesus seeks him out and the last we hear of him he's saying, "Lord, I believe." The blind man "sees" in more ways than one.

The established order is upended. David and the blind beggar are raised up. Christ, the carpenter, is king. In the new order, the one Christ brought and that we are supposed to be living by, the marginalized are no longer forgotten.

— Anne and Fred Ribble

**March 27, Monday:** Psalm 89:10-52 • Jeremiah 16:10-21  
• Romans 7:1-12 • John 6:1-15

*“My friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.”*  
Romans 7:4

When I was a child, I was assigned household chores I did not want to do. I did not have to ask permission to do them—like chores were a privilege or tasks I got to do—O Joy. I never asked permission to make my bed. My parent did not say, “You *may* take out the trash.” No enticement in these permissions.

St. Paul says that we *may* belong to Christ and that we *may* bear fruit for God. Invited? Permitted? Why would we accept, and how would we follow through?

We died to the law through the body of Christ so that we *may* belong to Him. By the power of Christ’s resurrection, we *may* bear fruit for God.

For you are the glory of their strength;  
by your favor our horn<sup>2</sup> is exalted. Psalm 95:17

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he tells us that we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens us” (4.13). We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear fruit for God through our baptismal covenant. We proclaim the love of Christ in our belief, community, and prayers; in our confession, repentance, and witness. We “seek and serve Christ in all persons. . . [as] we strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being” (BCP, 304-305).

There is no power but resurrection power that can grant us God’s grace for living in Christ. We live with invitatory hearts and stand with holy permission so others may belong to Christ and may bear fruit for God.

— **Betsy Daniel**

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<sup>2</sup> *Horn* is the symbol of strength and power.

**March 28, Tuesday:** Psalm 99 • Jeremiah 17:19-27  
• Romans 7:13-25 • John 6:16-27

At a recent memorial service, a pastor described “the beautiful ugly Charlottesville.” By many accounts, we are #1 but the underbelly is ugly. I grappled with the passages for today and was especially stuck on Romans 7:13-25. Is it about a constant struggle we face to do what is right when it’s often easiest to fall into sin? Or worse, is it implying that evil is inevitable so why bother? As someone who hasn’t spent time studying theology and doesn’t regularly work to interpret the Bible, this type of passage leaves me confounded and often frustrated. So, I’ve decided to make my own meaning and it relates to the statement above.

I love Charlottesville. For many reasons to me it is the ideal place to live—it has a small-town feel with big city experiences; the arts and culture scene is thriving; I appreciate living in a college town; beauty abounds. But the underbelly is ugly. In my work, I repeatedly witness that for many people Charlottesville does not offer the same opportunities for joy, learning, appreciation and community that I experience. People feel isolated, rejected, betrayed and hopeless.

What I think today’s passage tells us is that even if we are hard-wired against it, we should seek to reject sin of all kinds, including against our fellow man. One way to do that is to challenge people’s hurtful assumptions and beliefs.

I recently heard a story about a little girl who had passed out her Valentines to her classmates and someone came up to her and asked if she was really friends with “Joe”? She said yes to which he told her that she couldn’t be because he was black. She told him that didn’t matter and that what he said was mean.

What if we all called out injustices as we experienced them? What can you do today in words or actions to create a beautiful Charlottesville for all?

—Erika Viccellio

**March 29, Wednesday:** Psalm 119:121-144 • Jeremiah 18:1-11 • Romans 8:1-11 • John 6:27-40

Keep steady my steps according to your promise. Psalm 119:133

Then the word of the Lord came to me: . . . Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand so are you in my hand. Jeremiah 18:6

Like clay in God's hand. . . . This means listening to God as we ask him to steady our steps; entering into deep relationship with Him, asking forgiveness, fully letting go to allow God to work through us, trusting Him to create something beautiful in us just as the potter creates something beautiful from a lump of clay. This means looking upon Jesus and **believing** in eternal life with Him. This seems easy when life is good and things are simple. When we slip into church each week to listen to beautiful music, soak up the presence of God, surrounded by people who are supportive, kind, and loving, sharing our faith.

