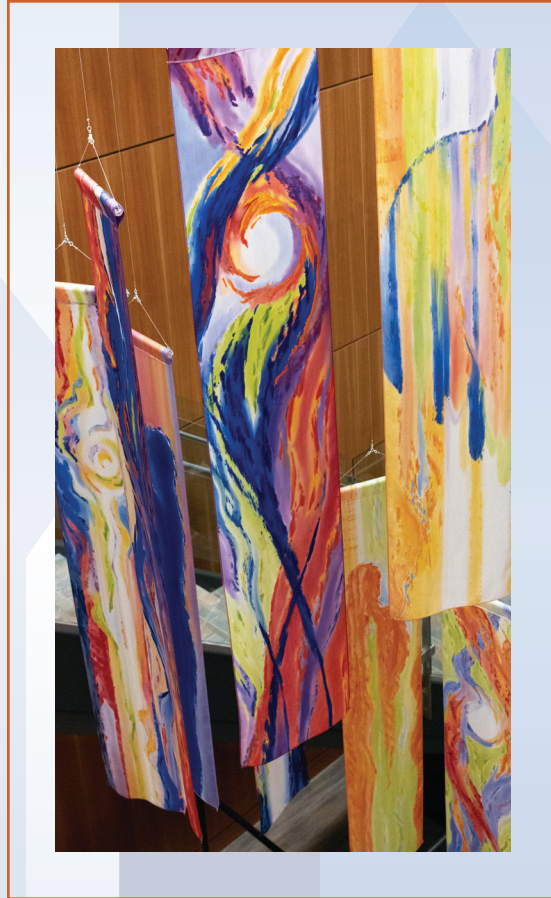




NEW BRUNSWICK
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Think Critically • Act Justly • Lead Faithfully



EARTH MEETS HEAVEN:
A JOURNEY TO THE
CROSS & TOMB

DAILY DEVOTIONALS FOR LENT AND EASTER
FEBRUARY 22 - APRIL 9, 2023

Foreword

Dear Community and Friends of New Brunswick Theological Seminary,

Grace and peace to you in the love of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit!

Time is both a gift and a calling. As a calling, time feels like in short supply as we face the demands of life. Thus, we have to make choices on how to use the precious 24 hours we have to rest, recreate, work, heal, protest, pray, worship, eat. Time is also a gift. God our creator gave us day and night, “and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Genesis 1:14b) as sacred markers of when to rise up and lie down, when to plant and when to harvest. As gift, time helps to order our lives even when it seems like our life and the world around us seems disordered.

Our celebration and observance of the liturgical calendar from the First Sunday of Advent to Christ the King Sunday finds its foundation in the Jewish observances of the sacred feasts (e.g. Unleavened Bread, Weeks, etc.). Early Christian communities anchored their worship, pilgrimages, and devotional lives to the life/baptism, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, finding in the Jewish liturgies the similar, constitutive emphasis on the pattern of God’s mighty acts and presence in creation, exodus, and exile. Thus, our Judeo Christian faith shares in recounting God’s covenantal works, thereby inspiring God’s people to worship, to pray, to offer our lives as offerings to God for God’s good purposes in the world.

This devotional booklet has been sponsored by the Student Society of Inquiry and Ministry (SSIM), the student leadership of New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The SSIM, in partnership with the Office of Student Affairs, invited current members, faculty, and staff to contribute a reflection or a prayer based on one of the Scripture lectionary texts for that designated day of the Lenten calendar, Year A. The cover photo is of the “Jacob’s Ladder” (Genesis 28:10–17) installation at the foyer of our Seminary administration building. It nicely depicts the theme of this devotional booklet – Earth and Heaven meeting in God’s generous love.

May you, your loved ones, and communities be blessed by these daily devotionals so that you may be a blessing to many. Let us journey together to the cross where our Savior was crucified for the life of the world, into the solitude of holy Saturday’s tomb, from which emerged in resurrection power the Holy One whom the women disciples first encountered and offered the first testimony of Jesus’ rising.

In Christ our joy and justice,



The Rev. Dr. Neal D. Presa

*Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach
Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

February 22, 2023

Ash Wednesday

How is Ash Wednesday like an annual physical?

Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten Season, does for my spiritual health what an annual physical does for my physical health. When I stand on the scale and get my blood work drawn, I know I am about to face the truth. I am a finite creature who sometimes makes choices that harm more than help my chances at longevity. My desire to make those better choices is renewed by the truth discovered upon examination. Attention to physical health is refocused and renewed.

Annually, I attend a service where Genesis 3:19 (NRSV) “...you are dust, and to dust, you shall return” is repeated while ashes are distributed on the foreheads of the penitent in the sign of the cross. This is a solemn time. There is no ambiguity here; the message is clear. We are entering a season of high alertness to the reality of God’s work in us, our total dependence on our Creator to Sustain us, and the price that Jesus paid for our Salvation. We are moved to make choices based on these truths as we examine them. Attention to our spiritual health is refocused and renewed.

As you prepare for this Lenten Season, scripture passages from the Common Revised Lectionary can guide you in choosing the Lenten practices that resonate with you. I encourage you to read them and set your intentions for your observance of Lent 2023.

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/daily.php?year=A>

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, you see into the secret places of our hearts, where we mourn our sins. As we turn again to your grace, receive our prayers.*

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*Patricia Gilmer-Van Dorp is a student
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Thursday, February 23, 2023

Psalm 51

The Psalmist begins this text with these words: “Have mercy on me, O God according your steadfast love.” (Psalm 51:1) At the core of who God is, is that God is love and all that God is and all that God does is because of love. The Psalmist calls upon the Lord to have mercy not because of some meritorious entitlement, but rests this petition on the sole basis of God’s love. But let’s underscore this love: it is steadfast, it can be counted upon, it is the kind of love that is there when you wake up, it is there when you lie down, it is a remarkable love that pursues, it is the kind of love that keeps being merciful, and forgiving, and which abides.

