



## Lenten Devotional 2008

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United Church of Christ

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## *Preface*

This booklet is produced by the First Congregational Church of Berkeley for the use of its members and friends during Lent, 2008. We hope it provides a welcome focus and point of departure for you in your own private or group devotions during Lent. The meditations in this booklet were written by members and friends of the Church, not by professional writers (in most cases) or theologians (ditto).

The task we set our contributors was to provide a mediation that related to one or more of the bible verses that, in more liturgical churches than ours, are called the “propers;” that is, the readings specified for the particular day by tradition. The Propers for the day consist of one or more Psalms (usually at least one for the morning and one for the evening), an Old Testament reading, an Epistle reading, and a reading from one of the four Gospels.

As you will see, the Propers merely provided a point of departure for our writers. Each brought to the exercise their own fresh perspective and their own years or decades of life experience. I think you will find that this makes for a wonderfully fresh and varied experience for your reading and meditation.

In most cases, I've simply noted the verses for the Proper at the top of the meditation, unless the writer quoted a particular or unusual translation which was integral to the discussion (as in the first). In those cases, I quoted the section in its entirety. Meditations shown as “--ed.” are my own.

May this booklet help you find even more meaning in Lent.

*--Michael Arighi, editor*

*Lead us into Life*

Ash Wednesday, February 6: Ps 32 Of David. A *maskil*.

*Happy is one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered over.*

*Happy the one whom the LORD does not hold guilty,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*As long as I said nothing,  
my limbs wasted away  
from my anguished roaring all day long.*

*For night and day  
Your hand lay heavy on me;  
my vigor waned  
as in the summer drought.*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to You;  
I did not cover up my guilt;  
I resolved, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.*

*Therefore let every faithful one of us pray to You  
in a time when You may be found,  
that the rushing mighty waters  
not overtake us.*

*You are my shelter;  
You preserve me from distress;  
You surround me with the joyful shouts of deliverance.*

*Let me enlighten you  
and show you which way to go;  
let me offer counsel; my eye is on you.*

*Be not like a senseless horse or mule  
whose movement must be curbed by bit and bridle;  
far be it from you!*

*Many are the torments of the wicked,*

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*but one who trusts in the LORD  
shall be surrounded with favor.*

*Rejoice in the LORD and exult, O you righteous;  
shout for joy, all upright ones!*

– (J.P.S. *Tanakh* Translation.)

Psalm 130 A song of ascents. Of David.

*Out of the depths I call to You, O LORD.*

*O LORD, listen to my cry;  
let Your ears be attentive  
to my plea for mercy.*

*If You keep account of sins, O LORD,  
LORD, who will survive?*

*Yours is the power to forgive  
so that You may be held in awe.*

*I look to the LORD;  
for with the LORD is steadfast love  
and great power to redeem.*

*It is the LORD who will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.*

–(J.P.S. *Tanakh* Translation.)



Who among us, though devout, humble, and honest, does not bear upon our souls' broad shoulders unseen burdens of guilt, or shame, or regret unspoken of – and for untold misdeeds, shortcomings, and failures of conscience?

To whom shall we confess our weary trails of fears, and troubled memories? Who shall forgive us, and who shall redeem us of our sins? This, truly, is the desideratum our silent souls all finally seek.

We shall be blessed, forgiven, redeemed, and saved when, at last, we show up, one before another one of God's beloved children, we give our whole at-

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tention to the opening up of our karmic diaries, we tell the sorry truths of our lives we've so long withheld, and we let go of them, along with our sorrowing fears of the consequences of our unjust acts, and our unmerciful omissions.

None of our short human lives is free of sin, of humanly made suffering and sorrow. We know, in the wisdom of our humility, what is good and holy, what is just and merciful – and we do not do it. Our spirits are willing, but our flesh is weak, and our social systems work against us – this is the sinful state of humanity.

And this is the reason of our psalms, our spiritual exercises, and our prayers. So, let us trust in God's "hesed" – faithful care, or steadfast love, and in the salvation our own repentance and forgiveness holds for us, and for each other.

*--Jim Weller*



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Feb 7: *Psalm 37:1-42, Habakkuk 3:1-18, Philippians 3:12-21, John 17:1-8.*

### **Trust in the Lord**

This is what I take away from these readings. The psalms assure us that we need not fret because of the wicked. “Trust in the Lord, and do good...” Or as Habakkuk concludes after all kinds of awful events unfold...”yet will I rejoice in the Lord.” Or as the writer of Philippians reminds us “Christ Jesus has made us his own”. And in John ...”And this is eternal life—that we may know you.”

But it is so hard. This trusting business. It means I must subject my own will, thoughts, and needs to a higher scrutiny. It’s not my way, but God’s will. It’s not my queendom, but God’s realm—this messed up, rotten, gorgeous, beautiful earth and universe where I reside temporarily. Where do I get this audacity to even imagine that I know some if not all the answers, how it should be?

I’ve been thinking a great deal about serenity. This is not a comfortable space for me, but in the last several months I’ve really been trying to get a handle on it. My Spiritual Director (everybody needs one!) gave me this quote when thinking about serenity. “What is, is. What is not, is not. God is.” This thought keeps showing up. What is, is. Not some illusion of what I wish were true, rather that which I must take a look at. Not everything, indeed anything, needs MY blessing, insight, or critique. What is is. And when all is said and done. God is. That is trusting in the Lord.

Prayer: Oh God, maker of heaven and earth, help me to receive your wisdom, your goodness, your holiness. Give to me serenity so that I may truly worship you and know that you call my name. Let me be still in the comfort of your love, so that I may learn to trust in you.

--*Carmelle Knudsen*

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Feb 8: *Ps 96, 31, 35, Eze 18:1-4, 25-32; Phil 4:1-9*

“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.” *Eze 18:31- 32.*

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” *Phil. 4:8-9*

“Lead us into life” is a daily prayer for me. Each day dawns fresh from the ever-creating hand of God, a gift of renewed hope and possibility. But along with the joy of being alive comes the awful freedom of making choices, prioritizing and acting (or not). At some point in time I realized that we are all in this quandary: puzzling over to what and to whom to give our limited time and energy and to what purpose. The Prophets, like Ezekiel, exhorted the people to turn away from attitudes and behavior that lead nowhere at best, and to death at worst, and toward God. “Get yourself a new heart and a new spirit! Turn then, and live”. Sounds simple and straight-forward, but for most of my adult life I have experienced discerning and deciding a lonely and difficult task.

I was amused to discover in our garage archives some old posters I had hung in my room at PSR in the late 60’s/early 70’s to nudge me. “Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out: by James Bryan Conant; “Never, for the sake of peace and quiet, deny your own experience or convictions” by Dag Hammarskjold,; and a third from Michael Pascal, “It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than it is to think yourself into a new way of acting.” Even after all these years, I reflected, taking risks, trusting my own inner authority, and getting out of head into my heart are still challenges for me.

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However, there has been a shift. Slowly, over time, especially during these years at First Church, I have been blessed with countless experiences of God's grace. Today, a poster on my office wall declares "The Unbelievable Beauty of Being Human" by Wing it!, and a quote from St. John of the Cross, "The soul of one who loves God always swims for joy, always keeps holiday and always is in the mood for singing." These words of Paul are becoming more and more important to me. They honor both thinking life-giving thoughts, and doing life-giving actions, replenishing my energy to see clearly how best to "bear hope for a suffering world" (FCCB Seeker's Statement). Participating in, celebrating and being grateful for kindness, excellence and the pleasing love of God wherever it is manifest, actually increases the available energy needed to contribute to the healing of our world. Maybe this is why our Ministry Teams can take on such difficult issues with lightness of spirit and deep compassion. Maybe a new heart and a new spirit are the daily gifts of God and this Lenten journey together following in the ways of Jesus will be an answer our prayer: lead us into life.

--Charlotte Russell



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Feb 9: *Ps 30, 32, 42, 43; Eze 39-21-29; Phil 4:10-20; John 17:20-25*

The text of Psalm 42 is an old favorite of mine. In the King James, it begins: “As the hart pants after the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul for Thee, O Lord.” It has been one of the texts that has inspired some of the most beautiful liturgical music I’ve had the pleasure to sing. Palestrina did a famous and beautiful setting to the Latin text, “Sicut Cervus,” which the Chancel Choir has done several times. There is also a lovely Mendelssohn setting, titled “As the Hart Pants,” which is also a favorite. Both give me a sense of peace and of the joy in the refreshment of God to our souls.

However, re-reading the full text in the New English Bible, I am struck that the joy and the peace are not there in the original. It is not a hymn to the peace of God, but a soul-cry from the abyss of distress. This put the text in an entirely new light for me, with the emphasis on the longing for the peace—the peace which is not present.

This puts me in mind of people who seem indifferent to religion, until they come into a personal crisis—a failing relationship, confronting the death of one's loved ones, or one's own imminent demise. I know some find it amusing when people only come to God under the toughest circumstances; I know I've been guilty of it at times. But I think I understand it a bit better now. It's easy to think we can do without God when things are going well. But when everything falls apart, we are in anguish. Like the thirsty deer, we want—we need—that stream. The Psalmist promises that, if we wait patiently and don't abandon God, God will not abandon us.