Not so easy when we are stressed at work, angry at our partner, short tempered when tired, frustrated when we can't accomplish what we would like; confused in our relationships, burdened with whatever trials life brings. Not so easy then to be genuine in our faith, taking time to center ourselves within that faith and then living that.

I think sometimes that those who have this 'way of life' (those really genuine gentle Christians) have some special connection to God that I've missed; that I wasn't standing in the right line when they handed out instructions for having a deeply spiritual life of faith. And yet, it is in my struggles, through my tears and in stumbling through life and getting it "wrong" that I am given opportunity each and every day to take time to breathe, to listen to God, to pray in whatever way I can, to open myself to His working through me, building, oh so slowly, that gift of a life of faith, working with God to create something beautiful in who I am, who I am becoming.

—Anne Cressin

**March 30, Thursday:** Psalm 69 • Jeremiah 22:13-23  
• Romans 8:12-27 • John 6:41-51

Man does not live by bread alone, even presliced bread. – D.W. Brogan

All sorrows are less with bread. – Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616)

In the Lord's Prayer, the first petition is for daily bread. No one can worship God or love his neighbor on an empty stomach.

–Woodrow Wilson

This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.  
– John 6:50

From the ridiculous to the tender to the sublime, images and metaphors of bread are broad and powerful. Bread denotes home, security, even money. Today we find Jesus shortly after the miracle of the loaves and fishes. People have gathered to hear his words and before leaving needed to be nourished. God's grace is shown by provision of enough bread from two loaves, echoing the sustenance of manna for the Hebrews in the desert. That grace is so abundant as to provide 12 baskets of leftover crumbs.

Then follows one of Jesus' most enduring metaphors: that he is the Bread of Life, come from heaven to proclaim eternal life, continuing the themes of public ministry and proclamation (and challenges from the authorities) that had begun earlier in John's Gospel. The deepest hunger of humanity for connectedness, healing, purpose, for everlasting life can be provided by receiving this bread of heaven, Jesus the Christ.

Even still, in times of celebration and challenge, in Easter and in Lent, at weddings and at funerals, we receive bread, in faith, to reconnect to the promise of God's love and mercy, reawakening, reconnecting with Jesus' promise and uniting with others in the quest, in the receiving. As we sing: "Be known to us, Lord Jesus, in the breaking of the bread . . . the bread which we break . . . is the Communion of the Body of Christ . . . One body are we . . . for though many we share one bread. Alleluia."

—Peter Dennison

**March 31, Friday:** Psalm 107:33-43 • Jeremiah 23:1-8  
• Romans 8:28-39 • John 6:52-59

**A poetic Reflection on John 6:52-59**  
**“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.”**

Flour and Water, Yeast and Salt  
Juice leftover, Critical timing,  
Chemical reactions.

Living Father, Only instance in Bible,  
House of Sustenance.

Blessed Art Thou, Not just for Solace  
For Strength, Trembling:  
Am I worthy, or not worthy?

Take, eat  
Manna from Heaven, Flesh and Blood  
The Whole Man, Eating with sinners.

Publicans, tax collectors,  
Take and drink.  
Remember Me, Inherit Life  
Join Together, One Body.

New Covenant  
Given for You, Saints before us  
Joining together,  
Holy Communion.

Until He comes, New Covenant  
Ingest, Partake,  
Corpus Christi,  
Holy Eucharist.

How do you picture the Last Supper? Da Vinci's painting? Do you miss women at the scene? Were they actually there? Were children? What is authentic? Could Jesus, this “glutton and a winebibber” [see Matthew & Luke] have actually spoken these words, formally termed the “discourse on the bread of life”? Whether or not we have remaining questions, can we always love the gospels more for the repetitions of the story in the Johannine retelling as well as our questions? Can we love each other more through them?

—Margaret V. Lee

**April 1, Saturday:** Psalm 109 • Jeremiah 23:9-15 •  
Romans 9:1-18 • John 6:60-71

John 6:60-71

The entirety of our passage is a reaction to what came in the verses before. Jesus has just announced to a crowd in a synagogue, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.” It is no surprise that the crowd is a little freaked out by this. In our passage, we are told that many of Jesus’ followers find this teaching difficult to accept, and we learn that “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” But not everyone turns away. Jesus asks the Twelve if they also wish to go away, and Peter replies, “Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” The Twelve are committed. They know that Jesus is the Son of God, so they have no choice but to accept his difficult teachings. Nevertheless, we can imagine a collective sigh of relief when the Twelve learn that Jesus’ talk about flesh-eating and blood-drinking is a reference to what will eventually be called the Eucharist.