Now, such a love is not to be taken for granted. We can fall into the trap that because that love is steadfast, constant, and consistent, that somehow we can live recklessly and unjustly. By no means! Such love is desiring and deserving of love, of commitment, of joyous delight, of wanting to live in and live with the presence of this God who is love. The Psalmist knows what the love of God and the God of love desires: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.” (Psalm 51:17)

Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. In Your Name, I pray. Amen.

Friday, February 24, 2023

Romans 1:8-17 and Psalm 51

Sometimes my eye is caught by a beautiful design on a wall in our home. It happens when the hallway is dark, but a light shines brightly in our room. You see, there is a mosaic of broken pieces of mirror which catch the light and reflect it into the darkness – creating beauty. If those shards of glass were left in their natural state; in a bin, broken and destined to be discarded, they could not do this. It is by being picked up by an artist, arranged together in a work of creation, and pointed to the source of light that something beautiful pierces the darkness.

God is creating something beautiful, and it happens by faith. A faith that saves through the gospel of Jesus Christ. A faith that not only picks us up from a pit of despair and washes us thoroughly from our iniquity, but a faith that reorients our life toward God and impacts those around us. As we are cleansed from sin, are collected with others, and reflect God's light, our faith shines into the world.

Let us not be ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, and creates works of beauty.

Romans 1:8, 16-17 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Prayer

Gracious God, You are beautiful in Jesus Christ, Your Son, the Lord and Savior of us all. Enable us to cling to the Gospel, Your power unto salvation, so that we may bear witness to and do good works that exhibit Your beauty to all the world. Amen.

*Dirk Geiser is a student
in the Doctor of Ministry program*

Saturday, February 25, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-12

Intermittent fasting is popular these days. People refrain from eating for 12, 14, 16 or more hours before they eat in hopes of losing weight. Growing up, we fasted at church retreats and during that time we were supposed to pray and read scripture, not just binge watch Netflix or go shopping. Isaiah describes a lot of “hangry” people.

Fasting is nothing new. God knew we needed a reset. But any type of fasting that only focuses on ourselves is not the kind that honors the Lord. Fasting, just as any spiritual discipline, should have an outward component. Yes, during a spiritual fast, we should be contemplative and prayerful, but we cannot call ourselves people of faith and not address the needs around us. Spiritual fasting is cleansing. It is an opportunity to pour out ourselves from all that we take in from the world. We fill our closets and storage units with possessions; we ingest hurts and wounds. When we stop focusing on our own accumulation, or pointing our fingers at what others are doing or not doing, when we cease and desist our own malicious talk, then we can be filled with the light of Christ and shine that light where there is oppression, indignity and hunger.

Prayer

Lord, empty me of the pain and hurt I've taken in. Let me cast off my burdens. Remove from me any insecurity, jealousy and fear. Empty me and fill me up again with your light. Holy Spirit dwell within me so that where I go, people will know that I am a person of the light. Amen.

Sunday, February 26, 2023

First Sunday in Lent
Psalm 32

Selah is a necessary and desired instruction. As a cue to the musician, cantor, and gathered assembly, *Selah* was an indication for all persons to “hush,” to “shhh”... stay silence. Can you hear a pin drop? Shhh. What do you do in the hushed silence? You reflect. You meditate. You receive the words just read or sung. We find this after Psalm 32:4, after 32:5, and after 32:7. The first *Selah* follows a day and night of groaning when confronted with the heart’s brokenness, exhausted from the reality of having broken the heart of God. The second *Selah* follows confession of sin and confronting the sheer mercy and love of God. The third *Selah* follows a re-affirmation and realization of God’s enduring strength and protection. From the third *Selah*, the text completes in the succeeding four verses towards a crescendo of delighting in the joy of God.

Dear one, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. *Selah*.

Prayer

God, You know my inward parts. You know us more than we know ourselves. You know that we are mortal, broken, who have sinned against You, against one another, against ourselves. Thank You for Your unending and unfailing love. Enable us to rejoice in You, and in Your sure and certain promises. Give me time to pause, and to reflect upon You and Your goodness, and then to teach others to do the same. Amen.

Monday, February 27, 2023

Hebrews 2:10-18

Those of you who have a sibling, or who have more than one child or grandchild know can relate to this: siblings may grow up in the same household, have the same parent(s), but their distinctive personalities, likes and dislikes show them to be their own individual selves; sometimes you and they may wonder if they were mixed up at birth. My wife and I still marvel that our sons, who are a mere 18 months apart, invariably will choose opposite things: our eldest prefers rice, our youngest opts for noodles; our eldest played the trumpet, our youngest chose the clarinet. If only they chose the same thing, they could have borrowed from each other, or we could have ordered the same menu item. And it may end up that one son will be attending college in the East coast United States and the other in the West coast.

This text from Hebrews reminds us of the same-ness and the differentiation when it comes to Jesus Christ, and who we are in Him. The writer of the book of Hebrews asserts that we share the same heavenly Father (2:11), and therefore Jesus Christ calls us His siblings. Jesus became flesh and blood, as do we (2:14), so that He may deliver us from death. He is connected to our humanity so deeply, “in every respect” (2:17b) as He demonstrated being “a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God.” (2:17c) Here’s the key: “to make a sacrifice of atonement.” Or stated more plainly... to be “at-one-ment.” To be one with us. Verse 18 shows us what His being one with us looks like: He is able to help us when we are tested. Only the Divine Sibling, our Divine Sibling, our Holy Brother who is unlike no other. Thanks be to Jesus!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, our faithful and merciful Brother, Savior, the Son of God. Thank you for delivering us from the power of death and evil. Thank you for being one with us. Thank you for being with and being in the suffering of the world, and for helping us when we are tested and pressed on every side. In Your Name, we give You thanks. Amen.