--ed.

Sun, Feb 10: *Ps 63, 98, 103; Dan 9:3-10; Heb 2:10-18; John 12:44-50*

### **Psalm 103**

I find this one of the most hopeful of the Psalms. The Psalmist (it is attributed to David) paints a picture of a God who is steadfast in his/her love for her/his children. Even when they forget his/her ways, when they repent and turn again to God, s/he sets aside his/her wrath and shows compassion. The most reassuring thing, for me, is in Vs 10-11: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high about the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.”

Sometimes one of our ministers will use the phrase in the assurance of pardon that “there is more Grace in God than sin in us,” which encapsulates the idea that we don't always get what we deserve. And that's a good thing. I don't consider myself a particularly great sinner; I certainly try not to be. I'm also not a great believer in a Dantesque Hell, with unquenchable fires, yet I get great reassurance from that passage.

Though I believe Hell as being “cut off from God.” I believe we experience it right here, when we do what we know we shouldn't; when we harm others by our actions or the social and economic systems from which we benefit; when we willfully hurt those with whom we are in relationship. Then we cut ourselves off from God, and from each other, and from those other souls with whom we share this world. The punishment? Angst, guilt, isolation, loneliness: The dis-ease of the soul.

Thank God there is a way out—a way to reach across the gulf between us and heal the breach. We are assured that God can heal all our dis-eases. But we need to stop doing what it is that causes them. We need to make amends for what we have done and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt, and then seek mercy from the Lord—mercy we are assured is available to us.

--ed.

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Feb 11: *Ps 41, 52; Gen 37:1-11; 1 Cor 1:1-19; Mark 1:1-13*

I'm frustrated with my inability to draw any inspiration from the Bible so I turn to "Love Poems from God" and read words from Rabia, a female Islamic Saint.

The sky gave me its heart because it knew mine was not large enough to care for the earth the way it did.

Why is it we think of God so much? Why is there so much talk about love?

When an animal is wounded no one has to tell it, "You need to heal"; so naturally it will nurse itself the best it can.

My eye kept telling me, "Something is missing from all I see." So it went in search of the cure.

The cure for me is His beauty, the remedy – for me was to love.

Ah, she makes it sound so easy! I've been on this relentless healing path for what seems like forever. Sometimes I glamorize it by calling it the "Dark Night of the Soul", but more often I am just impatient with myself for not being able to "just get over" the shame and terror of my childhood trauma.

Our animal bodies do heal quite naturally, but there is something about the layer of shame that seems to defy nature. Yet I know she's right, the cure for shame is not pride, but love and beauty. So I'll just keep showing up every Sunday and praying for this message to sink in.

--*Michele McGeoy*

Feb 12: *Ps 45, 47, 48; Gen 37:12-24; 1 Cor 1:20-31; Mark 1:14-28*

## **Psalm 47**

I often like reading the Psalms. That's probably because, as a musician, I recognize that so many of them were written to be sung. We don't know how they were performed. The Jewish musical tradition is discontinuous, with centuries of home worship following the destruction of the Temple, so the musical accompaniments that were probably original are lost. Some seem to have been performed with instruments—tradition even ascribes certain ensembles to certain ones sometimes. Others so lend themselves to song that it's almost impossible to resist singing them.

Psalm 47 is clearly one of those. The traditional attribution is to the Korahites, who were a group that wrote hymns for the temple. Even without the attribution, it's clear from what we see. The repetitions in Vs 6 (“Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises”) are clumsy in speech (try to read it fluidly), but so common and easy for singing, where you can add a musical variation to the repetitions that punctuates them and brings the congregation into the performance.

So, why do we sing to God? Why do we even sing? It seems to be an extension of speech, which is something that is pretty innately human. But it's not a necessary concomitant of speech, it's something “extra.” We don't NEED to sing to communicate, but we DO sing. And, in singing, we express our deepest emotions—grief, fear, hopelessness, love, joy. And, through that singing, we have the power to move others to share that emotion. And since all of these connect to God, the association of singing with worship of God seems both innate and fitting. It gives joy to those who sing, and shares that joy with those who hear. So, sing for joy, shout to God with loud songs of joy!

*--ed.*

Feb 13: *Ps 119:49-72; Gen 37:25-36; 1 Cor 2:1-13; Mark 1:29-45*

**1 Corinthians 2:7-9 (*The Message*)**

God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest – what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene. The experts of our day haven't a clue about what this eternal plan is. If they had, they wouldn't have killed the Master of the God-designed life on a cross. That's why we have this Scripture text:

**No one's ever seen or heard anything like this,  
Never so much as imagined anything quite like it –  
What God has arranged for those who love [God].**

Take this pill, eat all you want, and still lose weight! Rub this crème on your face, and make fine lines and wrinkles disappear! Eat blueberries and drink green tea, and fend off cancer! Just two bowls of Cheerios® a day will lower your cholesterol! Read this book, and become a millionaire! Read this book, and live longer! Read this book, and be happy!

Is this really what we crave? Do these promises address our deepest longings? If you knew you had a month left to live, would losing weight, having money, reducing wrinkles or lowering cholesterol be anywhere in your list of priorities?

Of course not. When we allow (or force) ourselves to contemplate our finitude, we recognize that what we most deeply, truly, utterly yearn for is something deep, something mysterious, “not the latest message, but more like the oldest.” And it is not something we can find easily or quickly. Nor (in my humble opinion) is it something we can learn from anyone or anywhere else. Perhaps that is why Paul recites the passage that no one has ever seen or heard anything like it, or imagined anything like it – because the wisdom of

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God is deeply individual, deep in the interior of God's purpose for each one of us. It is the task of each of us to seek out God's secret wisdom, "destined for our glory before time began." (I Cor 2:7 NIV.)

Lent is an excellent time for beginning, rededicating to, or continuing the task of finding God's secret wisdom. Try a new method of prayer, or meditate. Find a special location in which to contemplate the mysteries of God. Attend a Taizé service (or several – they/you get better with practice). Seek out spiritual direction. Whatever you choose, do it sure of the promise that what awaits you is beyond your imagining!

--*Dorothy Streutker*



Feb 14: *Ps: 50, 59, 60; Gen 39:1-23; 1 Cor 2:14-3:15; Mark 2:1-12*

### **Reflection on Genesis 39:1-23**

I think it's unfortunate that we so often equal God's presence in our lives with some kind of personal well being. We say of people who seem to have more than their share of things, that they are blessed. Rich people, we say, are blessed with wealth; beautiful people with beauty, young people with youth. We see things like aging and ugliness and poverty as evidence of God's absence, or we think that God has forgotten us, or that the aged, the ugly, and the poor must have done something to warrant their circumstances. We wonder where God could possibly be when we consider things like the genocide in Darfur, the tragedy in Iraq, or the devastation of Katrina.

Joseph's story in Genesis suggests a different perspective on these things. Joseph's brother plot to kill him and settle on stripping him naked and throwing him into a pit. And we are told that the Lord was with Joseph. He is sold into slavery in Egypt, and we are told that the Lord was with Joseph. He is falsely accused of rape and thrown into the king's prison, and we are told, [b]ut the Lord was Joseph, and showed him steadfast love. The Lord continues to be with Joseph.

Maybe it's the case that God is not so much responsible for the circumstances we find our selves in as God is committed to helping us get through them. Maybe it's easier to see God at work in our lives when we are getting what we want, but what the Genesis stories seem to be telling us is that God shows up through the whole of our lives, the good and the bad; the ups and the downs. So if we don't find God in the depths of our sufferings, at the times when God seems farthest away, maybe it's because we're the ones who aren't listening...

--*Geoffrey Gaskins*

Feb 15: *Ps 40, 54; Gen 40:1-23; 1 Cor 3:16-23; Mark 2:13-22*

## **Psalm 51**

This Psalm includes the memorable phrases “purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” It is one of the most beautiful prayers of contrition we have. The author acknowledges his sin openly and asks only that God forgive it and cast him not away.

Some years ago, I remember being uncomfortable with having the confession of sins so early in the service. It seemed like it interrupted the flow. Worse, the whole idea of confession made me a pretty uncomfortable.

The more I've lived and the more I've read, the more comfortable I am with it, and with having it right up front. Why? Because we ALL make mistakes; we all sin, in that old biblical vocabulary. We do things we know we shouldn't do (sometimes repeatedly). Perhaps worse, we stay silent or fail to do things we really know we should do. We try to rationalize (“it's not REALLY so bad to...[place your favorite rationalization here]”). It can sometimes work for a while. We can fool ourselves for a time. But it either becomes a habit, in which case we're headed down a road we don't really want to be on, or we start feeling guilty about it. I think that's the better path, because guilt is a signal to us that we're doing something wrong. And when we get that guilt—or when we recognize that, oops, we've headed down the wrong road—we need to fix that. Conservative Christians say you have to “get right with God.” I don't agree with all their ways of doing it or the “freight” they put on it, but I think they've got a good point. We have to come to terms with our own actions, recognize that they're wrong, apologize for them, and ask for forgiveness. It's only when we've taken these steps that we can have the experience of being “purged with hyssop” or “washed clean.” Only then can we begin afresh, with our feet on the right path.

