



an altar in the world
lent 2010

First Congregational Church of Berkeley
United Church of Christ

Credits:

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Joel 12:1-2, 12-17a; Psalm 51:1-12, 2;
Corinthians 5:20b-6:2 (3-10); Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Decision Time

A funny thing happened on my way to Jerusalem. I thought I'd be athletic until I developed a heart leakage; I thought I was incapable of writing an essay until a professor introduced me to verbs and adjectives; I thought I'd be a lawyer until God said ministry; I thought I'd work in East Harlem until I was chosen to work in homeland mission; I thought I'd pursue a conventional suburban pastorate until I was successively called to organize three new congregations and later to specialize in spirituality, including university teaching; I thought I'd live out my life in the east until Julia and I and all four of our children found ourselves on the west coast; I thought I'd retire next May until Bill created an interim need.... You have your own encounters to tell this season, as we read those poignant ones of Jesus.

The significance of such events is not only in what comes to us but also in what responses we decide to make, as Jesus did. Each one partly molds the unfolding of a whole life. This is the case right now for us as a congregation. Jerusalem is not just a geographical city on a hill in Israel; it's meant by the writers of the Word to be recognized by us as our personal and collective holy city, the ultimate design of what God intends for us to become. Willy-nilly, we're on our way.

Words in these readings beckoning to us to start this sacred season are (1) return to me (Joel); (2) truth in the inward being, a clean heart, a new and right spirit (Psalm); (3) be reconciled (Corinthians); (4) store up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew). Let's write down a decision now that looks like an attainable response for just these 40 days.

Psalm 37:1-18; John 17:1-8**Trust in Him**

The two passages from today both point out what it means to be a Christian. The first one is a Psalm from David, in which he praises God and thanks Him that he can count on His guidance. He points out that you will only succeed in the long run if you follow God and His laws. In the Psalm, David motivates everyone to keep on doing the “good” even if at first impression it might seem that the “evil/wicked” have a better and more successful life. The prayer of Jesus also tells us that the only way to “eternal life” is by following Him. Interestingly, both texts are written by persons who suffered persecution; both regularly prayed wherever they were at the time, which relates to our theme of “Altar in the World.”

While reading both of these texts, I asked myself the following questions: Who/How is God described here? Who/What are the “good” or “good things” Christians are supposed to do? Hence, what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ and follow Him? What/Who are the “wicked” things in our world? Or what am I not supposed to do?

What I liked personally in comparing these two texts especially was having in mind the characters of both “authors,” Jesus and David. Jesus was obviously the one who was showing us how to live the life we are supposed to live. However, as the Son of God He obviously did not fail, and sometimes this might be frustrating to us. The story of David (who is by the way, my favorite character in the Bible), in contrast, is the story of a human like us. He failed every now and then as we do, but he always found his way back on the path God made for Him, showing us that all we need to do is “commit our ways to the LORD; trust in Him and He will guide us.”

**Psalms 84, 150, 42, 32; Jeremiah 1:1-10; 1 Corinthians 3:11-23;
Mark 3:31-4:9**

God's Temple

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "You are God's temple, where the temple of God dwells."

So often we have looked to a building like a church as the temple of God. But no. Paul says that each one of us is the temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwells within us.

How often have we looked toward the heavens thinking God was up there somewhere? Now as we grow in spirit and in truth, we realize God really is within us. So we can cast our burdens of lack upon the Christ spirit within and be free to enjoy health, friendships, plenty, and anything else that is good for us.

According to a national survey, it seems that the majority of people in the United States have a positive attitude toward life. We rejoice and are thankful daily for that Spirit which directs us no longer to be critical of others but to offer a silent prayer of praise for the Christ spirit within them.

Prayer: God. We thank you for Paul's revelation about Christ's spirit. Grant, we pray, that we will always be aware of that Spirit within us.

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45
Prophetic lesson: Isaiah 43:15ff

It was a dark, wild night in the North Atlantic. The small ship carrying us home to America seemed inadequate for such a storm. I found my way to the upper deck and the ship's bow, to watch. Several times a fierce wave broke over the deck while I held on for dear life and was drenched. It was an encounter with the One Who had called that sea into being, and I was awed.

Much later I would learn that places of my birth and childhood are deep inside me: the desert and the sea.

The Second Isaiah's Book of Consolations brings us images, in superb poetry, of these two elements.

I am your Holy One,
Who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters...
See, I am doing a new thing!
I am making a way in the desert,
and streams in the wasteland.
The wild animals honor Me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the desert
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to My people. (NIV)

Imagine One Who makes a way in the most violent sea! Imagine One Who "gentles" that sea until She is an underground spring! Now She brings healing, refreshment, life to a dry and thirsty place.

What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend...?

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

Altar Building

I am an arranger... of things, not of music. How I wish!

My magpie soul desires to collect bright shiny bits and put them in my nest/home. A beachcomber at heart, I have picked up at least my share of sea glass. This beloved, socially acceptable compulsive behavior cleans up sandy beaches and provides a pretty mulch for my house plants. (Rinse the salt water off first.)

Once a worship committee gave me a grand assignment: to collect rocks that would be used in a ritual during the UCC Women's Network retreat. We were to mark a grief. Choose a rock from a table, hold it prayerfully, and then place it on the large altar. We were not denying grief; indeed we were naming it to our God in silence and in the presence of a beloved community of women.

I walked the sands of Shell Beach on the Central California coast, wondering, "What does grief look like?" Some stones contained holes, others were scored by lines. Most were worn down, the broken edges made safe and smooth. Some were flat, some were conical. All fit into the palm of my hand. Together at the retreat we built the altar of rocks and prayers, of memories and solid objects. It was beautiful. It was community.

Out of my experience with Women's Retreat altars, I began to create Centering Pieces at home, at the church I pastored in the 1980s, and when I taught as Adjunct Faculty at San Francisco Theological Seminary. **A foundational belief of mine is that any thing can remind us of God's ways of being in this world.** So, why not have something of beauty in our midst that silently recalls us to an awareness of God acting in this world, in us?

Materiality vs. spirituality is a false dichotomy. Jesus was not tempted with material things: all the kingdoms of the world, all the food in the world, even his own mortal self. Jesus was tempted by the invitation to put anything of any kind before his devotion to God. He has been described as "God-besotted." He chose God every time.

I create centering piece/altars because I need to be reminded, God knows. My focus is not as pure as that of Jesus, God knows. I do love her/him, God knows.

Psalms 22, 148, 105, 130; Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 4:1-9; John 17:9-19

The angle of repose of dry sand is 32 degrees. If you were to pour sand into a pile and allow it to come to rest naturally, the sides of the pile would form an angle of 32 degrees with a vertical line through the center of the pile. Pour more sand on the pile and it will get larger and higher, but the sides will always end up at a slope of 32 degrees.

The kingdom of heaven is like the angle of repose. We know that we are doing God's will, that we are practicing our faith, when we find the angle of repose for our own life, when the graces and gifts which God showers on each of us come to rest at the steepest possible angle. When we function at a shallower angle, we are not using our talents and abilities to their fullest, not living up to what God has in mind for us in this life. If we try to function at a steeper angle, we keep sliding back down the sides of our sand heap. We burn out, have a nervous breakdown, fail to keep commitments. Just as the pile of sand is unstable at that steeper angle, so will our lives be both unstable and unsustainable.