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Genesis 4:1-16

Sandy yelled at her mother, “You always agree with Sarah, and you never agree with me!” as she ran into her bedroom. She slammed the door, grabbed her prayer journal, and began writing the following words, “Dear God, My mom favors my sister, and I am becoming resentful!”...

The biblical story of Cain and Abel illustrates the true reality of sibling rivalry. Sandy, like Cain, viewed herself as less valued, and unimportant, and became resentful toward her sibling Sarah based on the assumption that she was less favored. The emotion of resentment is often the negative result of a competition or comparison. Resentment produces feelings of jealousy, anger, and bitterness. It leads to conflict and the disruption of healthy relationships. It can be expressed by family members within the family unit and by individuals in a communal setting such as our local church communities and the workplace.

The story of Cain and Abel offers the opportunity for us to grow in our faith regarding our sense of value and creativity. God gave each person a unique talent and gift to be shared with the world, but unfortunately, Cain fell into the temptation of competition and comparison and did not recognize his power as being fearfully and wonderfully made by the creator.

On this 7th day of Lent, let us seek to affirm ourselves as being uniquely made in the image and likeness of God. Let us show love towards our Christian siblings by accepting our unique talents. Amen.

5-10 Minute Reflection:

Carve out 5-10 minutes of your day to reflect on your individuality and gifts. On a blank sheet of paper, write down five or more positive things about yourself that make you fearfully and wonderfully made.

Begin your list with the following sentence, “Today, I will affirm that I am...”

*Kia L. Inman is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Matthew 18:10-14

Life in a me-centered world can make it difficult to celebrate the joys and successes of others. On social media, in our churches, and in our families, there is a socially sanctioned, commonly accepted air of competition. We are told it is good, desirable even, to push ourselves to exceed the accomplishments, out-do the achievements, and out-pace the goals and lives of our competitors. As I write this, it is NFL Playoff season, a season of rooting for one's team and booing the competition. When our team falls out of the running, we lick our wounds and hope that next year will be better. We find it difficult to congratulate our friends who rooted for the "other guys."

But, in the Kingdom of God such things do not exist. Competition is replaced with compassion, rivalry is replaced with reconciliation. God's rejoicing in the one found sheep does not ignore the safety of the other ninety-nine, rather God invites us in to celebrate the return of the one who was lost but now is found. In our world of rivalry and competition, we would do well to remember that as Christ's church we are not in competition, but in collaboration and cooperation with God, and one another.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank You that You equally love us all, that You count us worthy of Your love and attention, that we are not in competition for Your love because we are all equal in Your sight. May we love our neighbors and strangers, as we have been loved by You. Amen.

*Arlene Romaine is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Thursday, March 2, 2023

Psalm 121

From east, and west, north, and south, God's people sojourned through difficult terrain. With the household in tow, a family's pilgrimage culminated in the final meters through the Kidron Valley, as it slopes down and then slowly upward. The miles of the journey roused a sense of excitement, anticipation, relief, and jubilation at the site of the City of David, of Zion, the shimmering top of the Temple, and vast expanse of the walls, the mighty gates, the majestic doors. This ancient city, the meeting place of earth and heaven, the people and the God of the covenant. Here was the rendezvous with the Almighty.

With all of the battles, the wars, the imperial intrigue, tribal infighting, the pilgrim beholds the appearance of the great city of Jerusalem and cannot help but proclaim: "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2) This Psalm belongs to group of 15 psalms from chapters 120 through 134 called the "Songs of Ascents" – praises to be sung as the traveler emerged from the valley and upwards towards the Holy City, a sacramental and spiritual journey of walking towards God – the One who is our help, our keeper (121:5a), our shade (v. 5b), the One who watches our coming and going (v. 8).

Beloved, may we live in the rough and tumble of this world, where the upward call of God is lived in the outward orientation of our work, grounded in the inward work of the Spirit upon our hearts. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Lord, who made heaven and earth, You are the One who neither slumbers nor sleeps. Establish our feet and our lives on Your truth, on Your love. Keep us from all evil, keep our lives secure in You. Abide with us at sunrise, in the day, and at sunset, for to You we look, to You we turn, to You we come. Amen.

Friday, March 3, 2023

Romans 3:21-31

When you hear: "God is good"
You intuitively know to say: "All the time"
If I say: "All the time"
You know to say: "God is good"

It's similar when we say: "The Lord be with you"
You know to say: "And also with you."

At the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches last September in Germany, there was a song whose leader/congregation went like this:

Leader: "All are welcome"
Congregation: "All means all"
Leader: "All means all"
Congregation: "All are welcome"

Romans 3:21-31 puts into theological language the way the Apostle Paul communicates things of what we are saying here. The Apostle writes of the comprehensiveness of human brokenness: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:23) All means all. Every peoples, tribe, language, socioeconomic, racial ethnicity, gender, age, political perspective. All means all. Then he directs our attention to the comprehensive application of God's justifying gift of faith in Jesus Christ, through the law of faith. It's a gift for both Jews and Gentiles because our common humanity, all of us, is in the same God of the covenant.

So, who is loved? All. Who is saved? All. Who are welcome? All.
All means all.

Prayer

As far as the east is from the west, so is Your expansive love, O God, who made heaven and earth and all that are there. Thank You, gracious God, for your generous and deep love for us and for Your whole creation. May we testify of Your wide love in Jesus Christ, sharing it to all, as You gave Your all in Christ for us and for the life of the world. Amen.