--ed.

Feb 16: Ps 55; Gen 41:1-13; 1 Cor 4:1-7; Mark 2:23-3:6

**Psalms 55, 138, 139**

These Psalms show both sides of our human response to the Divine. Psalms 55 and 139 cry out to God to save us in our time of peril. This is the usual response to trouble, particularly in the Bible. But it is also often true for us now. I'm reminded of the phrase from WW II that there were no atheists in foxholes. When all hope seems lost, we naturally try to revive it by looking to the power of something beyond ourselves.

But, to me, Psalm 138 represents the harder, less common, but no less necessary response. This Psalm is attributed to David, and it seems to come after his deliverance from a perilous situation. In it, he gives praise and thanks to God for delivering him from danger.

While we're often good about asking God's help when things get tough, how good are we at remembering to say thanks afterwards? And sometimes we need to recognize when we should give thanks.

My Dad died last June, nearly 95 years old. He had been in pretty good health when we saw him last, just the weekend before, but started feeling kind of lousy midweek. He was in the hospital two days, never really in pain, and died of pneumonia in his sleep.

In many ways, it was a difficult time for us, making the transition from having him there, as he had been for all of our lives, to not having him there. I asked for help for the transition, and I sometimes still find myself teary-eyed when I least expect it. But I also realized that I needed to give thanks. Not only had he had a good life—something to be grateful for on its own—but he had an easy death, without pain or long suffering. His death had been a gift—to us and to him—as much as his life had been a gift to all of us, God be praised.

--ed.

Sun, Feb 17: *Ps 24, 29, 8, 84; Gen 41:14-45; Rom 6:3-14; John 5:19-24*

## **Psalm 29**

In our nuclear family, we have two kinds of people. We have people who are very comfortable with the inherent fuzziness of metaphor, simile, and the like. It's part of the way they normally think. I'm one of those. Then we have the literalists. Engineers, mathematicians, scientists. You know the kind. Needless to say, they have more trouble with anything that isn't quite concrete (figuratively; literally, too, sometimes). Makes for interesting dinner table discussions sometimes, as we talk past each other.

This Psalm doesn't work for the literalists. This Psalm evokes the power of God by simile: His voice is like the thunder; it breaks the Cedars of Lebanon. "He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox." The mental images the Psalm evokes are fresh and powerful, homey and elevated, all at the same time.

How do you talk about the power of God? It so exceeds our limited mental grasp that all he can do is try to compare it to other things that stretch that mental grasp, too. Concentrating on just the concrete aspect of it, I think, can lead us to miss the point. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who counsels other physicians, tells a story in her book, "Kitchen Table Wisdom," about Joseph Campbell, the famous mythologist, at a meeting of physicians some years ago on the experience of the sacred. He showed them a number of slides, including one of a bronze statue of the Hindu god, Shiva, dancing. With his many arms in the air, holding symbols of abundant life, surrounded by a ring of fire, he has one foot high in the air and his other on the back of a little man, crouched down in the dust, intently studying a leaf. The physicians, trained to be literal and concrete, all noticed the little man and asked about him. Campbell laughed and told them the little man was so caught up in the material world that he didn't even realize that a living god was dancing on his back.

--ed.

Feb 18: *Ps 56, 57, 58, 64, 65; Gen 41:46-57; 1 Cor 4:8-21; Mark 3:7-19a*

## **Psalm 65**

I write this reflection on a cool Berkeley morning in January. It has been raining intermittently for several days after a powerful storm passed through Northern California, leaving many without power and reminding us all of the sublime power of nature. The second half of Psalm 65, too, reminds us of the deep spiritual and theological significance of water in the Christian tradition. We are told that the earth is enriched with “the river of God” and that the Lord makes the furrows soft and blesses the flowing springs. In turn, the little hills rejoice and the valleys shout and sing for joy. They are saturated, satiated; they are made new for the year ahead. Water has always been a beautifully mysterious symbol for me. I remember seeing the ocean for the first time and being overwhelmed with the wildness of those waves. Our biblical narratives tell us similar stories of the power of water; it destroys lives through flood, but brings redemption and new life as well. In the early church, Lent was a time for pilgrims to prepare for baptism. All of lent, in a sense, was a deep, scary, and beautiful time of preparing to be received into what the author of the Psalms calls the river of God. What if we did the same? Perhaps our Easter river is not necessary a formal baptism on Easter eve, but rather the renewal of our ongoing life in Christ. When we seek to let go of those things that distance us from God—self-hatred, perfectionism, intolerance, for example—we allow for God’s rain to fall upon our lives. Only then will our own furrows and ridges be made soft. Only then can we, like the valleys and the little hills, sing with joy. Today, I meditate on that sublime image of images—the flowing river running into the wild sea.

Oh God, hold us while we prepare to receive your gifts of water and life this Lent. May we remember and reaffirm our baptism in you, the One who crowns our years with goodness. Amen.

--*Jenny Veninga*

## *Lead us into Life*

Feb 19: *Ps 61, 62; Gen 42:1-17; 1 Cor 5:1-8; Mark 3:19b-35*

### **Psalm 62:1-2**

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.

Anne Lindbergh told the story of Andre Gide, a French author and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who traveled fast through the jungles of Africa. One morning the native guides sat in a circle and refused to leave the camp. When Gide urged them to get moving they looked at him and with firmness said, "Don't hurry us-we are waiting for our souls to catch up with us."

Lent is the season of the Church year when I try to let my soul catch up. Unlike Advent with its endless rush of holiday hustle, Lent is a longer, quieter time of contemplation. Once I mark the start of Lent with Ash Wednesday, I can focus on the inward process of preparing myself for the Easter experience. But I am always plagued by these questions.

- \* What does it look like when my soul catches up?
- \* What does it feel like?
- \* How will I know when my soul has caught up?

I'm not sure I know the answers to any of these questions. But I think that is what the Lenten journey invites us to discover. What is it for each of us to know when our souls have caught up? As the Psalmist suggests, can my soul wait in silence for God? Throughout the forty days that make up Lent, I know this for sure, when I reach Easter my soul will sing with joy at the resurrection and I will celebrate the wonder of the Risen Christ.

--*Kris Veldheer*

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Feb 20: *Ps 72, 119:73-96; Gen 42:18-28; 1 Cor 5:6-6:8; Mark 4:1-20*

Psalm 119:73-96, emphasis on vv 81-88 V 83: “For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke (yet I have not forgotten your statutes)” V 96: “I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad.”

Like a wineskin in the smoke?! This image catches at my heart and my mind grasps for words to describe the felt-sense evoked: lonely, destitute, soot-choked, cracked, useless, withered and devoid of moisture. It speaks to me of a suffering that ages and preserves, suffering so taken into the tissues that it's emitted from one's very pores so that their very being reeks of it. An interminable suffering “my soul faints...my eyes fail from searching...when will you comfort me?” (v 81, 82).

Last year I was given an opportunity for a unique Lenten discipline as I accompanied my partner in her wilderness experience of Breakdown/Major Depressive episode. My normally buoyant, self-reliant and detail-oriented “Miss Efficiency” partner suddenly required constant accompaniment, coaching, and assistance for all but the most basic of daily tasks. Her inner outlook was beyond bleak with no relief in sight (at least that included staying in this life). There was nothing to say or do to make this suffering better or easier. It was just a matter of waiting it out – waiting for the medications to kick in, the brain chemistry to right itself, the underworld journey to run its course. And yet so much was done and so many needed words of encouragement were spoken as we waited. Meals were brought, schedules organized of friends to come to sit in meditation, take walks, drive to appointments. A turning point came as a small group of friends walked rhythmically with my partner and I around and around a courtyard sing-singing “It's gonna be okay, we're all gonna get through this” as much to ourselves as for her.

Hanging on to faith can be tricky at such times. Looking for the bigger perspective often means finding others to hold it for us when we can't hold it ourselves. Someone gave us a card that still sits on our buffet today: “It will all be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.” Lenten waiting is an active waiting. Not a sitting and twiddling of thumbs, but a doing of what

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must needs to be done. An attending to the minutiae of daily life and practice: walking the dog, getting the kids to school, paying the bills, preparing the meals. While at the same time knowing, trusting, hoping that some bigger thing is happening too. That we're moving (whether creeping or speeding) ever along toward this eventuality we're so tired of waiting for. Each Lent, we Church folk play out (again) Jesus' death and our death (to who and what we thought we were) and then (unexpectedly, but even more hoped for) the return to Life (again) as we are made new. Again and again and again.

--*Amy Smith*



Feb 21: *Ps 70, 71; Gen 42:29-38; 1 Cor 6:12-20; Mark 4:21-34*

**Mark 4:21-34**

In this section of the Gospel, we are given a series of parables about the nature of the Kingdom of God. They are quite different. But, looking at the stories more closely and in their context, I think there is a deeper connection. For me, this is a good thing, as one of the parables involves what has always been a hard spot for me: “for the man who has will be given more, and the man who has not will forfeit even what he has” (Vs 25). The harsh and apparent inequity of this has always been a stumbling block to me. Reading it in the context of the other parables in which it's set makes more sense of it for me, and helps me recognize if for what it is, or what I think it may be, anyway.