The angle of repose is, however, not one of nature's constants. Different substances, like different people, have different angles of repose. A life which would be frantic for one person may be significantly below the optimum operating capacity of another. So we each need to find and then sustain our own particular angle of repose. And like a heap of sand, it is probably necessary to keep adding to the pile until the sides start to slip and then back off a little. Limits can be found only by testing them, but once we have found the unique angle of repose God has set for each of us, we can then experience both the Joy and the challenge of practicing our faith every single day of our lives.

— 1998 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Mark 1:14-28

I sat next to Jesus on the BART train. Well, the guy looked exactly like a picture I have on my desk of a laughing Jesus. In this picture, he has his head thrown back in a belly laugh and he has shoulder length dreadlocks. The man next to me looked so much like that picture, it literally took my breath away. I wondered if this man could really be Jesus. Disconcerted by the thought, I centered myself by pulling out a book of meditations I had in my bag and began reading with great focus on this crowded morning train. After a couple of stops, he asked me, very politely, what I was reading and we began a conversation, simply, naturally, gently. I spoke of the love God has for each and every person and he spoke of his frustration these days with feminists, so that he never knows if he offers his seat to a woman if she'll be insulted or not. We spoke of how angry it makes us when we are categorized by superficial characteristics, like gender or skin color. He told me when people say to him, "You speak so well," he wonders what do they expect? We spoke of spiritual things, about keeping our inner and outer lives in alignment. He told me about the profound spiritual experiences he's had at Burning Man. It was a very satisfying conversation for me. As he got up to leave, I wished him a good.....life, anything less seemed trivial.

As I reflect on our encounter, I find myself thinking about Bible stories, like today's scripture from Mark where Jesus had conversations with ordinary folks, these ordinary fishermen. I've always wondered what it was about him that affected them so much that they got up and followed him.

I sat next to Jesus on the BART train. I believe the living Christ is within each of us. Christ brings to life in us our soul enlivening, heart awakening, loving, forgiving nature. Imagine, if you encountered Jesus somewhere in your daily life, what do you expect it would be like? How would you respond? How might you be changed? I invite each of us to keep the eyes of our heart open because you never know who you might encounter.

**Psalms 5, 147:1-11, 27, 51; Lamentations 2:1-9;
2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11; Mark 12:1-11**

Won't you let me be your servant? Let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

[New Century Hymnal]

“This weekend I felt like I didn't want to live life any more. Life is too painful.” These words were spoken to me just last week by someone I really had considered more an acquaintance than a friend — someone I have known about 10 years and see regularly, but not often. But there we were, together and alone for the next half hour, during which time this despondent man poured out his heart to me: so many troubles and worries...a financial crisis, a failed business, no close friends, a partner who had died of AIDS.

I reached into the recesses of my mind, trying to remember my psychiatric nursing class 18 years ago. Fortunately, a few things had stuck: Determine whether the person currently is at risk of harming themselves. Don't try to cheer them up. Acknowledge their feelings. I did my best to do just that. I cried with him. We embraced. I offered my suggestions about some immediate help.

After we parted, I was overwhelmed by the extent to which God plays such a part in all our lives, often in most unusual and surprising ways. I hoped that this person, now more friend than acquaintance, felt strengthened by my presence and by our interaction. I also realized once again what a privilege and opportunity being a servant of God can be.

— 1998 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalms 50, 59, 60; Mark 2:1-12

Last Holy Saturday, 2009, I turned on Green 960 while I made the lemon bars for our Easter cookie coffee hour. A show called, “Freethought Radio,” happened to be on. It was sponsored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and featured author Barbara G. Walker on the pagan origins of Easter. I thought maybe I would learn something new. It was interesting, although the discussion of the interweaving of early Christianity with Mithraism and worship of the goddess Astarte (Easter—Esther—estrogen) and other religions percolating around the Mediterranean was mostly familiar territory.

It struck me, as I grated lemon rind and processed butter, flour, and sugar, that these speakers were missing the point. They seemed to think that “religion” was just beliefs and doctrines. If you understand how Christianity arose from non-Christian antecedents, the hosts seemed to reason, you wouldn’t place your faith in its tenets. They fail to recognize that religion is a human response to the intuition or experience of the divine. As a human construct, it is subject to the wonderful weirdness of the human spirit.

One Easter, a few years back, I was still at church long after service. Almost everyone was gone, and a great quiet was settling in. A young man from Japan found me in the Cloister and asked if he might interview me about my religious holiday. He had to write a report for his class. What followed was one of the strangest conversations of my life. Imagine explaining, to someone who has never heard the story, that Easter is about a dead guy who came back to life! He was very polite but clearly thought this was really bizarre.

It is the strangeness itself of our religion that gives me confidence. I like the feeling that we don’t claim certain knowledge about the nature and purposes of God. It baffles me how anyone could make such a claim. As God said to Jonah, “Where were you when I created the heavens and earth?” We may be precious in God’s sight, but our small human selves only glimpse hints of the glory that is God. It is not necessary that our response meet someone’s criteria for logic. It is only necessary that we respond.

Ezekiel 39:21-29 Philippians 4:10-20 John 17:20-26**God's Glory, Name, Face, Spirit and Love**

Through Ezekiel we hear God saying, "I will set my glory among the nations.... I will be jealous for my holy name.... I will not hide my face any more from them when I pour out my Spirit..." Do we know that God is in charge of our lives? Do we know that we are meant to experience that glory, to feel the Lord's face (presence) shining upon us, and to understand His jealousy, as we are to worship God alone?

Can we say with Paul, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me...And my God will supply every need of [mine] according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus?" Imagine what it would be like if we believed this and lived in that knowing. We'd be powerful instruments to help heal this wounded world.

John sums it up with Jesus' prayer: "Father, I desire that they...may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world... I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Apparently, to know His love within is dependent upon first knowing God's name (God's nature). Let us prayerfully ask Jesus to make God's name known to us, to expose His inestimable love in us, and above all, His very self in us.

— 1992 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 55; Mark 2:23-3:6

Following the rules versus following the Spirit. Hmm...

I found irony in the two readings for today, or at least, in what came up for me as I read them. The Pharisees are on Jesus' case, as usual, this time for "working" on the Sabbath. He had allowed his disciples to gather food on the Sabbath, and he was healing the sick. For Jesus, compassion is the higher order "rule." He cannot abide strict adherence to tenets that deny genuine human needs.

When I saw that Psalm 55 related to a sense of betrayal by a friend, I recalled a time when I felt betrayed. Ironically, the incident involved a friend who felt she was following the "rules" of the situation at hand. Like the Pharisees in the Mark passage, my friend couldn't see the forest for the trees.

People who argue the difference between being religious and being spiritual often cite problems with the rules and dogma of various religions. Focusing on love and compassion seems to evoke the idea of spirituality, but for many, not the idea of organized religion.

This is one of the many reasons I am so glad to be a part of the United Church of Christ. We are free to experience and express God's love in whatever ways the Spirit moves us, unfettered by heavy dogma and rigid procedures. Our diversity does not divide us; on the contrary, it makes us stronger as a whole. We are free to embark on our own spiritual journeys, always supported by our faith community, whether we happen to see things the same way as others or have very different views.

Compassion is the key. If we remain attuned to the hearts and minds of those around us, we can discern the guidance of the Spirit within, the One who connects us all. During this season of Lent, let us follow the example of Jesus. May we strive to always choose the loving and compassionate course in our everyday lives.

Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

Fully Human, Fully God's

As members of a beloved church community, it can be easy to forget that we live our lives among a population in which the majority of two generations have not grown up knowing the traditions, practices, and symbols of the historical Christian church. Church renewal coaches remind us that, when we invite unchurched or “de-churched” folks to “taste and see” what our faith communities have to offer, we must ask ourselves:

“Is this activity something normal people do?”