Saturday, March 4, 2023

Luke 7:1-10

Power has the ability to do things. Authority has the capacity to make power happen. As a force for good, power allied with authority can emancipate enslaved people, forgive hundreds of millions in student loans, or order non-compliant companies to provide fair wages and good working conditions for their employees. As a force for bad, power allied with authority can brutally murder a young adult person of color under the guise of community policing, enslave people, keep in place policies and practices that benefit and advantage the wealthy and well-connected at the expense of the impoverished, disenfranchised, and neglected in society.

In Luke 7, the centurion, a visible representation and embodiment of the power and authority of Roman occupiers, of the imperial imprimatur, was being tutored in the limits of power and authority. One of the things that power and authority cannot do is heal. It can provide access to medicines, medical technology, and physicians, but power and authority in and of itself cannot heal. You can pass a law or issue a decree that says, "(Name of person), is healed" but those words on parchment paper has no power to do anything. Power and authority are limited. The centurion threw himself at the mercy of God as he sought Jesus' help for healing of his servant.

Only the power and authority of God as Jesus Christ can anything and everything happen. "You are healed." Done. "You are free." Done. "Let there be light." Yes. "Rise from the grave." We know and believe that to be true.

Prayer

God, You alone are Lord of heaven and earth. All bow down before You. No emperor, power, principality, nor authority match you. You alone are supreme, You alone are preeminent in wisdom, power, glory, and love. Thank You that You count us worthy in Jesus Christ to come to us, healing us, transforming us, hearing our pleas and petitions, as like the centurion. Enable us to have faith in such a way that we place our whole trust in You. Amen.

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Second Sunday in Lent
John 3:1-17

While it is not a lectionary text option for this Second Sunday in Lent, we could have chosen Genesis 1:1 as today's text. All of Scripture is important and efficacious. But if I were asked (and I have been asked before) what the most important text of Scripture is, I have said it is Genesis 1:1. Because there we have in that one verse, the fourth word in English and the third word in Aramaic sets the stage for everything and everyone that comes after. God. "In the beginning, God." All that follows, every text of Scripture; in fact all of life, the entire universe, hinges on that fact and reality – in the beginning, God. Not colliding molecules, not dust and hot gases circulating in space millions of years ago. It's God. It's God's universe. It's on God's terms. Everything. And when we as humans don't get that, or when we forget, or take it for granted, or live like God is out of the equation, then we get into real trouble really fast.

John 3:1-17 is a Gospel that reads like Genesis 1. Jesus' evening conversation with Nicodemus in the dead of night to, perhaps, cloak Nicodemus' identity from any passerbys, or any of his religious leadership colleagues, exhibits that being born again is not of human flesh nor human will, but of God (3:2-3, 5). The purpose of why God rebirths us is also because of God: "For God so loved" (3:16). The deployment of Jesus the Son, that is God's doing, that is God on a mission (3:17).

What's the purpose of life, your ministry, your work, your education, your existence? God.

In the beginning, in the end, and everything in-between, now and into eternity, is all for God, by God, through God, in God.
How do we know this?
Because in Christ Jesus, God is all in all.

Prayer

In the beginning was You, God. In You, we live and move and have our being. In Jesus Christ, You love the world that all who believe in Him may not perish but have Your life. May it be that we live in that reality, the reality that is You. Thank You for loving us and giving us new life, both now and forever. Amen.

Monday, March 6, 2023

Psalm 128:1

“Real Joy”

“How joyful are those who fear the Lord — all who follow his ways!”

The book of Psalms also commonly referred to as the hymn book of the Bible has within it a number of different songs composed by different authors, at different times, under various circumstances with a variety of thematic thrust. Psalm 128 is part of the section and collection of psalms referred to as the Songs of Ascent. Songs the Jewish pilgrims would sing as they made their ascent journeying towards Jerusalem for one of the annual feasts. I would like to imagine that perhaps this verse of the song was sang with an upbeat tempo as this sermon in a song seemingly could have served as inspiration and motivation as the people of God joyfully journeyed towards the temple out of obedience to God. A people determined to do so not just out of a holy reverence and respect of God, but also knowing that all who are committed to him and following his ways could expect to experience something in return. That something is something that many are desperately searching for in so many ways today and yet have found it a difficult thing to find. That something is “real joy,” not a superficial surface type of joy that is predicated on what might be happening externally in one’s life but real joy that is internal, that comes from within. Real joy as we are reminded by the psalmist comes as a result of living a life that is pleasing to God and it can bring an inner peace that at times may be shaken by the some-times violent and vicious vicissitudes of life but never stolen.

Prayer

Gracious God, You are our real joy. Grant to us Your very life that we would live daily in Your joy, grounded and anchored in Your heart. Amen.

*Sylvia Coleman is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Romans 4:6-13

When my daughter was diagnosed with autism, the shock, anger, and guilt that I had felt was overwhelming. What sin had I committed that my child was given such a curse? I turned away from God and placed my faith in my own abilities and the world around me to find the “cure” for my child. Researching and networking for something manmade to help my daughter.

After years of anguish on this path, seeking and never finding a cure, the Holy Spirit led me to an RCA church. I stopped looking for a cure from this world and looked up at the cross; placing all my faith in God who sent the Messiah to die for us. My faith had grown, and my heart grew bigger as I surrendered all of me and my daughter, Grace, to God. It was then that God’s face shined upon me and told me that a cure is from the world but Healing, true healing, comes from God. It is believing and living the truth of Jesus Christ that we are able to receive God’s blessed assurance of wholeness and forgiveness. It is because of this that what once was thought of as a curse became the greatest blessing – a life with Christ!