The setting here is the parable of the sower and the seed. Today's reading begins with the light under the bushel. Jesus says that “...nothing is hidden unless it is to be disclosed and nothing put under cover unless it is to come into the open.” In the next paragraph, he goes into the verse quoted above: “He also said, 'Take note of what you hear; the measure you give is the measure you will receive, with something more besides. For the man who has will be given more and the man who has not will forfeit even what he has.'”

I've always read this as prescriptive: To those who have, more *\*should\** be given. But that's not what's being said. Rather, in context, what we are seeing is that those who flourish are the ones who had “ears to hear” and understood the message. The fruits of that understanding are ever greater. That's the “something more beside” that they have to look forward to. Those who only got a little of it, like those seeds that fell on rocky soil, flourish briefly, but soon wilt for lack of rooting. Even what little they got is taken away.

Maybe my “hearing” is getting better, or my “rocky ground” is getting a little “loam-ier” with age? I can hope so.

--ed.

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Feb 22: *Ps 69, 73; Gen 43:1-15; 1 Cor 7:1-9; Mark 4:35-41*

The Old Testament reading is Genesis 43:1-15.

This reading is about Joseph in Egypt and forgiving his brothers.

In Gen 42:21-24, Joseph hears Reuben's remorse at their action and weeps. The 43rd chapter is his forgiveness of them.

My mother died this past year. She had a long and good life. She was preceded in death by my dad a few years ago. Since his death, she became more frail and Alzheimer's disease took progressively more of the mother I loved. She died peacefully. She had said that she wanted to go and live with her husband, and that would be in Heaven.

I look back in my mind, in my memories – she lives there. I choose to remember the good, the love, and the mother she was. And there, she is reunited with the memories of my dad and of them, together.

This is my journey from the dark vision of a frail, demented loved one to a beautiful shining memory.

--*Tim Specht*



Feb 23: *Ps 75, 76, 23, 27; Gen 43:16-34; 1 Cor 7:10-24; Mark 5:1-20*

## **Psalm 23**

While God is with me, I need nothing else. This sublimely reassuring psalm has been the “light at the end of the tunnel” for many, myself included. Even the imagery in it is comforting—the green pastures calling forth the beauty and bounty of Spring, the still waters like a Sierra meadow at midday in mid-Summer.

Even when the going gets pretty hairy, we're assured that God has not abandoned us. In the valley of the shadow of death we see God striding along beside us, ready to fend off the lowering menace. Even the homely image of a meal in the presence of my enemies, I have always imagined that God has invited my enemies to break bread, too, and to thus resolve our enmity. The popularity of this Psalm, with both Jews and Christians, through many generations and locations, I think, arises from the universality of strife, tribulation and grief in our world. And also our universal desire to be free from it.

In the past year, this Psalm has never been far from me. It has been a year of life-changing losses of those close to me. I lost the last of my two uncles in April, when I was on a business trip back East. While I was digesting that, I had to help the dear friend I was staying with through her Mother's rather unexpected final illness and death. I had been home less than 6 weeks from that when my Father died, as unexpectedly as one can die at nearly 95 . About the time we got Dad buried, we discovered that Margaret's father had cancer (operable, fortunately).

You want to cry, with Christ on the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” That's how I've felt this year. I've walked through the valley of the shadow of death, but I remind myself that I need fear nothing, for God is always by my side. It's a good thing, because I sure couldn't do it alone.

--ed.

Sun, Feb 24: *Ps 93, 96; Gen 44:1-17; Rom 8:1-10; John 5:25-29*

**Romans 8: 1-10**

Here we are, about half-way through Lent. We find ourselves being called upon to choose between the life of the Flesh or the life of the Spirit. Paul spells out the choices. If we accept the law of the Spirit of Life, as set before us by Jesus Christ, we will walk with the Spirit and not follow the Flesh.

The implication is that in our daily life, our civil conduct and our response to the pressures that surround us should all be tempered by the faith that we are already with Christ. Remember that the next time a car cuts you off on the freeway and the driver returns a friendly gesture when you honk at him.

We do not necessarily need to be "saved again." It is a big order, but all we have to do is to set our behavior patterns on the mind of the Spirit which is life and peace. It is a tall order. There are insufficient physical standards or worldly goals to be measured against. This is not baseball with a player considered great if he bats .362 without steroids. This is in our mind, our conscience, in our consciousness, and in our daily self debates about choices and decisions.

Ultimately, we have no one to answer to except ourselves and to our God, through Jesus Christ.

--*Caleb B. Case*

## *Lead us into Life*

Feb 25: *Ps 80, 77, 79; Gen 44:18-34; 1 Cor 7:25-31; Mark 5:21-43*

### **Mark 5:21-34 (NIV)**

This ancient story--found in Mark, Matthew and Luke-- (re)teaches me the power of faith-in-action.

We are told that the woman in the story has been plagued with a bleeding disorder for a long time (12 years!) She's seen all the specialists and they could do her no good. (Maybe the ailment lay somewhere beyond a doctor's cure?) Despite all those attempts, when she saw Jesus, she had a simple thought: "If I just touch him, I'll be healed." She believed this would help. When she acted on that faith, she found that what she thought would happen, did happen. And this was confirmed by Jesus, who sent her forth in peace and a blessing to be freed from her suffering.

It strikes me as this lesson is so powerful, true, and timeless that it has made its way into our popular culture in myriad ways. Maybe you, like I, have encountered the teachings of Norman Vincent Peale, Tony Robbins, even Suzi Orman? They all suggest the exact same formula for life: What we think about matters: for thoughts inform faith (beliefs), and our beliefs inspire our actions, and by acting we produce results, thus reconditioning (or reforming) the cycle of thoughts, faith, actions and results. Pretty clever of them!

Whenever I read or hear these modern day teachers, I always think: "Hey, they're preaching the gospel!"

May we all go forth in peace, and be freed from our suffering. (And think good thoughts!)

--Rev. Ben Kocs-Meyers

Feb26: *Ps 78:1-39, 40-72; Gen 45:1-15; 1 Cor 7:32-40; Mark 6:1-13*

## **A Prophet Without Honor**

Mark 6:1-13

"He's one of them". "You know how those people think." "That's the way they always act".

When Jesus went to Nazareth (his home town) and began teaching in the synagogue, the locals were so scandalized that one of those people would be teaching in the temple that they could not hear the wisdom of his message.

The locals knew Jesus as a carpenter, not a prophet or Rabbi. They knew Mary and Joseph and his brothers and sisters. He'd probably built beds or tables for many of them. While a carpenter was an honorable calling, it was certainly not the kind of person from whom the Nazarenes would expect, or could accept, life-changing principles. As a result "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith."

How quick we are to judge all the "thems" we know, or know of. Our Spirit Talk group recently talked about "born-again" Christians, described in the Anne Lamott book we're discussing, as "...hard core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic...not to put too fine a point on it."

Do I have anything to learn from them? Before I dismiss them as having no theological merit, would I like to have their fervor and certainty for my faith or their willingness to speak of it public? What about the other "thems" I know and discount because they're "just carpenters".

--*Dave Sutton*

Feb 27: *Ps 119:97-12, 81, 82; Gen 45:16-28; 1 Cor 8:1-13; Mark 6:13-29*

## **Meditation on John the Baptizer**

In the selection from Mark in today's lectionary, we are given the story of John's death. The notes in the New Oxford Annotated Bible (which is an NRSV translation with very helpful explanatory notes) indicate that Herod was in a dilemma. He had taken his brother, Phillip's, wife, Herodias as his own on Phillip's death. Among other things, this had antagonized the father of Herod's first wife, the King of the adjacent kingdom of Nabatea, which was bad enough. But, to add to his international troubles, John was making a fuss about the illegality under Jewish law, of taking his brother's wife as his own. Herod had imprisoned John, but had been unwilling, as Herodias kept insisting, to kill him. John had a following and Herod didn't want any martyrs.

But the dancing of Salome, Herodias' daughter, enthralls Herod and he makes the fatal (for John) mistake of promising her anything she wants. What she asks for, of course (with some prompting from her mother) is John's head, which Herod provides,

The context here is odd. Before the story, Jesus has just been rejected in his hometown and sent his disciples out to do good works. Immediately after this story, they return with their reports. So why is it there?

It seems to be where it is because it is setting up the character of Herod, so we know what he's like. Also, this rounds out the story of John whom we saw before in Chapter 1 of Mark. It also prepares us to understand what happens to prophets in Israel at this time, which sets up the events of Holy Week. This may be important, since Jesus' death on a cross—an ending reserved largely for enemies of the state or major criminals—was seen as something of an embarrassment by the early church, and certainly by those who might otherwise have been inclined to join it. The story of John and his end would have made it easier for the church authorities to say “there's no shame in it; that's what happened to all the good prophets. Look what happened to John. It's a sign of how decadent Jewish society was in those days that, as usual, it was killing its prophets.”

--ed.