If we attempt to immerse them in rituals that require a lifelong understanding of Christian practices, we will be less effective. With this in mind, I invite you to experience Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, and this booklet, as a collection of activities and ways of living with other human beings that that can be at the center of effective evangelism. All human beings experience life's pleasures and pains through their bodies, seek a purposeful life, and have the opportunity to be more fully present—to themselves, Creation, and the Great Mystery. Evangelism is inviting others into this mystery.

Barbara Brown Taylor's begins her chapter regarding prayer, *The Practice of Being Present to God*, with a quote from Kenneth Leech: “*The best preparation for a life of prayer is to become more intensely human.*”

I submit that one of our church's primary reasons for being is its role as a vehicle through which individual human beings can strive together to experience God in the midst of being evermore intensely human.

Psalm 27 was written in a context of conflict; of violence, suffering, and fear. The Pharisee in our passage from Luke tells Jesus, “*Get away from here. Herod wants to kill you.*” All human beings have fears, some real, some imagined. One healthy response to fear is to not suppress it, but to experience it fully, and then ask: “*What of my fear is real, what is worrying about what might happen, and where is God guiding me through and beyond this valley of fear?*” When we experience great joy—of mind, body, and spirit—we can also ask, “*How has God brought me to this moment?*”

A life of faith is built from the regular and intentional process of seeking, and at times, *knowing* the experience of God in the midst of our most intensely human moments. Sometimes we, like the Psalmist, must “*wait for God; be strong and have courage.*” As hard as it is, we must remember that Jesus sits alongside us

while we wait. At other times, God's presence fills the centers of our existences:
"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom or what shall I fear?"

As you walk through Lent, may your precious life be the vehicle through which you encounter God. May God's light and salvation shine through you, so that others might seek to know God's glory through you and this community of faith. *Amen.*

**Psalms 27, 147:12-20, 126; 102 Jeremiah 10:11-24; Romans 5:12-21;
John 8:21-32**

Psalm 27 (Selections)

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to enquire in his temple.

I believe I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage, yea, wait for the Lord.

* * *

I planted a pine tree in my garden.
A monument to grace;
Seed and growth of mystery,
Pruned by the gardener.
Life was the gardener.
Obedience was the Word.
Sharp was the knife, terrible the pain.
Not to be forgotten.
Through patient years of day and night,
Strong evergreen, the gift of faith.

Psalms 61, 62; Mark 3:19b-35

Last summer, I spent three weeks with Pat, an old friend who lives half the year in a small village in the south of France. La Roque Gageac is a medieval town built into the side of a cliff. Over the 15 years since she's been staying there, she has become close friends with the people who live on her narrow lane. While I was there, I came to see how much Pat, who doesn't belong to a church or profess a particular set of beliefs, lives the kind of life that I believe Jesus was trying to teach us to live.

Not a day went by when Pat wasn't taking time to do something for one of her friends on the lane. Every morning, old Mr. Rouggier, her elderly cabinetmaker neighbor, would meet Pat on the street in front of the house, and he would tell her how hard a time he was having with his wife, who has Alzheimer's. Mrs. Rouggier would do silly things; he was tired of always having to watch out for her. In the early afternoon, if we weren't out visiting caves and castles, Mrs. Rouggier would come by, and go into great detail telling Pat how Mr. Rouggier was not treating her right. Each of them would pour out their soul to Pat, who would quietly listen and be supportive. Some days, she'd get a call from an older British woman up the street, who needed help dealing with something about her house. Pat would drop what she was doing to go help. She'd go air out the house of the Dutch friend who lived on the other side of Mr. Rouggier, so it would be fresh when the Dutch couple arrived for their vacation. She'd check other houses up the street, too, and help the owners, who live in distant places, take care of their homes. In general, Pat was the one everyone could count on to listen, to encourage, to do what was needed. When I think of today's scriptures, they all come together to describe Pat. She provided comfort to the weary, encouragement to the discouraged. She was like a sister to anyone who needed a sister. Pat returned to the States in October, but she still phones Mr. Rouggier every Sunday to see how he's doing.

Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.

**Psalms 27, 147:12-20, 126, 102; Jeremiah 4:9-10, 19-28;
Romans 2:12-24; John 5:19-29**

*Wait for the Lord, take courage;
be stouthearted, wait for the Lord.*

“Hope has two beautiful daughters...anger and courage.”
— St. Augustine

Reflect prayerfully, asking God for wisdom and insight: What, right now in my life, is “wilderness” for me? Offer this “wilderness” to God for healing, direction, and hope. Ask God for courage to respond to God’s leadership in this area of your life.

Anger can be a frightening emotion to feel. Often we deny or repress it, even when it may be justified. (Jesus’ anger led him to drive shady “entrepreneurs” out of the Temple in Jerusalem and led him to say to the Tempter in the wilderness, “Get away from me, Satan!”) But anger which is denied comes out in other ways — often as depression, anger turned toward oneself, tending toward hopelessness. While we do need to harness and control our anger, it may be the source of energy to lead us out of our wilderness.

Reflect prayerfully, asking God for wisdom and insight with anger you may have, remembering St. Paul’s maxim, “Be angry, but sin not.” Ask God to help you transform your anger energy into hope and God’s will for you, especially in your “wilderness.”

— 1995 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalms 70, 71; Mark 4:21-34

Altars in Evansville

Not as regularly as Pat returns to the Lake, but every few years or so, I return to my boyhood home Evansville, Indiana on the Ohio River – just a bridge (“Can you hold your breath?”) away from Kentucky. I always go to see my oldest friend Randy, who was also in morning kindergarten at Stanley Hall. I re-walk the four-block walk to grade school. And I visit my altars.

The first is always my boyhood home at the end of Mulberry Street. Sixty-five years in two generations of Stumpfs but no more. Another is the building which earlier was my grandfather’s music store on Main Street (where a jewelry store named “De Jongs” is still open for business.) And another is the small office on Governor Street, just two blocks from the ballpark in the movie *A League of Their Own*, where my dear father worked until his death when I was eleven.

The feelings on returning are usually bittersweet. Sometimes they’re painful with too many ghosts. But they’re always *powerful*. They pull me back. There’s something very special, almost holy, about visiting the same places 10, 20, and 50 years later. The intersection of time and place. Maybe I can go home again. Maybe I will.

In his essay *An Indiana Childhood*, James C. Coomer put it this way:

It is not the siren call of youth, but the siren call of place that brings me back as often as I am able. Youth, as one quickly learns, is transient. Place, as one gradually learns, is permanent. Youth can be remembered. Place can be revisited. But youth and place together can only be recalled, no re-lived. One outgrows one’s youth. One simply moves away from place. In the long run, however, it is place, not youth, that one remembers with fondness and, perhaps, with longing. Place provides the environment within which one grows, and learns. Place provides a sense of permanence in a mobile life. Place may even be remembered as home, regardless of where one lives. The siren call of place can be irresistible; not because of where it is but because of where it was. Youth is a part of being. Place is imbued in the whole being. So it has always been for me.

And for me, too. Amen.

**Psalms 119:73-80, 145, 121, 6; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Romans 4:1-12;
John 7:14-36**

I go to the Psalms frequently when I pray. I offer this prayer as a loose adaptation of Psalm phrases and images that stood out for me.