As we go through this Lenten season, let us remember that spiritual healing and forgiveness comes from the Risen Savior who sacrificed and died for us so that we may be reconciled with God and live in blessed righteousness with the Holy Trinity.

Prayer

Thank you God for sending your Son to save us. Open our hearts and our eyes to feel and see that you are God and bigger than anything that this world gives us. Remind us to hold tight to your promises of redemption and reconciliation as we place our faith, hope, and love in the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ. In the Name of God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Janet Cardillo is a student in the dual
Master of Divinity/Master of Arts (Theological Studies) program*

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Ezekiel 36:22-32

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” as the saying goes. Hopefully that ascription is given for a child’s good grades, or an act of kindness for helping a neighbor with their groceries.

Those of us who are parents or grandparents smile at hearing those words because it is a reflection and proof-positive that our years and the “million little things” that we do in raising families matter. We’ll never really see the fruits of our labor until it shows itself through the words and deeds of the child, no matter their age.

Of course, psychologically speaking, there has to be a healthy sense of self, a differentiation where parent understands that their child(ren) are not extensions of themselves, and ought not to be mirrors of who they are. Children mature by developing their own sense of worth, of identity, of relative independence. Helicopter parenting can become a co-dependence that is unhealthy for both parent and child.

But, here’s the healthy part – it is healthy for the apple to know that it came from the tree. A child, part of living into the fifth commandment, honors father/mother/parent by knowing who they are by whose they are. To live out a good example honors them because we all are inextricably linked one to another.

The Lord’s word to Israel in the book of Ezekiel is about “a new heart” and a “new spirit” (36:26) not for the sake of Israel, *per se*, but for God and God’s name. The embodiment of God’s laws, of God’s teachings, are enfleshed in the lives, conduct, and choices of God’s people. If we who affirm and confess that we love God but yet we don’t care and love for our neighbors, feed the hungry, shelter the orphan, advocate for the voiceless, then we disrespect and dishonor the name of the God whom we profess to the public. We certainly don’t want the world to have a bad view of the God whom we worship and serve, just as I don’t want you to have a bad view of me because of my sons, or you having a bad view of my parents and grand parents and great-grandparents because of what I have done or not done.

Let’s honor God by honoring one another.

Prayer

Holy God, Your name is to be praised in every corner of the earth. Forgive us when we dishonor Your name and reputation by what we have done and by what we have left undone. Change our hearts, our minds, our attitudes, our lives, so that all that we say, and all that we do, would honor and glorify You. Amen.

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Exodus 16:1-8

“Longing for the food seasoned with liberation and marinated in justice”

God’s plan to liberate the Israelite community from Egyptian bondage had powerfully come to fruition. However, there was still a problem. Although their bodies were free from captivity, unfortunately their minds were not. The trauma of their experience under the Egyptian system of oppression was so prevalent that the potential of a new reality became problematic. So much so, they complained about being free! Subsequently, they longed for the comfort their captivity created for them. However, the status quo of injustice should never be normalized as something to covet. The collective trauma of America, who’s recent cries to, “Make America Great Again” sounds like the Israelites’ cry for a sullied and sickening past reality, even if it stinks with the stench of oppression. However, amid the misguided attempts to long for a reality of injustice which is embedded in our history, let us push forward toward freedom. In this Lenten season let us resist the urge to return to systems and ideologies that oppress, victimize and administer violence as a means of control. Because for me, the only meat and bread that is acceptable and worth longing for is the food that is seasoned with liberation and marinated in justice.

Prayer

God of justice and freedom, set our hearts and lives free to work for justice where all are free. Empower and enable us to undo oppressive systems and ideologies, and to long for Your liberation. You are our Rock, You are our Guide, You are our Liberator. Amen.

*Gene Maurice McRae, Jr. is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Friday, March 10, 2023

Exodus 16:9-21

During the shelter-in-place directives at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I watched *The Barefoot Contessa* on the *Food Network* to learn new recipes. I would watch old episodes of that show to see how certain spices like thyme and rosemary can be used effectively in stews or roasts. I even learned how to make *panna cotta* and roast lamb Provençal style. What I stopped doing was watching cooking competition shows where guests would compete for as to who could make a dish the fastest, or craft a dish based on secret ingredients in a basket and having only 30 minutes to bake, chop, dice, slice, roast. I would hate the judges nit-picking whether what looked like a delicious dish didn't meet a particular judge's palate for insufficient salt, or a plate presentation that had a little smudge. What grated on me in those shows was the privilege of these judges to essentially set aside perfectly good food, making a contestant dejected in the process, and exhibiting for so many parts of the world that we have food to judge, that we somehow have so much food that we can make it a game, a contest of wits as to who can use the right amount of vanilla extract or just the exact amount of sprinkles of cinnamon.

Economic justice and food justice and water justice are near and dear to my heart as my parentland of the Philippines has many families who are in need of basic necessities of food and clean water. They don't have the privilege and luxury of throwing away food, or judging whether a smidgen of sauce on the plate is unpresentable.

The text in Exodus 16 describes the complaining hearts of the Israelites. God delivers a message through Moses and Aaron that all will be fed in the evening and in the morning, all "shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." (16:12b) God kept God's promises and, indeed, the people had more than enough, so much so that the food was overflowing to the point where maggots infested the leftover and the food spoiled.

Frankly, there's no reason for there to be food deserts, there's no reason for there to be any shortage of food for the seven billion human beings created in the image of God who inhabit planet Earth. So the next time we feel that complaining attitude welling up, the sarcasm, or the pettiness at slow customer service, let's pause. Let's breathe. And let's give thanks to God that we have breath to breathe, food to eat, water to drink/bathe, clothes on our back, shelter over our heads, and the God who provides it all so that we may bless others.