Feb 28: *Ps 42, 43, 85, 86; Gen 46:1-7, 28-34; 1 Cor 9:1-15; Mark 6:30-46*

***Mark 6:30-46. The Feeding of the Five Thousand***

In many ways, this miracle story about feeding so many (with abundant leftovers!) is the true initiation of the Communion Table in Mark. In a place out in the country where apparently there was not enough for everyone, Jesus instituted a sharing meal. Everyone that was there was fed-- whether invited or not. No questions were asked about membership or beliefs. "Welcome to our table! Eat!" Jesus said.

In the opening verses of this passage, we find out the crowd had met Jesus and the disciples out in this deserted place. The crowd clamored to be with Jesus. It got late, and the disciples, who are not treated as very perceptive in Mark, complain to Jesus that it is time to send the crowd away, or they will have to be fed. The disciples were not ready to spend the money needed to feed this many people (the story says they would need 200 denarii to buy the food—or the equivalent of about 9 months' pay). Jesus dismissed their worries with a single question: "What do you have? Go and See."

Perhaps that is a good question for us to ask in our lives. What do we have? Do we take inventory of what we have with God before saying what lies before us is impossible?

For me, I always imagine what it would have been like to be one of the last folks on the edge of this throng of people. Can you imagine standing at the margins of a crowd of five thousand? In the straining to hear, confusion, milling around, and trying to listening to Jesus teach, it becomes late. There is a commotion up front with Jesus and the disciples. The disciples scatter among the crowd, and return to Jesus. From the very back of the crowd we can see Jesus hold up some bread in a blessing. Minutes later, bread and fish for everyone is passed around. From the back of the crowd, there is no miracle. They only know the abundance that was passed from Jesus to all.

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Is this the story of our lives? While in the crowd, the abundance of God is passed to us. We eat our fill—and there are leftovers. We receive the abundance of God, and perhaps forget to stop and acknowledge the miracle that we have just received. No matter what is passed to us, its source is the love of God. Is that a miracle or everyday grace? How often do we neglect to ask, “What do we have? Let’s go and see”. Today, be diligent and constantly thank God for the daily graceful abundance of what we do have.

*--Jeff Crews*



## *Lead us into Life*

Feb 29: *Ps 88, 91, 92; Gen 47:1-26; 1 Cor 9:16-27; Mark 6:47-56*

### **Psalm 88**

Lent is a time for reflection, quiet, and making space to listen to God. The celebration of Christ's birth is behind us, and the resurrection still lies ahead. For some, this late winter season is a difficult time: we are weary of cold, stormy weather and ready for blue skies. Perhaps we identify with the writer of Psalm 88, who cries out in loneliness and sickness, wondering why God has forsaken him. The most terrible thing for him is to be separated from God.

When we rush through our days and do not pause to listen or look for God, we can feel separated from God's love as well. We may feel distressed, lonely, tired, sick, or in despair. Lent reminds us to slow down, to look for God's love and abundance.

Lent is not about giving up the things that we like but about making space for God. As spring begins to blossom around us, we can make that space in many ways. Here are a few ideas:

- daily prayer and meditation
- regular walks through our neighborhoods with pauses to smell the flowers
- mindful eating of simple meals without distractions
- thoughtful conversations
- reading scripture
- offering up our sorrows and concerns to God
- giving thanks for all the blessings God has bestowed upon us.

The anticipation of Christ's resurrection means that when we hear the Psalmist say, "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?" we know that in Jesus Christ the answer is "Yes!" The Psalmist anticipates Christ's triumph over death and God's transformative power in our lives. May we always be reminded of that amazing gift.

*--Meighan Pritchard*

*Lead us into Life*

Mar 1: *Ps 87, 90, 136; Gen 47:27-48:7; 1 Cor 10:1-13; Mark 7:1-23*

Ps. 87:7 Singers and dancers alike say, "All my springs are in you."

This past Christmas, the manger with the infant Jesus has been a well-spring of grace to which I return frequently when resentment wells up inside me and threatens the very relationships, human and divine, that I hold dearer than life. Let God's grace flow through me in such abundance as to wash out all resentment and build up praise to God.

Mark 7:15 And there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

"They" didn't make me miserable with their expectations. Let me re-examine my own expectations and choose to eagerly receive that well-spring of grace in God.

Ps. 90:14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Let my only expectation each day be that I will be satisfied with God's steadfast love. "All my springs are in you," and you are present everywhere, seen or unseen.

Ps. 136:1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

For God's steadfast love endures forever, satisfies, is a well-spring of grace, ever present. Thanks be to God.

I Cor 10:13 ...God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

That well-spring of grace, of steadfast love, born in a manger, walked among us in the flesh, crucified and risen, the Way, endures forever. Thanks be to God for his son, Jesus. Amen.

--*Margaret Arighi*

Mar 2: Ps 66, 67, 19, 46; Gen 48:8-22; Rom 8:11-25; John 6:27-40

## **"Hoping for What We Do Not See"**

Romans 8:22-25

*22 For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. 23 But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free. 24 For it was by hope that we were saved; but if we see what we hope for, then it is not really hope. For who of us hopes for something we see? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Today's English Version)*

We live in a world full of troubles—the pain and sadness of personal loss, the destruction of war and violence, enduring inequality and injustice, increasingly alarming environmental conditions. All of creation, including all of humanity, does indeed “groan with pain.” That this continues to be true two thousand years after the words in this scripture passage were written is troubling. What reason do we have to “keep the faith” when all of these problems are still with us?

“Hoping for what we do not see” is central to my faith. This means believing in something that is not necessarily here yet, but could be. It means believing that the Creator does indeed care for Creation—for all of us. It means believing that the world can be a better place; that we can treat each other better; that Creation need not groan so much or so loudly. When we live each day with this hope in our hearts, in our actions, in our words to each other, it becomes possible to “wait with patience” for this better world. This does not have to mean that we accept things as they are. It means we can live our whole lives struggling with others and with God to make more of our hopes a reality. We can accept that things do not always go the way we want, both in our personal lives and in society. When we are able to find this hope even when we are defeated, down and out, then truly “by hope. . . we are saved.”

--*Matt Reed*

Mar 3: *Ps 89:1-18, 19-52; Gen 49:1-28; 1 Cor 10:14-11:1; Mark 7:24-37*

**Psalm 89:1-18, 19-52**

The two halves of this Psalm really need to be read together. It is, in essence, an extended argument with God.

In the first half, the Psalmist writes about the glory days of David's kingdom and of the covenant proclaimed by the Lord with David and his descendants. The Lord had raised up this young ruler over Israel and had promised him (Vs. 29) "I will establish his posterity forever and his throne as long as the heavens endure." But, in the next verse warns darkly, "If his sons forsake my law and do not conform to my judgements, if they renounce my statutes and do not observe my commands, I will punish their disobedience with the rod and their iniquity with lashes."

The Psalm harks longingly back to the former covenant, as if reminding God, "you promised!" Then it appeals to God's mercy: "How long, O Lord, wilt thou hide thyself from sight? How long must thy wrath blaze like fire?" The Psalmist seems to be treating God as if he were another, albeit vastly more powerful, human, trying to "guilt-trip" God into fulfilling his promises: "So, what kind of a God are you, that you forget your promises as soon as the going gets tough?"

I think looking at this as an argument with God can give us interesting insights into the nature of our relationship to Deity. One doesn't argue with someone or something that doesn't matter, or that one doesn't care about, or whose mind can't be changed. There's no point. One generally only argues with those one cares about, who are close enough in relationship that you care what they think or do, and whose minds you think you can change. I think that's the important subtext of this Psalm: Despite all God has allowed the Israelites to be put through, they still care enough about God to try to convince God to intervene and take their side again, and that they believe they can do it.

--ed.

## *Lead us into Life*

Mar 4: *Ps 97, 99, 100, 94, 95; Gen 49:29-50:14; 1 Cor 11:17-34; Mark 8:1-10*

### **Psalm 100**

Psalm 100 is a psalm of thanksgiving and worship of our LORD. We are reminded that our Creator loves us and is faithful to each of us.

I found this Psalm a wonderful morning reading as it is full of so much joy. May this joy accompany you through your day.

“Worship the LORD with gladness”(NIV) could be the theme in Lent. However, the first association with Lenten often might be personal restriction and repentance. We read now that we should rather “serve the LORD with gladness (KJV)”. How can we use this time of Lent to make it into a time of joy and thanksgiving of our LORD and creator?

Lenten is the time of reflection on the basics. Let us use this day to declare our faith in the one God, who made us, as this Psalm clearly states. As derived beings from God, we belong to Him, therefore let us “come before him with joyful songs ... give thanks to him and praise his name (NIV)”.

A short prayer to start the day (inspired from psalm 71, NIV):

In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge. For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you. My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long.

*--Isa Philipp*



## *Lead us into Life*

Mar 5: *Ps 101, 109, 119:121-144; Gen 50:15-26; 1 Cor 12:1-11; Mark 8:11-26*

### **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**

I often feel as though I lead a life of distinct contrasts. By day, I commute with a hoard of other working stiffs into San Francisco to use my left-brain, analytical skills as a civil engineer. I spend the day making calculations and writing technical reports that I hope will improve the world around me. After work, I switch gears and use my right-brain, creative skills for practicing music, cooking, and interacting with friends and family. I am sure that others share the same dichotomy in their daily life. It is often incredibly difficult to switch from one world to another: work to play, friends to family, indoors to outdoors.