O God, I know it was you who created me, who made me what I am, so why didn't you make me smart enough to understand your ways so that I don't appear foolish to the cynical nonbelievers I know? I know there must be reasons for suffering in this world, the pain in my own life — help me understand it better, so that others may be inspired by my hope and my faith. In spite of the pain, or perhaps because of it, I know your love is always there to comfort me, because your love is a promise that is unwavering, faithful even to the end of time.

Help me remember to praise you, O God, to bless your name every day, to remember always the wondrousness of your gift of life, because my smiles, singing and laughter may be the strongest witness I can give to the power of your love to change lives. For you, God, are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding with steadfast love. You are good to all and compassionate to all you have made. You are near to all who call upon you honestly.

I bless you, O God, for all the guidance you have given me; you are always before me. My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices, for you show me the path of life and your presence brings fullness of joy.

Let all flesh praise you, O God, for ever and ever. Amen.

— 1995 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalms 75, 76**Mark 5:18-20:**

¹⁸As He was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed was imploring Him that he might accompany Him.

¹⁹And He did not let him, but He said to him, “Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you.”

²⁰And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Why would Jesus refuse to let someone for whom he had just performed a miracle (curing the demon-possessed man) come with him? One who could testify to a personal miracle? What is the relevance for us who today understand mental illness in an entirely different way?

Thanks to my (too occasional) attendance at Geoffrey Gaskins’s Bible Study class (and Barclay’s commentary) I’ll attempt an answer.

The man was described as possessed by “legions” of demons—reference to his personal experience with the Roman Legion’s brutality, which may have driven him insane. Jesus tried two previous methods to help the man without success, so needed something dramatic. That was to drive the demons from the man into the nearby herd of pigs, which promptly ran into the river and drowned.

That was enough to persuade the man he no longer had demons, so why wouldn’t anyone want to follow the man who had so relieved him?

The answer is in the 20th verse about the man’s proclaiming in Decapolis, a group of 10 largely Greek cities. The man became the first witness for Christ to Greek civilization.

The glory of the Christianity which one day flowered in the Greek mind and genius began with a man whom Christ healed who had been possessed by demons. Christ must always begin with someone. In our world, what are we doing to make it begin with us?

So the challenge for us is how we are to follow Jesus? Are we to board the boat with Him in safety and peace, or are we to risk taking our faith to unbelievers? When was the last time you told a friend what a terrific church you belong to? When was the last time you supported the unpopular but Christian side in a water cooler discussion? When will be the next time?

Psalm 63:1-8; Isaiah 55:1-9

On New Year's Eve, the labyrinth was open for people to walk. I sat in Loper Chapel in candlelight, meditating and reflecting on what I wanted for the New Year. The altar had many candles burning; it has become my altar in the world. This is the altar where I offer up my hopes and dreams. This is the altar where I am reminded of my connection to something far greater than myself that is paradoxically also at my core.

As I was walking the labyrinth, it came to me that what I wanted for the New Year was to find a way to trust God. I cling to the illusion that I'm in control, or that I want to be in control, so to let go and trust is a big deal for me. I walked grappling with these questions: what if I were to trust in God? What if I had the faith of the mustard seed, or Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son on the altar? What would my life look like if I could leave my "troubles" on the altar, turn my back on having control? And so it went as I walked into the center, searching for my connection to God. I came out of the center and was winding my way out, when I became aware that I was "lost" and in fact I ended up in the center again.

The labyrinth is a metaphor for life. So what did it mean for me to have to return to the center (my center)? Is trusting God another way of saying: in fact you don't let go, you must stay connected? That at my center, there is that connection. It is only my ego that insists on having control. That for me to trust I will be returning frequently to my center, to remind myself of my connection to God, that even I am trustworthy at my core.

Walking the labyrinth is my way of staying connected to God. It reminds me that I am accompanied on this journey in life, and that each time I walk into the center I can reconnect with God/my center, and the candles on the altar shed light on that experience.

Genesis 39:1-23; 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:15; Mark 2:1-12**Praying for Healing**

Once I found myself like the man on a stretcher in Mark, greatly in need of healing. Mine was an emotional rather than physical paralysis, caused by an associate who treated me unjustly. Like Joseph, thrown into prison when his master's wife deceitfully betrayed him, I too, felt dishonored, devalued and denied a fair hearing. Years of loyalty and devotion counted for nothing. "Righteous rage" overcame me; I was victim to hurt and disappointment, and harbored profound feelings for revenge. Circumstances did not allow direct confrontation. Where was I to put all that rage? My "lower nature" was in full gear!

"What is this business about turning the other cheek, anyway?" I asked Forster, searching for perspective on my inner chaos. He suggested quietly that it might have something to do with self empowerment, but only if one acts authentically in response. I felt heard and went away thinking "yes," but still "how?"

Shortly thereafter I had a dream. In it I met my persecutor face to face. My storehouse of pent up, revengeful venom came pouring out in a furious verbal attack, wave upon wave. Clearly stunned, he shrank back in horror, withering and speechless, his power over me diminishing by the moment. Reaching for the telephone, in desperation he called out for help, for deliverance, perhaps not so much from me as from a life tormented by boredom and frustration, and lacking in fulfillment. I was witnessing his pain. Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, a tremendous warm wave of compassion flowed over me, and I felt a profound sadness for him. At that moment I awoke from the dream. My body felt light, my heart open, and the burden of anger released from my whole being. No longer victim, I was healed. Now I could get on with my life!

Faith tells me it was God who made that dream possible, and it was God who gave me the grace to remember it.

Psalm 78:1-39; Mark 6:1-13

Clothes, friends, and school assignments were just some of the things I worried about when I was a kid. One day, I addressed these worries to my mom and asked her if I should worry about each of these. After we went over my whole list and she said that I shouldn't worry, I looked up at her all concerned and said, "Well, what will I worry about then?" I have continued this habit as an adult and my worry list has grown to include work, expenses, and even whether or not I will get this meditation devotional written in time. I have used worrying as a crutch to get through the uncertainty of life.

The people in today's Bible verses seem to have also been suffering from this "worry bug." In Psalm 78:1-39, we learn how God provided for his people. He parted seas, made water flow from rocks, and sent manna from heaven. Through all of these accounts, however, the people still continued to worry and question if their needs will be met or not. In Mark 6: 1-13 we are introduced to the people of Nazareth doubting Jesus and his ability to perform miracles even though he did some amazing things while on Earth.

I have been trying to work on my worrying because it only makes me a wound-up ball of stress. I have started to try and find new outlets to work through my anxieties. While walking to and from work each day, I list all the things I am grateful for. Reviewing all the things that God has given me and has made happen, presents hard evidence to me that God will take care of me in the future. I think if the characters in our Bible verses had done a gratitude list, they, too, would have found out the truth about God and His son.

The beginning of Psalm 78 summarizes this concept when it states that if we just look back at our ancestors, we will see the miracles of the Lord. So I urge you to join me in looking back. Look how God has provided and taken care of you and all the people who have come before you. It really puts worrying in its place, and by daily practice, our gratitude lists will let us become immune to the "worry bug."

Psalm 80; Jeremiah 7:1-15; Romans 4:1-12; John 7:14-36

“Let me dwell with you in this place” Jeremiah 7:3

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: . . . ‘Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.’”

Six months ago, my partner Steve and I began participating with nine other FCCB members in a small group we call simply “covenant group.” We meet twice a month for dinner and fellowship. Since we come from many directions, we have been blessed to be able to meet at one central location, the home of Jim Schaal and Sarah Conning. Their house has become the physical and spiritual home of our group.