We live in a culture that increasingly finds Christianity less compelling than it once did. The percentage of people who are religiously unaffiliated is on the rise, especially among younger generations. So what are we supposed to do? Should we pursue the trends and abandon our devotion to Christ? Of course not! Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We know the truth we find in Jesus, and this drives our decision. The twists and turns of history are complex, and fashions come and go, but the truth of the Gospel remains. So as cultural preferences and intuitions change, let us remember the words of eternal life we have received.

— Daniel Wise

**April 2, Fifth Sunday in Lent: Psalm 130 • Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Romans 8: 6-11 • John 11:1-45**

Today's Gospel reading tells of Jesus' raising his good friend Lazarus from the dead. It's an amazing, challenging, and complex story, with several themes woven throughout.

First, the theme of time. We are told that Jesus stayed where he was "two days longer" after he heard about Lazarus' illness, that Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days by the time Jesus got there, and from Lazarus' sister Martha that his body would be starting to decompose because of that four-day span of time.

Second, themes of sleep, life and death, and somehow a connection between them. Jesus tells his disciples "This illness does not lead to death" and that his friend "has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." And later he tells Martha that "[those] who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

Third, impatience and criticism. Martha and Mary each say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Townspeople say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

And finally, God's power and glory. Jesus says, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory. . . ." And to Martha he says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

The reading culminates in the raising of Lazarus. Jesus cries, "Lazarus, come out," and tells the people to "Unbind him, and let him go." Lazarus is restored to his sisters, his friends and his community. Even though there've been clues along the way, this dénouement is still astounding.

Pondering this reading and its interwoven themes, I turn to the psalmist and his counsel of patience and trust:

O Israel wait for the Lord,  
For with the Lord there is mercy;  
With him there is plenteous redemption  
And he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

— Karen Mawyer

**April 3, Monday:** Psalm 31 • Jeremiah 24:1-10 •  
Romans 9:19-33 • John 9:1-17

A favorite religious blogger, Richard Beck, has noted how dangerous the psalms are for oppressors; by calling out oppression or offering praise for God's deliverance from injustice they give power and hope to those in exile. Take Psalm 31 "I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul" (7) praises the psalmist; "I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery" (12) continues the lament. The psalm reflects a universal desire *to be seen*; yet how much more urgent is visibility for those who are oppressed or marginalized.

Like the blind man in today's Gospel, another forgotten piece of broken pottery. Today's Gospel verses tell a story of Jesus healing a man blind from birth. Once healed, his neighbors debate whether this could be the same man; had he not fully qualified for their notice before? The disciples approach the man with judgment—"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"—does their understanding of suffering blind them to greater truths?

Yet Jesus saw. Here was one in whom the works of God could be revealed. And so, Jesus heals the blind man. By the end of this passage, this once-blind man is telling his story to the Pharisees (twice); he is visible and emboldened and a little bit cheeky ("Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"); and he is, not unexpectedly, cast out of the synagogue.

The Pharisees later ask, "Are we also blind?" (spoiler: yes!). As am I. And I am reminded to consider: Who fades from my sight? What truth escapes my notice because it is uncomfortable? To what responsibilities do I shut my eyes? What presumptions limit my vision?

Lord, give us a heart to know and eyes to see, so that we, too, may say, "I was blind but now I see!"

— Michele Claibourn

**April 4, Tuesday:** Psalm 123 • Jeremiah 25:8-17  
• Romans 10:1-13 • John 9:18-41

**He replied, “Whether he [Jesus] is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” John 9:25**

I love a miracle. Who doesn’t? Well, the Pharisees do not in today’s gospel story. In fact, the focus of the story seems to be on the Pharisees’ unwillingness to believe that Jesus healed the young man born blind.

With eyes open to the world, the young man is fervent in defense of Jesus’ miracle. As the Pharisees question him for a second time, he provokes them: “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” As scripture tells us succinctly: “they threw him out.”