Every day we are faced with decisions about what kind of person we want to be for the day. Occasionally we face larger, more stressful questions and decisions that can change the course of our lives.

I believe it is important to recognize that God's Spirit is with us as individuals no matter what side of the bed we wake up on and wherever we end up after walking through the next open door. God works through us to ensure that our decisions lead to benefit the common good. The world needs engineers and musicians, comedians and dramatists. I need to remind myself that I am free to take risks and try new things, free to take on new challenges, and free put on different clothes for a day. I also need to remind myself that I don't need to wear all of the clothes I own at the same time. The Spirit of God will support me in whatever risks I attempt, and allow me to let go of things that I cannot control. Whether the risk is starting a new job, taking up a new sport, trying an exotic food, or volunteering for the weekend, I hope that the Spirit of God will help me to join with others to turn our everyday actions into positive change for the world.

--*Steve Skripnik*

Mar 6: Ps 69, 73; Exod 1:6-22; 1 Cor 12:12-26; Mark 8:27-9:1

## **1 Cor 12:12-26**

This section of what is traditionally considered Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one that has been both famous and infamous through the centuries. In this section, Paul likens the members of the church to the members of a physical body—hands, feet, eyes, ears.

Though this passage has been used to justify inequality, I read this passage, as being radically inclusive. It recognizes the unarguable differences between us—men and women, just as one example—and goes on to proclaim that we all have our own gifts, even if they are different. It tells us—once again—something that we humans tend to keep forgetting: Different is just different; it's not better or worse: "...God has combined the various parts of the body, giving special honour to the humbler parts, so that there might be no sense of division in the body, but that all its organs might feel the same concern for one another. If one organ suffers, they all suffer together. If one flourishes, they all rejoice together." [New English Bible]

And what is it that binds this all together? Chapter 13 states it explicitly. It is Love. Without love, everything else is vain ("...but if I am without love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.").

So, this radical inclusivity requires that we perceive ourselves as one body and treat each other (all the other "parts") with love since, in a very real sense, we're "all in this together."

Easy to do when people are like us. Harder to do when they seem very different, maybe even frightening or just annoying. What about the homeless person in the street? What about the driver who just cut us off in traffic? Radical inclusivity is a challenge to us all—one that we can only meet through Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help us, your body of Christ, to be fully inclusive of all. Quiet our judgmentalism and help us look past that which may frighten or offend us, into each other's hearts, for the image of you we each carry there.

--ed.

Mar 7: *Ps 107:1-32, 33-43; Exod 2:1-22; 1 Cor 12:27-13:3; Mark 9:2-13*

## **Living the Way of Love**

1 Corinthians 12:27 – 13:3

We have heard the latter part of today's reading – 1 Corinthians 13 – probably numerous times. And we don't ever seem to tire of the words. We are seated – some standing – inside a beautiful church, perhaps our own sanctuary. Inspirational music has penetrated our souls, sweet voices have touched our hearts. People are dressed so wonderfully. And it seems as though all of the most important people in the world are here. They are. It is a wedding.

A friend or sibling stands, and, maybe a bit nervously, reads 1 Corinthians 13. It begins strangely, if not mysteriously, explaining how love relates to speaking in a foreign language or having the ability to prophesy. But then it moves into the familiar cadence that bores into our being:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

The passage continues, speaking of knowledge, of childhood and adulthood, of perfection and imperfection, and how they change or fade. But “. . . now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

But our reading for today starts earlier [12:27], and stops short of the full, well-known 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, giving focus to a wider context to the Way of Love. While yet a meaningful application to the relationship between committed people and family, love, as God would have it, is the essence, the mortar, an inestimable ether that must bind all people, the actions they take, the causes they pursue, the vocations they follow, as well as the feelings they share with stranger and acquaintance alike.

## *Lead us into Life*

At my workplace several years ago, we instituted what we call the Leadership Covenants. A poster was created that we all signed. There are several covenants. “Treat colleagues with mutual respect, trust, and dignity.” “Communicate early, honestly, and completely.” “Help each other; ask for and give help and welcome it freely (it is not a sign of weakness).” “Share experiences and lessons learned.” And others. It wasn’t until I read the scripture passage for today that I realized the unspoken or even subconscious basis for that poster may be today’s reading: that well-grounded ethics, genuine compassion, and a sense of fair play and cooperation are a daily and constant opportunity for living the Way of Love. It is an opportunity we all have.

--*Jim Marrone*



Mar 8: Ps 102, 108, 33; Exod 2:23-3:15; 1 Cor 13:1-13; Mark 9:14-29

**I Corinthians 12:31b--14:1a (Today's English Version)**

**Acts 20:35 NEB, Matt 25:32-40 RSV**

Left by itself, Paul's magnificent chapter on love is great, but not personally practical. Actually, we could read it, agree with it, and still say, great, but so what?

The translators of "Today's English Version" have it right. They continue the discussion into the first verse of Chapter 14: "It is love, then, that you should strive for."

Nothing abstract about that! We are to be people who love, and what was Jesus' main teaching of how to \*be\* people of love?

New English Bible, Acts 20:35: "We should keep in mind the words of Jesus, who himself said: 'Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving.'" Not just in giving, of course, but \*more\* in giving than in receiving.

How beautifully this ties in with the message found in Matt. 25-31: "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink...[etc]."

Prayer: "Oh God, you know better than we that we live in a culture that stresses the joy of receiving, receiving, receiving! Help us to turn more and more to Jesus way of sharing and giving and thereby living joyously. Amen"

--Dan Aprá



Sun, Mar 9: *Ps 118, 145; Exod 3:16-4:12; Rom 12:1-12; John 8:46-59*

## **Romans 12 (Verses 1-12)**

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is true worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will.

### Humble Service in the Body of Christ

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your [a] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, [b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

### Love in Action

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

[“Today's New International Version” from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)]

As I read this passage I'm reminded that each one of us is a precious gift to this world with special talents to share. Sometimes it may be difficult to discern what our gifts are, and sometimes it may be challenging to discover that spark in others. However, each one of us plays our part daily in a world this is

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everything you can imagine or experience--horrifying to beautiful, frightening to endearing, disheartening to jubilant.

Recently I worked late to finish a project. I hadn't really taken much of a break all day; not even stepping outside the office building to enjoy what had been a gloriously sunny day. It was quiet and the darkness from the outside seemed to creep in through the large plate-glass windows. As I walked down the hallway towards the exit, I heard the rhythmic swishing of a dust mop nearby. It was the night janitor whom I'd often met at this hour. He was doing his job--peacefully and diligently--with cart, mops, and sprays.

Exchanging a smile and a goodnight greeting has become significant to me because his kindness helps me reconnect to the world after being in my head all day. That evening's exchange was particularly meaningful because as we smiled and said goodnight, he ended with the word "friend." His simple gesture of kindness was such a gift to me at that moment and still is. Often the simplest of acts can be the most profound gifts we offer others. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi: whatever you do might seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.

*--Louise Halsey*



Mar 10: *Ps 31, 35; Exod 4:10-31; 1 Cor 14:1-19; Mark 9:30-41*

**Psalm 31 (morning), Psalm 35 (evening)**

The two Psalms of today's Scripture readings speak of anguish, distress, fear, sorrow and grief, but yet the writer has an unwavering trust in the Lord to soothe and relieve.

This description of suffering reminds me of people I have met in a poverty stricken area of Mexico, people who are immobile due to birth defects or trauma. Most have no means of independent mobility, but instead must rely on the people around them to carry them from their beds or chairs to wherever they need to go. The suffering extends to the caretakers who must be strong both physically and mentally, yet see no way to alleviate their burden. The suffering they all experience must be like what the Psalm writer experienced.

And then come Rotary members to distribute free wheelchairs, giving hope to the hopeless, mobility to the immobile, freedom to the caretakers. The look on the faces of the recipients who can suddenly move under their own power, often for the first time, the tears of the caretakers who watch is beautiful to see. There is a radiance beyond description that shines in the careworn faces, a rebirth of hope, a whole new life now made possible.

To me this is what Easter is about. The sadness and despair which give way to the incredible joy of Easter morning. God among us.

May we each seek to alleviate someone's burden, to give someone else that rebirth of hope and the joy of hope renewed, to show the love of God that motivates us as we travel through Lent together.

*--Carolyn Thiessen*

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Mar 11: *Ps 121--126; Exod 5:1-6:1; 1 Cor 14:20-40; Mark 9:42-50*

**Thank you for the music** Psalms 121, 122, 123 (morning)

Awe, gratitude, confidence.

A sense of arrival, contentment, perhaps even complacency.

Renewed awe, with a greater sense of humility.

All the while, praying and, especially, singing.

At the risk of oversimplifying them, these three psalms, religious songs, lay out a progression of experience and faith that speaks to and inspires my journey.

In the past, while I may have felt awe and given thanks to God for the many blessings I enjoyed, this was easy, as I knew little of pain and suffering in my personal life. I was aware of the hardship and injustice endured both by strangers and some people closer to me, but despite my empathic nature, I never felt these \*myself\*. There was a substantial naïvete closely bound with my awe. Just over a year and a half ago, a delightful visit with family replete with celebrations led me to remark aloud and repeatedly on the hope and promise I held for my immediate family. Singing felt especially easy to do.