When we gather, we do activities that in most houses would be considered domestic or mundane: we cook, set the table, and eat together. These activities become special and intimate as we also pray, sing, listen, and share our joys and sorrows. Sometimes the “house” created by our covenant group seems most like “home” to me when we’re just laughing together.

When Steve and I bought our first home last year, we had mixed feelings. On the one hand, we were relieved to have found an affordable home at all. On the other hand, we were disappointed that our dream of living in a spacious house with a yard had faded into the reality of a small apartment. Somehow in the midst of those emotions, I forgot that it doesn’t matter to God whether we own our home or whether our house is large or small. God wants to be able to dwell there with us. And the way we welcome God into our house is the same way Sarah and Jim have welcomed our covenant group to theirs: through hospitality.

Jeremiah says that God can dwell with us when we amend our ways and doings and act justly with one another, when we protect the innocent and care for those in need. It’s common to think of going to church as entering God’s house. But do we realize how much God wants to dwell with us in ours?

**Psalm 119:49-12; Deuteronomy 9:13-27; Hebrews 3:72-79;
John 2:23-3:75**

A New Heaven and a New Earth

Heaven is surely found in the splendor of the starry sky,
Or wherever some ray of light pierces the darkness.

It may be closer still.

Some see it in amethyst and pearl — more often in the smile of a little girl.

Heaven is within us, could we but listen

Not so much to the tunes of our choice.

As to the whisperings of that inner voice.

Heaven's within our neighbor

It's there behind that fence

Or whatever barrier more dense

We've allowed to flourish —

We've even seemed to nourish.

Could we but have the courage to reach out in love to take the risk

To conquer fear

To know

That faith can move the mountains of

Hate

Greed

Despair

And find then the tree of life

Beside the living water

Where understanding flows

And healing reaches all the nations.

Surely then heaven would be found on that NEW EARTH.

Prayer: We pray that the Holy Spirit will move us to see that we are one with all the earth. That as we care for each other and all creation, we will be making a heaven here on earth. (1979)

Psalm 88; Mark 6:47-56

Thinking about “An Altar in the World,” this hymn comes immediately to mind; its lyrics being most appropriate for this time in history and our place in it.

“O God of Earth and Altar”

Text:

Stanza 1: Gilbert K. Chesterton, 1906, alt.

Stanzas 2 & 3: Jane Parker Huber, 1985

O God of earth altar, bow down and hear our cry;
Out earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide;
Take not your thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of pen and voice,
From all the easy speeches that make our hearts rejoice,
From value's profanation, from honor sacrificed,
From sleep and from damnation, deliver us, O Christ!

Awaken us to action and forge us into one,
Defying sect and faction; O God, your will be done!
Oppressive systems snare us; our apathies increase.
Great God, in mercy spare us for justice and for peace!

**Psalms 22, 95; Exodus 9:13-35; 2 Corinthians 4:1-12; Mark 10:32-45;
Exodus 9:13, 35**

Moses felt for his people and did something about it. He was in a favored position and used it to gain advantages beyond his own. There was uncertainty and risk involved.

I am in a favored position, with resources a hundred-fold beyond those of most of the people of our world. My conscience is awakened, but to what degree? I feel compassion, but how do I respond in proper measure? My human-ness needs to be lifted to a higher level toward concrete results in combating evil and helping the downtrodden. There are avenues for doing so. This Lenten season is a good time to work on it.

— 2001 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“The Prodigal Son” and “The Story of the Lost Son” are but two possible titles for this well-known parable. Unfortunately, a title places an emphasis on one part of a story that has rich and varied perspectives. Drawn from the life experience of family dynamics, with which each of us can easily identify, this parable is enriched in community discussion.

Recently I have studied this parable with students, some of different faiths, and everyone has empathized with the plight of the elder son. Why is it that we easily identify with the feelings of the elder son, the one who feels left out and unappreciated? And why is it so difficult to identify with the younger son, the prodigal, who returns home and joyfully received by his father? Perhaps it is harder to admit that we too have been wasteful and that we too have disappointed and created resentment in others. We may not have squandered money and acted disrespectful towards our family (or maybe we have), but the mere fallibility of humanity guarantees that in someone else’s perspective and experience of us, we have been wasteful and inattentive. Once we can admit this, we can begin to receive the full message of this parable...the message that speaks to our relationship with God.

Create this image in your mind — “...while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” In the context of the parable, this turn of events comes as a surprise as we wonder how the father could respond in such a manner. However, when I recognize this image and response as God, my surprise turns to awe. For this is my image of God - waiting, waiting, waiting, and then when we show up on the horizon, wasting no time in embracing us. There are no questions; there is no shaming; there is pure joy!

Can you imagine God celebrating your return home in the fullness of joy exhibited by this father? Try to show up on the horizon and receive God’s embrace.

Exodus 1:6-22; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Mark 8:27-9:1

God Be in My Heart

God be in my heart and in my thinking.

God be in my head and in my understanding.

God be in my eyes and in my looking.

God be in my mouth and in my speaking.

God be in my heart and in my thinking: God is in my heart when I am centered in those emotions that unite me to others, when I am one with the whole through which I live. The Life that manifests itself in my life is eternal and good.

God be in my head: When I pray that God be in my head, I'm asking that the unity of all things in the infinite Life of God shall so saturate my spirit that it will color and clarify all of my understanding and perception.

God be in my eyes: I feel that I often walk through a wondrous day blinded by preoccupation with all sorts of thoughts other than about the people, the places, the things that are the divine presence around me. When God is my eyes, my isolated self expands to include a larger portion of the divine, and I am delighted in sheer being and insight.

God be in my speaking: God is in the speaking of a close group of friends who talk freely and are completely sensitive in response to others. God is in my speaking when my words are other-centered, when they are words of healing, reconciliation, tenderness, compassion, and caring. I pray for more occasions such as this, when friends are smiling and laughing and the togetherness is a healing blessing.

(Alfred J. Starratt)

Prayer: May the God of us all guide and influence everything I say and do, so that my life becomes larger than it is now. May God's healing help me achieve wholeness of self, to be responsible for myself, and to move along and live with tenderness and care and love for my family and friends. Amen.

Psalms 97, 99, 100; Mark 8:1-10

One of the Lectionary Readings for today is Mark 8:1-10. In this story, a great crowd came to hear Jesus preach. After three days, Jesus was concerned because the people hadn't anything to eat. Jesus said "If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance." His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

When I read this story I wonder, as they found seven loaves and a few fish and shared them with the crowd, if others who might have had some bread and fish or some other food thought, "I have a little bit I can share as well," and by the time the baskets went around, not only was there enough for all, but some left over. In a time of scarcity for many, we have an opportunity to share some of what we have with those who are in need. As with this great crowd, we can enjoy what we have more when we share it with others so that everyone has something.

One of the other readings for today reminds us to celebrate our connection to God. Psalm 100 says: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations. "

Remember that no matter how hard the times, we are blessed with great abundance.

Psalm 55; Deuteronomy 11:18-28; Hebrews 5:1-10; John 4:1-26

When we pray, we very often give thanks to God for the many blessings we enjoy in this life. One summer Sunday about twenty years ago, a prayer of thanksgiving was printed in the order of worship and recited in unison by the congregation. I felt that the prayer so well expressed many of the wonderful elements that we experience in our lives, and perhaps sometimes take for granted, that I memorized it.