Prayer

Generous God, thank You for all that You provide for us in every way. Help us to live with contentment and gratitude for all that we have and ever will have. Amen.

Saturday, March 11, 2023

John 4:1-6

Covetousness and envy are powerful motivators and incentives for action. The saying “Keeping up with the Joneses” is an adage coined by a comic strip of that same title in early 20th century America to describe the social effects of comparison among suburban dwellers. This idiomatic phrase is used often when one neighbor compares their less-than-perfect manicured lawn and landscaping to their neighbor’s well-done grass, or one homeowner envying the well-placed Christmas lights of a neighbor’s home design. At its best, it may incentivize you to do well and better, to clean up your office cubicle, to place the Christmas lights earlier than later, to wash your car in the driveway so that it’s not an eye sore. At its worst, coveting and envy can breed jealousy, discontent and malcontent at what you do have, bursting into outright violence in words and in deeds.

Those in ministry — congregational ministry, denominational work, academia — are not immune to this. We know it all too well. First Baptist Church has grown in membership by 5000%, where Second Non-Denominational Church has declined by 500%. So-and-so denomination has established 200 new worshipping communities in the last month, while this-and-that denomination has declined or seen 100 churches leave. Professor X has more publications than Professor Y, whereas Professor Z sits on the best committees and has the best office than Professor W. And on and on, *ad infinitum*.

Look at John 4 and the opening words: “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’ — Jesus has to leave because there were certain Pharisees (some, not all) who were up to no good, who heard certain things, who were in the rumor mill, and seeing Jesus gaining traction and popularity... the Kingdom of God was on the move and there was no containing it, no stopping it. The Pharisaical power, authority, influence were being outmatched, outwitted, and out-loved by Jesus. Of course they would. This is Jesus, not the Joneses. Hands down, mic drop, no comparison.

Instead, covet prayers. Covet the good. Covet doing that which pleases the Lord: outdo one another in doing honor (Romans 12:10c), do things in honor with all your might (Ecclesiastes 9:10); love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Prayer

Loving God, there is no comparison to You. You alone are God. Help us to find our anchor, our compass, our life’s purpose in You. You count us worthy, valuable, and loved because You made us in Your image, You have redeemed us in Christ. Help us to honor and lift up our neighbors and strangers, to love them and to be loved by them. Amen.

Sunday, March 12, 2023

Third Sunday in Lent
Exodus 17:1-7

*Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water,
God's a gonna trouble
The water.*

God stirs the water, works in and through the water. This Black spiritual was coded language for enslaved persons escaping slaveholders through the Underground Railroad to get off of dirt trails and roads where pursuing dogs might trace their tracks and instead hide their scent by wading in the water.

When water appears in the biblical text, you know God is likely up to something. Water is present in creation, water engulfs Pharaoh and his armies but water is parted to enable enslaved Israelites to flee to safety, water signals arrival at the Promised Land. Exodus 17 depicts God providing water as Moses is instructed to strike the rock at Horeb so water can spring forth to quench the thirst of Israelites, who were clamoring to return to Egypt. God provides a way where there is water.

Christian worshipping communities saw the cleansing power of water and the pivotal role that water played in biblical history, marking a people, a renewal from Egypt to the Promised Land. So it was, then, in the waters of baptism – a new identity, a new life.

The prophet Amos calls upon: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

*Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water,
God's a gonna trouble
The water.*

Prayer

Righteous God of justice, stir in us and in the world a deep and abiding sense of Your presence, of Your convicting call to pursue justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You. Enable us to free the captive, and by Your Spirit, to open the eyes of the blind, to empower all into Your freedom. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 13, 2023

2 John 1:1-13

For nearly two years, all of us missed being with one another in the same space. When the day finally came when we could come out of our homes, even with masks on our faces, we all had a sense of joy seeing one another, hugging, or even giving elbow bumps was sufficient to have flesh and bone make contact and eyes gazing to another, not on a screen, but across from one another. Enfleshment and embodiment are essential to our humanity.

But as an Asian American who found comfort and encouragement from other Asian Americans in Zoom meetings, it was an opportunity to connect across time zones over the real fear that we and others in our communities had when confronted with violence. Or those of our Black siblings who were subjected to police violence again and again. Or Latin Americans seeking asylum and refuge at the southern border but made to feel less than, to feel unwanted.

The call and desire to have flesh, bone, and bodies in one space, away from Zoom/FaceTime was, on the one hand, a welcome desire; but I approached it with caution because having bodies of color in certain spaces was unsafe; in fact, those spaces — airplanes, sidewalks, certain sections of neighborhoods — there would be a denial of the sacredness of bodies, of my eyes, of my friends who are made to feel their bodies don't belong. This season was (and still is) a period of insisting of the sacredness of the flesh that God, that Jesus gave, of the joy that is ours because God loves us still, we love God, and that's all that matters.

That's what I see in 2 John 1. It is an exhortation to love, it is a reminder that God loves, it is a warning to be on your guard, to be wise with those who deny that Jesus came in the flesh. Because to deny my flesh, to reject your body, to disdain the pigmentation, to make fun of my eyes, to denigrate my clothing, my abilities, my intellect, my accent,... is really to deny me, and the Lord Christ who made me, redeemed me, and who makes my joy complete.

Prayer

Loving God, thank You for the body You fashioned so beautifully. Thank you for being enfleshed/embodied as Jesus the Christ, who in His divine humanity redeems us all, who heals our brokenness and makes us whole. Help us to love one another as You have commanded and desired for us. Amen.