A week later, we lost my youthful, precious mother in an auto accident.

I may not have been wrong to rejoice in my blessings, but I do believe I took them for granted. I have finally had to face and embrace complexity in God's universe. I most certainly catch myself "scorning of those that are at ease." I continue to look to God for guidance and protection, though sadness and anger make this difficult at times. I am also finally discovering the power of music and art generally to comfort but also to provide release, sometimes violently. I have to sing, and I am beginning to understand, finally, why music has served so many purposes--recreation being a quite insignificant example--and taken so many forms. It is not for me a question of whether to sing but of what to sing, and to be always thankful for music and all other forms of expression.

--*Angela Arnold*

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Mar 12: *Ps 119:145-176, 128—130; Exod 7:8-24; 2 Cor 2:14—3:6; Mark 10:1-16*

### **Mark 10:13-16**

As I write this I am about to leave for the practice for the FCCB Family Orchestra, and then to the Family Christmas Eve service.

The Scripture talks of families bringing children to Jesus, and of the disciples turning the children away. Jesus intervenes with the disciples, encouraging the children to come forward. For, Jesus says, “Anyone who does not come to God as a little child will not be allowed into God’s Kingdom.”

There are two messages here for me. One is that children are an important part of the church. The children’s service at the beginning of our Sunday worship touches us and often teaches us – not just what the ministers tell the children, but as importantly what the children teach us. The children add a lot to my Sunday worship.

The second message is that our acceptance of God is a matter of faith and openness – accept like a child. One need not over-analyze.

I truly enjoy the Family/Children’s Christmas Eve Service, the children’s service at the beginning of worship each Sunday, and Cazadero Family Camp each fall. The children bring us joy and are a big part of the church.

*--Bob Helliesen*



## *Lead us into Life*

Mar 13: *Ps 131—133, 140, 142; Exod 7:25—8:19; 2 Cor 3:7-18; Mark 10:17-31*

### **2 Cor 3:7-18**

We seem to live in a constant state of "transitory glory", where nothing is stable and there is always more to contemplate. Sometimes I feel as though I spend most of my time in transit between Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. Most of my time on BART/Muni is spent contemplating how much I abhor both of my current occupations. However, I have recently begun to look into the faces of others who have just as much anxiety about their work as I do at this stage in my life—betwixt and between undergrad and grad school. Often I see my reality mirrored back to me in the face of another traveller, who is soaked in rain or windblown and is in transit--just like me.

It's hard to take Paul seriously when he says that the greatest glory is yet to come, if only we can lift the veils from our faces, thereby letting the presence and Spirit of God into our lives. Old covenants die hard, and with the current sociopolitical conundrums we all face, sometimes it does seem like the end days, as opposed to the beginning of a transformative period constituting hope and effective change.

In order to be strong in conviction, I've started to order my thoughts on BART and strategize about how I might mirror understanding and compassion back to others. If perception is a veil which is keeping us from being thinking and prayerful people, then contemplative meditation must be an act of faith (a lifting of the veil) in which we offer ourselves up to the living Spirit of the God.

--*Whitney Huntley*

Mar 14: *Ps 22, 141, 143; Exod 9:13-35; 2 Cor 4:1-12; Mark 10:32-45*

## **2 Corinthians 4: 1-12**

This passage from today's scripture is rendered in Eugene Peterson's words in "The Message:"

"It started when God said, 'Light up the darkness!' and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful. If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives."

I selected this passage from the readings for today because it reminds us that we don't need to be particularly amazing or wonderful to be deserving of God's love. Even when life feels like it's plodding along in a rather ordinary way, we can still connect with something special and holy inside us. As a grad student, I sometimes feel like my everyday activities of problem sets, reading, and endless studying don't really connect me to something bigger. Even when I'm engaged in the material intellectually, I wonder how it will connect to my work in the future and how it connects to the larger world. When these sorts of feelings get me down, it's powerful to remember that within my "unadorned clay pot" I carry an incredible brightness. It's powerful to remember Pat's words when she baptized me, that baptism is a visible sign of God's invisible grace. Invisible, and thus easy to miss sometimes--and yet ultimately so brilliant that it is impossible to forget for too long.

--*Sara Chatfield*

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Mar 15: *Ps 137, 144, 42, 43; Exod 10:21—11:8; 2 Cor 4:13-18; Mark 10:46-52*

"But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture- I believed, and so I spoke"- we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."(2 Cor. 4:13-18)

This past November my wife had her first sonogram to check on the condition of our first baby. Since this is my first time being a dad, I didn't know what to expect at the appointment. Up until the sonogram, my wife's pregnancy had gone so smoothly, with just a couple of headaches here and there, but nothing major. So I expected a routine doctor's appointment.

And the doctor's appointment seemed typical at first. The midwife talked to us about all the usual stuff related to questions, medications, and future examinations. I sat by my wife's side, lost in the conversation, sometimes paying attention, sometimes wandering on my own thoughts. Then it was time for the sonogram. The fancy equipment came out that looked like an electric shaving machine. The midwife continued to chat with us as she put some jelly on wife's belly.

And then something magical happened. Out of the speaker, there was the sound of my wife's heartbeat, her slow but steady heartbeat, and then after a second I could hear the baby's heartbeat, strong and fast. And for a second, for an eternal and beautiful second, I could hear both her heart and the baby's heart beating at the same time, one faster than the other, yet harmoniously connected to each other.

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The magic of that sound is too beautiful to describe. It sounded like a symphony of two instruments, a duo making music for my ears, which made me feel alive and blessed at the same time. The image of God and the human person came to my mind in that moment. Hearing the sound of my wife's and baby's hearts beating together reminded me of how God's heart beat with ours, holds us and nurtures us, and makes us holy in the process. In our relationship with God we have two hearts and one music, the music of life and love, growing and expanding, nurturing and shaping our world. The heart of God beats with our heart, giving us life in time of death, forgiveness in time of repentance, love in time of hatred, wisdom in time of foolishness, wholeness in time of separation. Let our hearts be pumped everyday by God's heart, and let God renew the love for ourselves and for the world.

--*Salvador Leavitt-Alcántara*



## *Lead us into Life*

Palm Sun, Mar 16: *Ps 24, 29, 103; Zech 9:9-12, 12:9-13:9; 1 Tim 6:12-16; Luke 19:41-48*

Here I am taking down the outside Christmas tree lights between the big storms of early January. I feel a loss of the spirit of the season as I remove the lights that brightened our house and neighborhood. At the same time I am thinking about this Lenten piece and the three powerful and descriptive Psalms that crown this Palm Sunday devotional.

Psalm 29 with some inspiring words appropriate for our stormy January: “The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of Glory thunders. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.”

I am holding the experiences of Advent and Christmas. First, we are waiting in the darkness, and then the miracle birth of Jesus heralded by angels, visiting shepherds and wise men following a glowing star. Again Psalm 29... “The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness.” Baby Jesus came to shake us up, even 2000 years after his birth. Impressive and inspiring!

Psalm 103 describing the Lord, and also the character of Jesus: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.”

Now fast forward to Palm Sunday and three decades later in the life of Jesus. He rides the colt into Jerusalem Palm Sunday in glory and triumph. What joy, excitement and exhilaration captured in Psalm 24: “Lift up your heads, o gates, and be lifted up. So the King of glory may come in! “

In a few short months in the Christian calendar, we are taken from waiting, to miracle birth, to the inspiration of Jesus’ life as a teacher and leader, to glory, to death, and then the miracle of the life of Jesus continuing to inspire. Living the spirit of the Christian life is like riding a roller coaster.

Psalm 29 calms my spirit with these words: “May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless the people with peace.”

I wind up the lights and put them back in the box for next year.

--*Nick Kukulan*

Mar 17: *Ps 51, 69:1-23; Lam 1:1-12; 2 Cor 1:1-7; Mark 11:12-25*

**Mark 11: 12-25**

There is much to ponder in this challenging text which is often broken into two or three sections by Lectionary editors. We have the two-part story of the fruitless fig tree (11: 12-14, 20-21), interrupted by the story of Jesus' challenge to the money-changers in the temple (15-19) and finally some reflections on prayer (22-25).

Many of us are drawn to churches like FCCB and to denominations like the United Church of Christ for their openness and resistance to judgmentalism. "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here" is not just a slogan. It's a statement of our aspirations as a church. Too many have been victimized by their own churches' rush to judgment.

But Mark's gospel reminds us that Jesus is not afraid to confront when faced with injustice. Individuals and human communities are expected to bear fruit, to be useful. The money-changers' treatment of the poor in the temple was an abomination to Jesus and he didn't hesitate to cast them out and to overturn the tables.

Lent is a time to dig deep and to ask ourselves uncomfortable questions. Questions like these for you and me: What needs to be cast out of your soul? What needs to be overturned in your life?