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

We thank you, God, for the warming sun and
the cooling fog,
For bird songs in the morning and for stars
that sparkle through the night,
For strengthening food and refreshing sleep,
For the discoveries of science
and the heritage of art,
For the ministry of books and for music beyond
the reach of words,
For the care of fathers and mothers and the
happiness of home,
For the sanity of friendship and the madness
of love,
For the wonder of life, for the mystery of
death,
for the promise of the resurrection,
For all your constant care, good Lord,
we
give you thanks.

AMEN

Psalm 69

Rebuilding the Cities?

Psalm 69 is a long prayer of lament. The author cries desperately to God: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” For *her* (let’s expand our imagination for a moment!), these waters are the painful experiences of insult and persecution by her enemies, who have poisoned her, shamed her, and dishonored her without cause. “I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched,” she laments, “My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.” Anger comes next, as she can find no sight of God anywhere. Not only does she call for help, but she also demands the punishment of her enemies. “Do not hide your face from your servant!” she cries to her God.

And then a peculiar thing happens. She suddenly offers God praise and thanksgiving, calling for heaven and earth to magnify God. “God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah,” she writes in hopeful exaltation. Did God finally come through for her?

As I ponder what might have happened in between the psalmist’s lament and her praise of thanksgiving, my attention focuses back on the severity of her cries and the images that she uses. She is drowning, sinking. The world around her is crashing down. I needn’t go far to find similar images of suffering today, for a devastating earthquake hit Haiti just recently and 50,000 are supposedly dead. Their cities have literally crumbled beneath their feet. I can only imagine the cries that can be heard amidst the rubble.

Will God rebuild their cities, just as the psalmist has promised? Where is God in the meantime? “Deep suffering makes theologians of us all,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor. Certainly this is true because it prompts us to feel and think deeply about the meaning of our lives. But it is also true because in suffering, we often glimpse the very heart of God. God does not condone or necessitate this suffering, but He knows it. And feels it. This is one of deep meanings of the Incarnation: God, as Christ, is intimate with human suffering. We cannot know if the cities will be rebuilt during our lifetime, but we know that in their collapse, *God is there with us*. Perhaps this is why the psalmist gave her praise and thanksgiving, even in the face of her lament. Amen.

Exodus 7:8-24; 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6; Mark 10:1-16**God's Miracles**

In the Exodus passage, God instructs Moses and Aaron to work a miracle before the Pharaoh to try and persuade him to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Moses and Aaron go to the Pharaoh and do as God has instructed them. Aaron throws his rod down and it turns into a serpent. The Pharaoh summons his wise men and magicians, who are able to duplicate this feat, turning their rods into serpents. Then Aaron's rod swallows up their rods! But the Pharaoh is not convinced.

What intrigues me about this story is how Pharaoh's magicians can match some pretty incredible feats. It reminds me of all that we in our high-tech society have been able to accomplish. Pretty amazing! It's easy to think that we have all the power and control we need to run our lives and our world. But ultimately, God's power transcends all that we know. What a relief to be able to hand our struggles over to God!

Last week, I was driving in my car at lunchtime, thinking about a meeting I was going to have to run that afternoon at work. I wasn't sure if I'd prepared adequately, and feared the meeting would be chaotic and filled with conflict. So I asked God to bless our coming together and to guide us in working productively together. And God worked a miracle. The meeting flowed, we worked cooperatively and productively, and the boss was delighted.

Prayer: God, help us remember to bring our challenges to you when we worry over our inability to control events.

Psalms 102, 108; Mark 9:14-29

“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!” Mark 9:24b

Darkness allows us to appreciate the light. Winter’s cold helps us enjoy the warmth of summer. Bouts of sickness help us appreciate good health. The cry of the demon-possessed child’s father reminds us that belief and unbelief are similarly opposite, each experience helping us understand the other: Dark clouds of doubt are driven away by brilliant experiences of faith.

Some Christian traditions suggest “conversion” will lead to a life of seamless, never-faltering faith. We in the progressive wing of Christianity, however, admit to lapses, ups and downs, backsliding and struggle. Sometimes, faith and doubt co-exist, as they did for the father in Mark’s gospel.

Those same Christian traditions touting the lasting benefits of conversion also tend to suggest that God rewards faith; doubt is a sign of weakness, sin. From the Taizé Community in France comes a reassurance that this is not God’s way:

Is faith then a precondition for receiving the gift of God? If that were true, then my life, my happiness and my salvation would depend in the final analysis on me. Everything would be decided by my acceptance or my refusal. This idea does not correspond to what the Bible understands by faith. Faith is not a means we make use of in order to obtain something. It is a much humbler reality, a simple trusting that is always astonished: although I have done nothing to deserve it, God brings me back to friendship with him.

Thank *God* my life, happiness and salvation do not depend on me! Instead, our loving God is always there, always drawing me into the divine embrace. I’ll be in a spiritual funk, doubting and hurting and doubting...and something prompts me to look toward the sky, where I see rays of light shining through the clouds, or that wonderful shimmer on the far edges of the clouds, to help me remember God’s beauty and glory. Or a call will come in from someone in a much more desperate state than mine, who will inspire me to renewed faith through his firm and simple belief. Or I will hear a part of a symphony, or a touching story on NPR, or I’ll catch sight of an early-emerging daffodil. Through these small things, seemingly randomly coming into my life, I can cry out with the troubled child’s father, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:16-21**God Bless America**

Psalm 126 is one of a collection of Psalms sometimes referred to as community laments. They may have been recited as a response to a national defeat or humiliation. They often seek to remind both God and the people of God's favor towards Israel in times past; and they usually ask God to restore God's former blessings. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord," the Psalmist pleads.

It's interesting to apply Psalm 126 to modern-day America. Clearly, as a people, we have seen better days, days when God seemed to be on our side. Not that things were perfect; but most of us can remember times when the economy was relatively stable, when college graduates could look forward meaningful employment, and when America was the envy of the nations.

Not so any more. The economy would appear to be failing, our rates of unemployment are skyrocketing, and it's often hard to find God's presence in our national affairs. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord," the Psalmist cries, then tears and weeping will be turned into songs of joy. I don't think so. It is not so much our fortunes that we need to be restored in modern-day America. We're still a nation of great abundance. The tragedy of our current circumstances is a lack of soul, it seem to me. Restore our soul, O Lord, I would pray. Restore our sense of connection to our communities and with the whole of God's creation. Only then will we find solutions, working with God, that will turn swelling oceans of tears into heavenly choruses of joy. Thy kingdom come.

Psalm 73:1-9; Jeremiah 31:27-34; Romans 11:25-36; John 11:28-44

Even though we rarely recognize it, isn't the real devil in our lives uncertainty? Think of all the things we fret about, even dread, when really the concern is not bad things so much as what precisely is going to happen — like: How hard will it rain this afternoon? Will the client like our presentation tomorrow? Has the dog made a mess on the rug? Will Honey be very mad at me when I get home late?

Worry, worry, worry.

But face it: Honey's been cross before, we've all been rained on lots of times, the rug can stand a little discoloration, and clients never like anything.

Still, we're uneasy. Uncertainty undermines us. Otherwise, there'd be no worry. Because then we'd know what we had to contend with, and we'd handle it. (Well, most of the time.)

Now, ever wondered whether Jesus Christ really arose? Some people have. Even Christians.

Whether we have or haven't, though, here comes that uncertainty again. Because even with resurrection, what are we going to experience? What will hereafter be like — how hot will it be, for instance? How big will our wings be? Does Jesus understand English? Will we be on cloud nine? (Or cloud ten?) Will God like us?

Oh, the uncertainty.