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

When you're pressed on every side, do you wonder where Jesus Christ is? I've not only felt and thought that in my life, but I have been asked that numerous times by my children, by grown-up children at the congregations I have served, and by those whom I have visited in hospitals. They wonder and wander where is the Lord in tragedy, when trouble strikes, where is the God who is faithful and true?

Detecting and discerning the present power and the powerful presence of God in our midst takes the work of the Spirit for us to behold the hand of God. Such discovery often happens after the fact, when we have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight and we can reflect upon circumstances and conditions of life and say, "Ah, God was there. God was here." As we mature in faith, when our response time to responding or reacting to anxiety-producing events and people prompts us to prayer, or to listen more intently, or to pause before acting.

1 Corinthians 10 directs the community's attention to the common stories of Moses, the exodus in the wilderness, to God providing manna and water in the desert, to God's presence with the Israelites by a cloud by day, to God's mighty work of parting the sea so that the enslaved Israelites can escape the clutches of Pharaoh and his armies. Here's the pivot of 1 Corinthians 10: the Lord Christ was present in each and all of those places. In very real and sacramental ways, the food and drink that God's people received, the parted waters of the Red Sea, the cloud's presence presenting the presence of the living God — all of these were, in fact, the presence of Christ, the One born of Mary in the first century C.E., whose existence as the eternal Word, transcends time and space while inhabiting our time and space, our history.

So the next time you and I doubt or wonder whether Christ is present. We can trust and know that He is with us. It doesn't just take Christmas time to say and believe, Emmanuel, God-with-us is with us.

Prayer

Living God, who as Jesus Christ in the power and person of the Holy Spirit unites us to You and to all of Your people in every time and in every place, we lift our prayers and our praises to You, for who You are, for Your abiding presence, for Your love and grace that is boundless and timeless. In Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Whenever I read this section of Jeremiah 2, I am reminded of several older adult congregants who, in the solitude of their homes or at a nursing home, ponder why their surviving child(ren) don't visit them, or pick up the phone to call. One widow, who had grown accustomed to her estranged son's absence would say, "I think he's just busy with his own family." There's a feeling of forsakenness, neglect, or erasure of history, of relationship, of any semblance of belonging to one another.

The first part of this text has the Lord recounting how the Israelites, upon arriving into the Promised Land, somehow forgot the God of the covenant, the living God who sojourned with them in the good times and in the bad. The Lord summed up the matter this way: "for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." (Jeremiah 2:13)

As we have been forgiven, let's also forgive. As we have been loved, let's love and not hate. As we have been freed, let's not oppress and subjugate. As we have been fed, let's feed others. As we have been united to the Lord our God, let's not place our commitment and allegiances to any other but to God.

Prayer

Living God, You delivered us, You provided for us, You brought us from captivity to the Promised Land. Forgive us when we forsake You, when we forget You, when we search for other sources of life and meaning instead of or apart from You. Restore us to Your joy, to Your life, and renew a right spirit in us. Amen.

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Psalm 23

Next to John 3:16, this text of Psalm 23 is one of the most famous in all of Scripture. Whereas 1 Corinthians 13 is a familiar text in weddings, Psalm 23 is the favorite for memorial services/funerals, hospital/home shut-in visits, or any circumstance where our human condition desires for comfort, consolation, and healing.

The staying power of Psalm 23 lies, I believe, in that we find ourselves, at our core, as vulnerable lambs, sheep needing a shepherd. We may have our sophisticated technology, our academic degrees, our professions with titles, our homes and nearly paid mortgages, our friends/families/networks, our relative health. But even with all of that, as Ash Wednesday reminded us, from dust we came and to dust we shall return. Psalm 23 is a stark reminder that it is the Lord who protects, the Lord who provides, the Lord who abides with us our whole life long, even when that life is shortened, when that life is threatened, when that life is on the receiving end of disease/healing, peace/violence, nurture/neglect. Psalm 23 comes beside us to say “The Lord is my shepherd.” And because of that, we are not left wanting.

Prayer

Loving God, thank You for being our Shepherd, our Refuge, our Strength, the Holy One who abides with us, whose mercy and goodness follows us all of our life long. Amen.

Friday, March 17, 2023

1 Samuel 15:22-31

King Saul needed to repent/return to the Lord. King Saul needed the prophet Samuel to turn around, to repent so to speak, because Samuel's turning around and turning towards Saul would signal the Lord's favor returning to Saul. Samuel exhorted the king that what the Lord desired was obedience, not sacrifice because obedience was the mark of a changed heart. To desire what God desires — justice, reconciliation, love — means that your heart is in sync with God's, you have internalized and metabolized what you have heard, what you have been taught, what you have prayed. King Saul didn't get it and so he needed to receive Samuel's discipline and correction. The king confessed that he "feared the people and obeyed their voice;" in other words Saul was a politician who chose to appease those he could see, he was a politician who carried favor with the visible masses, and thought he could placate and play games with the invisible, living God. Saul was wrong on both counts.

Beloved, we can't play fast-and-loose with God. God knows us inside and out, better than we know ourselves. The Spirit will prompt others to prompt us to confess and repent. The Spirit will use the Scriptures, a dream, a song, a poem, or perhaps this Lenten devotional book to prod you and me to see our sinful and wayward ways, where we have chosen tasks, sacrifice, and work over the person of the living God.

Let's repent, let's turn towards, and return to God, and follow the Lord's ways. That's the way of love, the God of love.

Prayer

Loving God, forgive us when we replace obedience for sacrifice, when we replace our love and delight in You for work that leaves us tired and worn. Restore us to the joy of your salvation, and grant to us a generous spirit. Amen.