I’m not blind, nor ever was blind—physically, that is—although I did lose my eyeglasses recently. For a month, I resorted to wearing old glasses (c. 1990), and they sufficed—barely. When I finally gazed through new eyewear outside the optician’s office, I saw with amazement the top branches of trees budding. Through the new lenses, the whole world looked so crisp and clear and bright in the afternoon light. It took my breath away.

Ah, if only eyeglasses could cure spiritual blindness as easily as they alleviate astigmatism! I think this story invites us to look within: What are we unwilling to see? What are we missing with our old prescription glasses?

I would be remiss not to conclude with the first and last stanza of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.” John Newton, who began his career as a slave-trader and ended it as an Anglican clergyman, composed these words:

Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)  
That sav’d a wretch like me!  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

*(Olney Hymns 53)*

— Kelli Olson

**April 5, Wednesday:** Psalm 128 • Jeremiah 25:30-38  
• Romans 10:14-21 • John 10:1-18

In the introduction to The Letter to the Romans found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Fully Revised 4th Edition)*, Neil Elliott, priest, author and United Theological Seminary professor, wrote that, “Romans is an instrument of moral instruction and exhortation.” He then concluded at the end of his essay, “The apostle’s call to realize in common life the justice of God which believers celebrate is the letter’s enduring legacy.”

These reflections help me articulate how The Letter to the Romans caught my attention during Education for Ministry in the spring of 2015. I was drawn to the “moral instruction” of the letter. I was seeking this type of instruction during a time when the pursuit of personal spiritual direction was a high priority. I found that elements of the letter, taken out of historical context, spoke to me as if they were fresh and alive; as if the words had been written yesterday in order for me to read them today.

I am writing this Lenten meditation as a reminder to me, a reminder that the pursuit of moral living, spiritual direction, discernment, and prayer must not be something that waxes and wanes as the months come and pass. This reflection is one for me and only possibly for you.

I believe I have a better chance to do God’s will if I am actively trying to understand what the Lord may be saying to me. I am reminded this Lent to engage more deeply in activity that supports my efforts for that understanding. The questions posed in Paul’s letter remind me to ask some questions of myself in the here and now. I’ve rewritten Paul’s questions for my prayer time today. You are invited to ask them in your prayer time as well.

How do I exercise my belief in the One that I call on?  
Do I allow myself to hear the One whom I believe in?  
Am I going where I am sent to do what I am hearing?

— Darren Ball

**April 6, Thursday:** Psalm 133 • Jeremiah 26:1-16 •  
Romans 11:1-12 • John 10:19-42

What a crazy year! While I have experienced personal issues obscuring the spiritual in my life, this is really the first time that more public concerns have done so. If ever there was a time for me to realize that the spiritual life is not separate from everyday life in its busyness and distraction, this is it. Right now, the world cannot seem to keep from pounding on the door, demanding attention, discussion, action. The needs of the spirit seem to take second place to the urgencies that are thrust daily on my consciousness. The first lines of Psalm 133,

Oh, how good and pleasant it is,

When brethren live together in unity,

bring not recognition of the familiar or desirable, but a cynical “Oh, yeah? When and where is that!?” Trying to find a center in all of this has seemed almost impossible.

Almost, but not quite. I have found a blessing. On my daily walks, I pray what I call my “full body prayer”— that my whole body, mind, senses, hands, may be used to do the work of God. In this current climate, I believe that God is showing me a way to do just that. There have been calls to action on a daily basis. These are concrete things to do, to help others, to connect. It is far more intense, and at times uncomfortable, than anything I have done before. And I pray that my actions, and the actions that I support, bear good fruit. When Jesus Christ was accused of blasphemy and threatened, his response was simple:

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

I look to Christ, who has a way of cutting through the noise to get to the basics, to guide me in action and thought, to make this a more just world, maybe one step closer to the kingdom of heaven. I pray.