But surely there's something better. And this time of year always seems the best time to find it — the days are getting longer, the weather will start warming up soon, there's glorious music in the air. It makes you feel like whistling. And maybe you sometimes find yourself whispering: "It doesn't matter exactly what it's going to be like; it's got to be good." Good — really another word for God, I think. It's sometimes spelled F-A-I-T-H, too.

Anyway, I'm certain of one thing — we've got to get rid of uncertainty.

Psalms 121, 122, 123; Mark 9:42-50

The large picture window in our home is an *altar in the world* for me. Each night, I watch the sun set as it appears to be on its magnificent journey. In the fall, the sun goes down behind the City. Last night I watched it set in the middle of the Golden Gate as if lying down to rest in the cradle of the golden spans. Celestial rays shown out of a cluster of puffy purple clouds. As I watched, brilliant fiery light appeared through small wholes in the clouds, and soon the radiant light silhouetted the top edges of the clouds. The show went on for some time, changing dramatically as each moment passed. I noticed my next-door neighbor talking on the phone in her kitchen, missing this whole magical display. I waved and pointed her towards the sunset, wanting so much to share this sacred moment of God's glory. It is such a blessing to be able to stop, witness and be truly present and grateful for the colorful waning of the light in the rhythm of the day.

I invite you, during your day, whether stuck in traffic, walking to your office or any other time, to take a moment to be fully present to the beauty that surrounds you--the sky, the hills, a tree or flower. God's creation is a sacred altar, inviting us into reverent worship.

Sunset

Slowly the west reaches for clothes of new colors
 which it passes to a row of ancient trees?
 You look, and soon these two worlds leave you
 One part climbs toward heaven, one sinks to earth

leaving you, not really belonging to either,
 not so hopelessly dark as that house that is silent,
 not so unswervingly given to the eternal as that thing
 that turns to a star each night and climbs-

leaving you (it is impossible to untangle the threads)
 your own life, timid and standing high and growing,
 so that, sometimes blocked in, sometimes reaching out.
 One moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

**Psalms 43, 149, 31, 143; Deuteronomy 11:18-28; Hebrews 5:1-10;
John 4:1-26**

There are many ways to praise the Lord. The spirit of God appears in different guises. We learn to recognize God's love as it surprises us, if we are open, taking time for awareness and acceptance.

After reading the lectionary passages, I began to wonder how the spirit of God is made manifest. I was working on an afghan, sewing together those endless squares you've seen me weave during meetings. Maybe Browne Barr won't mind my telling a story the way I remember it. During the 1960s we had the Reconciliation Committee, which I chaired for a while. Once I asked Browne if it "bugged" him to see me weaving those squares. He responded. "No, except that I never see the finished product." So I sewed 300 of them together for an afghan. He called it his reconciliation blanket.

The spirit of God surrounds us with loving warmth and comes in simple, unexpected ways; we take it for granted without identifying it, unless our hearts take time to receive it. I am equating something everyday, like a pieced quilt or a hand-made afghan, with the love of God, an unlikely comparison. But think of the care that goes into the handiwork, the love expressed, the warmth provided, and the joy which surrounds the recipient — the newly married, the infant, the dear friend — as well as the giver.

Thanks be to God, for his love endures forever.

— 1995 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 131; Mark 10:17-31

These verses prompted me to reflect on the place and value of humility in our lives and our world. As the Psalmist proclaims “O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty.” Where is the value in being humble? Sounds nice, but after all, who ever got ahead in this life by being humble? Indeed, the notion of being humble seems so counterintuitive and runs contrary to everything we are told is important in this life — success, status and the like. Is it a strength or a manifestation of weakness? Our tradition, together with many other religious and philosophical traditions, teaches us that the act — or, perhaps better, the attitude — of being humble is a virtue. Why? These verses suggest the answer: this is the path to become closer to God.

Harder to answer, I think, is how one finds a way to be truly humble when we live in a world that constantly pulls us in the opposite direction. One way, I think, is presented in those moments when we are truly challenged in our lives. For some, it may be the financial upheaval of the past few years; for others, it may be a personal struggle or event. However the moment arrives, it gives us a peek at the possibility of humility. I am struck by the irony of this - that being humbled can lead to humility and a greater closeness to God.

I am grateful for this place — FCCB — a safe place to work on practicing humility in community, and becoming closer to God.

Psalm 69:1-38; Exodus 1:6-22; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; Mark 8:27-9:1

When I first moved from Richmond to Antioch, it was with trepidation that I left, as my community was here. Leaving the community of FCCB was difficult, as many at the church were extended family to me. There were those that I had known all my adult life, but it became necessary for me to move to where I could receive care from others.

I have given up my driver's license and it became necessary for me to use public transit. I knew no one in Antioch, not even the clerks in the stores, but what I began experiencing awakened my conscience to the kindnesses that even strangers can make in a person's life. Everyone was gracious in their offers of assistance from help in the stores; to transportation. Every trip away from home, someone offered help.

Though I cannot physically return the kindnesses that people have done for me, perhaps my limitations will cause those who have helped me, to continue to see the needs of others, and I will continually offer them my blessings.

— 2001 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalms 137, 144; Mark 10:46-52

People build altars in the world to honor the “thin places” where we feel the sacred close at hand. While some of my sacred places are awe-inspiring vistas from Pt. Reyes, Mt. Tamalpais or Mt. Diablo; some of my everyday “altars” include the farmers’ market, my garden, and even my kitchen. Mary Oliver celebrates the wonder of ordinary life in her poem:

Mindful

Every day I see or I hear something that more or less	Nor am I talking about the exceptional, the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant—
kills me with delight that leaves me like a needle	but of the ordinary, the common, the very drab, the daily presentations. Oh, good scholar,
in the haystack of light. It is what I was born for— to look, to listen	I say to myself, how can you help but grow wise with such teachings
to lose myself inside this soft world— to instruct myself over and over	as these— the untrimmable light of the world the ocean’s shine,
in joy, and acclamation.	the prayers that are made out of grass?

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40

I spent the spring and summer of 1966 as a sophomore at the Stanford-in-Italy campus in beautiful Florence, soaking up the art, architecture, history, culture, and cuisine of that astonishing city. That Palm Sunday I spent hours in its cathedral, “Il Duomo,” surrounded by a stream of masses held in each of its many naves, smelling the intoxicating aroma of incense and inundated by wave after wave of the peeling of the bells of Giotto’s Tower. It was there, on that sun-washed day while secluded in the subdued light of the cathedral that I first thought of the notes to what eventually became a one-movement piano concerto inspired by Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

It consisted of two musical themes. The first was filled with the sounds of bells as it sought to capture the exhilaration of the jubilant crowds running, dancing, and laying palms to celebrate the arrival of Jesus and slow procession through the streets of the Holy City as their long-awaited King. The second was somber and introspective, reflecting what I imagined might well have been His own understanding of what his entry into Jerusalem really meant, with the cross laying ahead in just five days.

As I developed the piece, these two themes flowed and intermingled while keeping their unique identities, for they represented what, even then, I intuited to be the terrifying truth of our religious life: we commit to being on the right side of justice as innocent children of God and yet all too often we are not only betrayed by—but we too also betray—that justice and fall far from innocence. Jesus must somehow have known that the only answer to this universal human dilemma would be a radical transformation of our nature through God’s Easter miracle, offered to us by our baptism into Christ, through the Lord’s Supper, and daily through grace by faith.

Thank God Jesus was not made the new political King of Israel but instead the lamb of God whose wondrous life, death and Resurrection is our true hope. “O give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good. God’s steadfast love endures for ever!”