--Bill McKinney



Mar 18: *Ps 6, 12, 94; Lam 1:17-22; 2 Cor 1:8-22; Mark 11:27-33*

## **Psalm 12**

Sometimes the Old Testament can seem miles away from our everyday reality. But sometimes we read a passage and the sentiments—and complaints—could have been lifted out of today's news. Last night I read an article about politics and rhetoric from the February 1, 2008, "Christian Science Monitor." It was entitled "Silver tongued vs. eloquent: Do voters know the difference?" In light of our current oratorically-impaired administration, it is a timely consideration—wondering whether we know the difference between the articulate and intellectually-adept and those peddling flim-flam. The author, whose background is teaching and writing about public speaking, says we have an ambivalent feeling in our culture about those who speak well. We call them equally often eloquent, brilliant, and compelling, or "smooth-talking," maybe "oily." He notes that, in our modern political system, sometimes the rhetoric is all we have to go on. He says this isn't all bad, as long as we analyze it carefully, particularly what we hear outside the carefully-scripted confines of public appearances and "sound bites."

Then I read Psalm 12 and realized that this is not new at all. "Help, Lord, for loyalty is no more; good faith between man and man is over. One man lies to another; they talk with smooth lip and double heart. May the Lord make an end of such smooth lips and the tongue that talks so boastfully! They said, 'Our tongue can win the day. Words are our ally; who can master us?'"

The answer that I long for in the present is not long coming; it's in the next sentence: "For the ruin of the poor, for the groans of the needy, now I will arise," says the Lord. 'I will place him in the safety for which he longs.'" Aha! So, is the rhetoric I'm hearing aiming to persuade me that I don't need to worry while the poor get poorer, and the rich should go shopping? Is the speaker engaging my highest aspirations as a human being, or appealing to my basest desires? The Psalm writer doesn't have much doubt which I should prefer: "Do thou, Lord, protect us and guard us from a profligate and evil generation. The wicked flaunt themselves on every side, while profligacy stands high among mankind."

--ed.

## *Lead us into Life*

Mar 19: *Ps 55, 74; Lam 2:1-9; 2 Cor 1:23—2:11; Mark 12:1-11*

On Ash Wednesday, the church formally turns its attention to the suffering and death of Jesus. Jesus, who was as fully human as he was divine, experienced the struggles and joys of life. He was tempted by the things that tempt us all. His vision of radical hospitality threatened the authorities. He suffered the pain of torture and the misery of abandonment by those he loved. He died an excruciating and lonely death. The mark of ashes imposed on our foreheads in the Ash Wednesday service is the mark of human suffering, common to us all.

Lent is a time of darkness in the church. Darkness deprives us of sight. We can be disoriented and frightened, lacking our usual reference points.

We hear disturbing reports about the practice of torture by the US government. How shocking that the darkness of torture has descended on this country! The impulse that tempts us to torture is the same that tempted Jesus; its name is “fear”. We seek information about conspiracies because we are afraid. We do what we know is wrong because we are afraid. The darkness of evil seems the only path to safety.

Confronted with these powerful urges, Jesus chose a different path. He rejected fear. He spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is here today among us. He preached on forgiveness, on community. “As you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40) reminds us that we are all connected. He said, “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34), for he knew that “Perfect love drives out all fear” (1 John 4:18). Love is the light in the darkness that is not overcome.

What does love have to do with fighting terrorism? First, we must love ourselves enough not to damage our souls by abusing others. Second, we must remember that embracing evil leads to destruction; its promise of safety is a lie. Safety is found in community and in love. The most effective interrogations occur when questioner and subject develop trust. From the trusting relationship, information is brought to light, and we are safer.

As Christians, we are called to that different path. Christians have been a powerful voice speaking out against the darkness of torture. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of our common vulnerability, and recommit to being ourselves the light that is not overcome.

--*Louise Specht*

Maundy Thursday, Mar 20: *Ps 102, 142, 143; Lam 2:10-18; 1 Cor 10:14-17, 11:27-32; Mark 14:12-25*

**Mark 14:12-25**

Jesus gathers for a final meal with his disciples. It was probably already an emotional time with threats and rumors swirling around Jesus. And right in the middle of the meal, Jesus announces that someone sitting in that very room will betray him. No doubt everyone looked around the room each with their suspicions about who it was. I imagine too, that everyone wondered, could it be me? Not all of them could have imagined doing what Judas ended up doing. But each of them must have had their doubts about Jesus. It is not a leap to see our doubts as betrayals of some kind. Does that mean that we, a progressive Christian church, by affirming our doubt as part of the journey of faith also are betraying our faith as well? Ultimately, the answer lies in this same scripture story. Even though Jesus calls out the traitor in the group, he immediately moves into the sharing of the bread and cup, the first communion. It is a tremendous act of love and compassion for Jesus to welcome his friend turned enemy to receive the bread and cup. And in that act, he acknowledges that our doubts about him cannot separate us from the body of Christ and the love of God. Neither can our anger, fear, frustration, or even ambivalence keep us away. But there is more to communion than the open invitation to the table. We must come and take our place and receive the blessing. The faith that is required of us is the same faith that was required of the disciples. The faith that allows us to accept the invitation to come to the table again and again throughout our lives. As we walk step by step these last days before Easter, listen for the invitations to the table and then do your part. Come to the table.

--*Adam Blons*

## *Lead us into Life*

Good Friday, Mar 21: *Ps 95, 22, 40, 54; Lam 3:1-9, 19-33; 1 Pet 1:10-20; John 13:36-38; 19:38-42*

### **Good Friday**

“Death cannot be the enemy if it’s death that brings us to life. For just as without leave-taking there can be no arrival; without growing old there can be no growing up; without tears, no laughter; so without death there can be no living.” -William Sloane Coffin, Credo

“...and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.” -St Francis of Assisi, Prayer for Peace

This is the first year that I signed up to write something for the Lenten Book. Frankly, I was somewhat stunned to see that I had been assigned Good Friday. Isn’t that a day reserved for a minister’s wise words? What could I possibly say about Good Friday to the entire congregation? Why me – especially this year, so soon after the death of my mother – when death is still so raw to me? But, perhaps that is exactly why I should write about Good Friday.

Growing up, I don’t remember my family being much of a Good Friday kind of family. We didn’t attend Good Friday services; other than respecting my Aunt Anna’s admonition to avoid eating red meat on that one particular Friday, we skipped over the day right into Easter Sunday. But a few years ago I was reading the San Francisco Chronicle on Good Friday; it contained so much tragic news, so much suffering. Yet I was filled with the conviction that God is with us and shares in our suffering. For me, this is the significance of the cross: the presence and power of God’s radically transforming grace in our lives.

As I sat with my mother as she was nearing the end of her life on this earth, I couldn’t help but realize that I was a witness to the labor pains of being born to a new life. All of us, including Jesus, must die to an old way of life, of being, in order to be born into a new way. In dying we are given new life. For Christians, there can be no Resurrection without the Crucifixion.

--*Melissa Moss*

Holy Saturday, Mar 22: *Ps 95, 88, 27; Lam 3:37-58; Heb 4:116; Rom 8:1-11*

## **Psalms 88 and 95**

Years ago, I heard Rueben Sheares, a minister in the United Church of Christ, say "you can't get to Easter without going through Good Friday." I recall that he said it in response to the awful struggle of apartheid in South Africa and he was referring to the political notion that in order to come into new life, there will be time spent in the pit, in darkness, in the depths. What is true in the political realm is also true for us as persons and is mirrored in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

On Holy Saturday, the seventh and last day of Holy Week, I begin the day quietly and with prayer. I feel a little stunned by the stark nature of the reality of death and life. It is almost as if a beloved has died and this is the first day after their death. It is true for me that I cannot begin imagining Easter morning without going through the rituals of Good Friday. Some theologians have remarked that Holy Saturday should be the quietest day of the year, because on this day, the body of Jesus is wrapped in linen, lying in a stone cold tomb. It certainly feels like the quietest day of the year to me, and not unlike the morning of Christmas Eve. I know something is about to happen liturgically and symbolically in our lives. However, I am called upon to wait and to wonder at all God is about to unleash into the wilderness of a hungry, aching world.

All around me, folks are buying up the hams at the market, children are dyeing Easter eggs and baskets are being stuffed with flavored jelly beans and chocolate bunny rabbits. I want the silence of this day! In some churches, altars are stripped or hung in black. No bells ring, no tolling of the years of Jesus' short life, and no ripple of cascading joy.

Sometimes, I can't even begin to pen the Easter sermon until noon. Words don't want to come and the Spirit, although willing, is holding back, as if to remind me to savor the quiet, to embrace the dark wonder of death, and to behold the awesome task of resurrection.

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“Let evening come,” as the poet Jane Kenyon has written. As it comes, the words of Psalm 95 break forth: “Come let us sing unto God, let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.” At dusk, Holy Saturday melts into the Easter Vigil, marking the beginning of Easter. In the Greek tradition, the clergy strew laurel leaves and flower petals all over the church to symbolize the shattered gates and broken chains of hell. The three sad days have done their worst; we are getting ready for holy joy to outburst.

Miraculously, the words of the sermon are fairly flying onto the page! Easter is in plain sight and my heart is quickening with the excitement of hope, love and pure joy. There is something to this ritual; here God is leading us into life.

--Pat deJong