— Michele Allen

**April 7, Friday:** Psalm 22 • Jeremiah 29:1, 4-13  
• Romans 11:13-24 • John 11:1-27

Last year as I put my Lenten meditation to paper, I sat facing my dear  
friend  
He was reclining on a bed in the Emergency Department  
Snow had fallen . . . “snow on snow, snow on snow” . . . as the hymn  
goes  
Bones were cracked, but hearts were whole

This year my meditation flows from a place within that is aware, yet still  
reels  
I am without my dear friend  
Death, that same death that had claimed Lazarus, snuck up and took  
him away  
Bones had healed, but now hearts are cracked

*Lord, if you had been here, [he] would not have died*

The pain is deep, murky, fluid; Mary and Martha knew it, too

Another hymn gently reminds . . . “and I will raise them up on the last  
day”

*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into  
the world*

Amen . . . so be it

— Christie Thomas

**April 8, Saturday:** Psalm 137 • Jeremiah 31:27-34 •  
Romans 11:25-36 • John 11:28-44

The first time that I sat down to write this meditation, I pulled out my Hebrew-English Lexicon and did what I know best, going through the Old Testament readings, poring over the dots and squiggles of that ancient and sacred language with a fury of notes and indecipherable doodles. I prepared what I thought would make for a very interesting discussion surrounding the grammatical intricacies of Hebrew poetry but was suddenly struck with a simple question: how would such an essay enhance my own (and hopefully your) spiritual journey through Lent? Simply, it wouldn't. So, I started over and asked myself, "what do these readings tell me?"

In the season of Lent, we are called to penitence and preparation to greet the risen Christ. We are compelled to remember the suffering and temptation of God-made-flesh through a dramatic shift in the tenor of our worship and the scripture read therein. I think it's our nature to draw comparisons from this to our own lives; to recognize the injustice, poverty, and corruption in our own society; to become acutely aware of sin and our distance from the promised Kingdom of God.

It might be tempting for you, as it is for me in this penitent time, to do as the Psalmist—to hang "our harps upon the willows," to cease all joyfulness in protest of our separation from the Holy City, lest we even momentarily forget the disobedience that divides it from us. For the Israelites this disobedience was an ill-advised rebellion, despite prophetic warnings. For me it is a whole host of things: the lies I have told, the hate I acted with, the pain I have left unhealed. But in our contrition, we should not forget the great promise that has been given to us, that, to borrow Paul's words, our imprisonment in disobedience is necessary so that God "may be merciful to all" and in the words of Jeremiah that, just as God has destroyed, so will God "watch over . . . to build and plant." Let us remember that, as important as repentance is to Lent, so salient is hope. Amen.

**April 9, Palm Sunday:** Psalm 31:9-16 • Isaiah 50:4-9a  
• Philippians 4:5-11 • Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

This is God’s love for us. Through the words of the psalmist, the prophet, the disciple, and above all Jesus we are given the reality of God’s love for us. It is amazing, almost incomprehensible, that through every adversity, every life-changing challenge, every mistake we make God is there to support us with his unwavering love. He is the light that never goes out, the comforter that never ceases to comfort, the loving arms that catch us as we fall.

He is there when we are not. In times when we cry out “why me?” and all we feel is pain and grief and we question the very existence of God, his light never goes out. He is still there if we stop for a moment, breathe, and let his love flood our mind and our senses. And always there is the mystery. How can that be? But we know IT IS.

In these times of radical change in our nation we question how we look for a path to follow. Jesus faced the ultimate challenge: death by torture on the cross. He put his trust in the will of God; he knew the overpowering strength of his love. So, we must remember his commandments, to love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. With that love we need to reach across the abyss that seems to separate us from our neighbors and by listening see that we are not as different as we had expected. Learn ways to build bridges so we can all work to make a world more pleasing to our Creator.

— Alice P. Meador

**April 10, Monday in Holy Week:** Psalm 36:5-11 • Isaiah 42:1-9 • Hebrews 9:11-15 • John 12:1-11

A Lenten Meditation for April 10 on Isaiah 42:1-9

These verses are the first of four passages in Isaiah, known collectively as the “servant songs,” that speak to the special relationship between the Lord and servant Israel.

The passage begins with an attestation of the Lord’s commitment and affection in the context of the travails Israel has overcome; and then proceeds to confirmation that the Lord’s abiding presence—his “taking it by the hand and keeping it”—will continue, all as the Lord foretold. These themes of loving devotion and constancy recur in the later three songs (Isaiah 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53.12), although each time with a different emphasis.