Psalm 51; Mark 11:12-25

Today's lectionary verses offer insight into the precursors and consequences of faith in God. In Psalm 51, the writer David comes to God with a broken spirit, despairing of his weaknesses and transgressions, and asks God to restore him to wholeness: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.... Restore to me the joy of your salvation." David knows beyond any doubt that God will be merciful to him: "a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." Though wracked with the bitter pain of guilt and remorse – or perhaps because of it – David has complete faith that God can and will heal his soul. This scripture demonstrates that when one gives up the illusion of self-empowerment and recognizes the weakness and imperfections shared by all human beings, then one becomes most receptive to divine love and guidance.

In the verses from Mark, Jesus speaks of the power of absolute faith in God, a power strong enough to move mountains: "Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will happen, it will be done for you." Here Jesus is not necessarily referring to the removal of physical mountains ; I believe that Jesus is telling us that when we sincerely put our faith in God, then God can remove the anguish and doubt that can burden our souls with the weight of mountains, as David was burdened when he put himself wholly into God's hands.

As we enter this Holy Week, let us be thankful for Jesus' sacrifice of himself on our behalf, an everlasting gift that enables us to receive God's forgiveness and healing with no preconditions other than simply having faith in God's power and mercy, and no payment other than placing our broken spirits into God's loving hands.

Genesis 41:1-13; 1 Corinthians 4:1-7; Mark 2:23-3:6**Feast or Famine? Servants and Stewards?**

Much is expected/required of us as faithful Christian believers. Thought provoking messages from these passages test our understanding. Clarity comes in developing deeper and deeper commitment to God's intention for our lives. Our attitude toward storing up possessions "against a rainy day" (famine or drought) seems prudent and responsible. The stewardship of these possessions — all from God — is the challenge. Surely waste is the opposite from storing up and not God's intention. When Pharaoh sought Joseph from prison to advise him on interpreting his troubling dreams, Joseph answered first by saying, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." The seven plentiful years and the seven lean years in Pharaoh's dream were one message so, mindful of this, it was determined to manage (steward) the plenty to stretch over the lean. The grain was not stored up to spoil, and the people were saved from starving.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "we should be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

These truths serve to guide us to decisions which reflect compassion, which engage us as servants and as stewards.

My prayer for this year of great decisions, of the rebuilding and strengthening of the temple, will see us as the enabling people of the mission — strong and free to grow in the spirit. Amen.

— 1992 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

Psalm 119:97-120; Jeremiah 8:18-9:6; Romans 5:1-11; John 8:12-20

The Jeremiah passage can be answered in a post-temple way: He was viewing things after the Babylonians had destroyed the Jerusalem temple and the leaders of the country had been exiled. We can take from this the idea that the “House of the Spirit” was not a place at all, but rather was within each of us. We are not left alone by God to deal with problems, but He will provide us with the resources we need. (In the case of the Jews, the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and the Jews were returned to Israel a few decades later.)

The Gospel reading from John was a situation in which Jesus was confronted by some Pharisees. In this case, Jesus took the occasion to claim that they didn’t really understand God, that Jesus was from God and the messenger of God. Once again, we are advised to accept God’s word for our actions, and not to depend on a building, in this case, Herod’s Temple, for our understanding.

Finally, Paul’s letter to the Romans is explicit in making the case that we cannot do anything to gain God’s favor. God comes to us first, and then we respond to Him in faith. In all cases, the “House of the Spirit” is within each of us and is not a physical structure. We surely shouldn’t act differently when we are in secret or isolated from others than we would when in public. We should be in God’s hands at all times.

Psalm 102; Mark 14:12-25

The Beauty of Shyness

There is something beautiful about shyness, even though in our culture shyness is not considered a virtue. On the contrary, we are encouraged to be direct, look people straight in the eyes, tell them what is on our minds, and share our stories without a blush.

But this unflinching, soul-baring, confessional attitude quickly becomes boring. It is like trees without shadows. Shy people have long shadows, where they keep much of their beauty hidden from intruders' eyes. Shy people remind us of the mystery of life that cannot be simply explained or expressed. They invite us to reverent and respectful friendships and to a wordless being together in love.

Henri Nouwen, "Bread for the Journey — A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith"
(1997) HarperSanFrancisco

**Psalms 22, 148, 105, 130; Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22 or
Genesis 22:1-14, 1 Peter 1:10-20; John 13:36-38 or 19:38-42**

Addressing God in one of his journals, Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, “You ask me a question that is so simple I do not even understand the question.” This sentence has continued to engage me since I first encountered it 13 years ago. What is God’s question? What question could be so simple that it evades comprehension? Who is the God that asks the question? I sometimes imagine this God as the still small voice that spoke to Elijah: at other times, as a gently smiling peasant woman with outstretched hands. Both the still small voice and the peasant woman represent something I have lost: something that has to do with simplicity, with clarity, and with singleness of heart.

Lent is the time when we enter the wilderness to learn that we have been in the wilderness for oh, so long. We have been blown about by the winds of our myriad activities, burned by the fires of our preoccupations. But the Lord is not in the winds, and the Lord is not in the fires. The Lord is in the still small voice and the smile of a peasant woman. Hush now, so that you can hear the whisper. Silence holds the answers to simple questions.

— 1995 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

**Acts 10:34-43 or Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10**

A poet wrote, “Do something every day that does not compute. Practice resurrection.”

Many things can be said about the resurrection, but one thing is for sure: it does not compute. It does not make sense to our literal, factual minds. It does not make sense that, after the crucifixion, Jesus would appear to his disciples. It does not make sense that the infinite God would reach down to Mary, sobbing outside the tomb, and breathe into her comfort and hope. The resurrection does not compute. The advice to “trust in God” does not compute. It does not make sense that we should expect anything but despair to rise from the ashes of our grief, of our shattered plans, of our broken hearts. It does not make sense that we should trust in the intangible reality of the Holy when the tangible benefits of technology and money and reputation are so readily apparent.

But faith is not concerned with the rational. It is also not concerned with the irrational. Rather, it is non-rational and is wholly a matter of the heart. So in the practice of our faith, we must also find a way to practice the resurrection, not to disparage the intellect, but to do something that stuns the intellect, that does not compute. Walk in the rain, and sing. Dive into the ocean, even if you know it is cold. Give a homeless person a meal. Give your spouse a small gift and a big hug even if it's not Valentine's Day or her birthday or Father's Day and even if you have been married for 12 or 20 or 40 years. Dance in the living room. Take the poet's advice.

Allow the resurrection in. Allow the resurrection to be shared. Practice faith.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12**Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front**

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay.
 Want more of everything made.
 Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery any more.
 Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something they will call you.
 When they want you to die for profit they will let you know.
 So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.
 Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all that you have and be poor.
 Love someone who does not deserve it.
 Denounce the government and embrace the flag.
 Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.
 Give your approval to all you cannot understand.
 Praise ignorance,
 for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.
 Ask the questions that have no answers.
 Invest in the millennium.
 Plant sequoias.
 Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,
 that you will not live to harvest.
 Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold.
 Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.
 Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees
 every thousand years.
 Listen to carrion--put your ear close,
 and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.
 Expect the end of the world.
 Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.
 Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.
 So long as women do not go cheap for power,
 please women more than men.
 Ask yourself: Will this satisfy a woman satisfied to bear a child?
 Will this disturb the sleep of a woman near to giving birth?
 Go with your love to the fields.
 Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head in her lap.

Swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and politicians can predict the motions
of your mind, lose it.
Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go.
Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

— Wendell Berry

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