What is distinct in this first song is the Lord’s summation at the end of the passage:

*See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.*

I told you what was going to happen, the Lord reminds Israel, and it came about just as I said. I will foretell new things, and they, too, will occur. I keep my word.

This reassurance, coming as it does in the lectionary at this dark point early in Holy Week, is a stirring reminder that what was foretold at Christmas, that the child born will teach and bless and save us, will be fulfilled on Easter morning. All that has been promised us in scriptures old and new—forgiveness, abiding love, the comfort of grace, salvation—will come to pass. The Lord will keep his word. Thanks be to God.

— Georgie Kettler

**April 11, Tuesday in Holy Week:** Psalm 71:1-14 • Isaiah 49:1-7 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • John 12:20-36

For a very long time I have felt that this gospel from John 12 is one of the most powerful and haunting in the Bible. Back in college I was moved by reading Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, for which verse 24 serves as the epigraph.

“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In the passage, Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem and foretelling his own death. But he characterizes the situation by saying, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.” Dostoevsky's novel portrays the power of self-giving love in Alyosha, the youngest and perhaps naive brother. In the midst of brutal and unstable 19th century Russia, he cannot not give of himself to others in love.

So death, death to self is necessary, but this is somehow glorification? Furthermore, “he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” The passage shows Jesus struggling with what he must face but not turning away from it.

Surely none of us has to face crucifixion. But surely also, glory in worldly terms often involves power, privilege and wealth. What could it mean for us to “die” and be glorified in our own age?

Sometimes it seems to me we all face a great contrast or separation: but not between East and West or even between haves and have-nots, although that can be a part of the situation we must confront. At a deep and fundamental level, Jesus is calling us to die to worldly glory, and to live for God.

I certainly don't have easy solutions to this portrayal. But what better time is there to wrestle with the issues; and not only wrestle but strive to respond as Christians? “We are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement.”

— John Zuck

**April 12, Wednesday in Holy Week: Psalm 70 • Isaiah 5:4-9a • Hebrews 12:1-3 • John 13:21-32**

The King James version of today's epistle (Hebrews 12:2-3) is grand:

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

<sup>2</sup>Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>3</sup>For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

What inspires us? Is it the good example of our fellows? We have just been offered (Hebrews 11:17-38) this “cloud of witnesses,” an accumulation of faithful men and women from the Old Testament: the list starts with Abel and ends with unnamed martyrs.

It would be wonderful if merely contemplating the heroism of yore were enough to temper our sad proclivities into pure endurance. If staring hard enough at a picture of Bach could make us great composers!

It would be wonderful if we could stop imagining life itself as a competition, a footrace (the phrase *curriculum vitae* bears a trace of the metaphor) with heats and rankings and prizes and corporate sponsors.

I am inspired by the idea that Jesus, the originator and perfecter of all we cherish, the Alpha and the Omega, loved us enough to inhabit our world of doubt and fatigue and temptation and pettiness. Loved us enough to change forever our sense of what one life can offer. Loved us without limits.

**April 13, Maundy Thursday:** Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 •  
Exodus 12:1-42 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-17,  
31b-35

Several years ago, during a presidential election, the “likeability” factor reared its head in the form of the question, “Which one would you rather drink a beer with?” Behind that question is the assumption that we need a president for whom congeniality is as important as political and diplomatic skill.

I’ve always been a bit uncomfortable with that question, because my most fervent hope is that the best, smartest, most qualified people will run for political office. I don’t particularly care if they can toss back a cold one with me.

Maundy Thursday is the day we remember the washing of feet and Judas’ betrayal, but the setting in which this takes place is at least as important as what transpired. Jesus and the disciples were sitting at table, enjoying a feast.

Jesus did this a lot and in a lot of places. He dined indiscriminately with sinners and tax-collectors as well as Pharisees. I don’t know if he was particularly charming and effervescent as he drank wine and visited with his friends. I’m pretty sure, though, that he did not gain such devoted followers by being a stick-in-the-mud.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t think the first qualification I look for in a Lord and Savior is someone I could drink a beer with. I want who Jesus was, God incarnate, loving the unlovable, seeking the outcast, challenging those who use and abuse others without regard for his own life.

Jesus’ table fellowship was not just about likeability; it was about relationship. There is something sacred about gathering around a table, breaking bread, laughing and sharing stories. It’s how friendships are forged and relationships strengthened. In the case of Jesus, it is also how we are to remember him.

Each week, we gather around our holy table and take and eat. In doing so, we make present and visible the body of Christ which was broken for us. We nurture our own bonds of affection for this St. Paul’s community so that we might go into the world and share that love poured out for us in the person of Jesus the Christ.

It may not be about drinking a beer with someone congenial, but, if we are truly patterning our lives on his and seeking out community with one another, a dinner table is not a bad place to start.

— **The Reverend Elaine Ellis Thomas**

**April 14, Good Friday:** Psalm 22 • Isaiah 52:13–53:12  
• Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9 • John 18:1–19:42

The crucifixion is the culmination of a story of continual abandonment. Jesus, who once taught and fed rapt throngs of people in Galilee now gathers with just the Twelve in dark rooms and nighttime gardens. Joseph of Arimathea is a “secret” disciple because of his fear. Nicodemus came only by night. The Twelve become eleven. Peter, who said to Jesus, “I will lay down my life for you,” finds himself standing at the edge of the scene, doing a desperate impersonation of an indifferent bystander. By the time the sentence is handed down, all we like sheep have gone astray indeed. Jesus goes to the cross alone.

I have often heard preachers—not to mention church websites and promotional pamphlets—invite people at the beginning of Lent to “accompany” Jesus, to “walk with him” on the road from the Mount of the Transfiguration to Jerusalem and Calvary, to “make the Lenten journey” with the faithful from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. But what kind of invitation is that? And why would we accept it? Especially knowing, with the benefit of hindsight, that even Jesus’s closest friends and followers peeled off the first time, abandoning him one by one by one to face alone into cruelty and death. Do we think we can do better? On Good Friday of all days, we are tempted to re-visit Peter’s words to Jesus way back on the mountaintop, before all the trouble started: Lord, Master, Rabbi, “it is good for us to be here.”

Why did we take this journey? Why did we follow, all the way to Good Friday and the cross? Well, we didn’t, of course. All we like sheep have gone astray. We, like all disciples, have peeled off, abandoned, denied. It is exactly our abandonment of Jesus that leads to the cross, our selfish sinful fear, that brings us to the edge of the scene with Peter, feigning indifference to the suffering of others. At that moment, we have abandoned Jesus and we have abandoned ourselves. But the Good Shepherd has not abandoned us. It is he who has followed us to the depths of sin, in order to lead us back, out of death into life.

— The Reverend William Peyton

**April 15, Holy Saturday:** Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16 • Job 14:1-14 • 1 Peter 4:1-8 • Matthew 27:57-66

“A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble...[who] flees like a shadow and does not last? Do you fix your eyes on such a one? Do you bring me into judgment with you? (Job 14:1-14)

Most people know Job as a man who suffered tremendous loss—his children, his great wealth in livestock (his livelihood), his house—and who was afflicted with horrendous sores from head to toe because the heavenly accuser claimed that Job would curse God if he lost everything. Less well known are the questions Job asks apart from the one that seems central: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

In today’s reading, Job dares to ask, “Do you care about us, God?”--“Do you fix yours eyes on human beings?” That question had likely seized Jesus’ disciples, including Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and the mother of James and John. How can it be that God cares when such a disaster as the crucifixion has happened?—When all that Jesus’ followers had hoped for was dashed in death, making Jesus’ life end not with glory for all but a whimper from him? Even judgment, negatively understood, would be better than nothing because then God would be with them.

Marvelously, Christians know that God cares and that judgment is far, far better than nothing. Based on 1Peter 4:6, the Church as taught for centuries that on Holy Saturday, the divine work of judgment and reconciliation between God and humankind that happened on Good Friday extends to those who had already died when Jesus descended to the dead.

Yes, God cares about us, not only with eyes fixed on us, but in being with us in the joys of daily life, in suffering, in death, in being with the dead, and in the beginning of his own glorious resurrection. Thanks be to God!

— **The Reverend Dr. Heather Warren**