Saturday, March 18, 2023

John 1:7-9

Turn on Your Lamp

⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

John 1: 7-9 NRSV

John the Baptist can be said to be the first Gospel Evangelist. The bible says that he was commissioned to “testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (John 1:7 NRSV). In this context, *testify* means to “bear witness concerning one – to tell what one has himself learned about the nature, character, or conduct of men.” [1]

John was ‘sent by God’ to tell the world that the long-awaited Messiah – the Light – had now come into the world. And Jesus, the incontestable light, would drive out darkness by *enlightening* (imbue with a *saving knowledge* of the gospel) the world – Jews and Gentiles, alike.

The world’s darkness, not Christ’s light, needed John’s testimony. Though esteemed by Jesus for his humility and great works, the bible is clear – John was not the light. One scholar states, “John is a lamp... but not the light.”

Our world is filled with darkness, but Glory to God, that through Jesus Christ, we are not *consumed* by it. This Lenten season, may we imitate John the Baptist: humble ourselves, turn on our lamp, and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ – so that those in darkness might see the Light of the World and receive abundant and eternal life.

Prayer

Lord Christ, You are the Light of the world, the light of our lives. Illuminate our path by Your Spirit and Word. Amen.

*Kimberly Tolbert is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Sunday, March 19, 2023

Fourth Sunday in Lent
1 Samuel 16:1-13

Arriving at church with our children in our Sunday finest, just moments before, there was no small amount of tension, screaming or rushing to get out the door. Still, once we arrived on the church campus, somehow, even the children knew it was time to stand upright, put grudges aside and present themselves as holy and pleasing before God and the church ushers.

It's rather humorous when you think about it. How many other families were harried and hurried getting to church on time. We should applaud every young couple with a baby or family who make it to church at all.

Samuel, Jesse, and all the older brothers were surprised that David was the one to be anointed. It didn't make sense. But it made sense to God. He knew David's heart. God knows our hearts. And though we do not deserve it, we have been anointed with the Holy Spirit. That anointing allows us to embody Jesus to those who are daily underestimated, forgotten and unseen.

God knows when we are judging, hurting, or scared. Whether you dress nicely on Sunday and wear sweatpants every other day of the week, He sees you for you. God even knows the herculean effort it took for that family to make it to church, even if they were late.

Prayer

God, it's so easy to judge. We judge others and we judge ourselves. Thankfully, You are merciful and generous. Compared to Your perfection, we all fall short. Whether we think more highly of ourselves than we ought, or place ourselves lower in a pit of despair, there is no secret hiding place away from You. You know us and yet, You still love us. All we can do is respond with thankfulness. Amen.

Monday, March 20, 2023

Acts 9:1-20

“Jesus can change an oppressor to a liberator”

At its core, this text tells the story about a pivotal moment in a man’s life that changed his mindset, and ultimately the trajectory of his life forever. Acts 7 and Acts 8 give the reader a glimpse into who Saul was, prior to his encounter with Jesus, on his way to Damascus. Saul witnessed the public execution of Stephen and later became a domestic terrorist and oppressor as well. However, chapter nine shows us all how oppressors and those who perpetuate oppression and violence can change and do a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree complete change from one extreme to another by carrying the message of liberation. After his encounter, Saul changed through the power of Jesus Christ. Although we see so much oppression in our world, I still believe that Jesus’ liberating message and ministry has the power to change hearts, mindsets, and oppressive behavior. Saul changed from a perpetuator of oppression to an advocate of liberation through the message of Jesus Christ.

NBTS family, in this season of Lent, let us continue to walk in the prophetic shoes of Saul as advocates of liberation as we think critically, act justly, and lead faithfully!

Prayer

Living God as Jesus Christ, You encountered Saul and changed his life forever. Meet us where we are and do a revolution in our hearts, minds, and all that we are. Transform us so that we may be agents of transformative justice in the world. In the name of Christ the Liberator we pray. Amen.

*Gene Maurice McRae, Jr. is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

Isaiah 42:14-21

In today's reading, we are offered two kinds of silence. One is reminiscent of the chaos in Genesis that was caused to be good by the sound of God's voice. While silence is necessary at times to regroup or rethink, here, God's silence is torture especially during the anxious times the people are experiencing. So, the Lord decides not to be silent anymore. Here, God breaks silence in a way that turns things upside down. The sound God makes is so transformational that the deaf are told to listen and the blind to see. God will guide the blind in a new way and the rough places will be smoothed.

The other is the silence of those who can see and hear what is right and do not act. This silence is not endorsed by God but rather by those who reject God's work.

During this Lenten season we take time to regroup and reconsider our ways; and so, we are silent and we listen. Yet it is not a time to listen to God's chaos causing silence but his powerful loving voice of restoration. It is the time to listen and take part in God's restorative work in the world. God will guide us.

Prayer

God in the silence, speak to us Your powerful voice. Transform our lives and renew us so we may participate in your restorative work in the world. Amen.

*Carlos Gonzalez is a student in the
Master of Arts (Pastoral Care and Counseling) program*

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

Isaiah 60:17-22

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 60:17

¹⁷ Instead of bronze I will bring gold;
instead of iron I will bring silver;
instead of wood, bronze;
instead of stones, iron.
I will appoint Peace as your overseer
and Righteousness as your taskmaster.

Prayer Theme: The Exchange

Dear Lord,
We thank you for this time of repentance, reflection, and renewal. We realize over the course of a year we may have become consumed with worry, complacent in duties and have lost hope in the things you ordained for our lives. We lay down the bronze of confusion, the iron of abuse, the wood of temptation and the stone of cold hearts. We ask you to wash and give us a fresh anointing. May we receive the blessing of newness that your word proclaims for us. We ask Lord, that you make the exchange of confusion for clarity, abuse for appreciation, temptation for trust and resentment for rejoicing. May your glory rise amongst us, your peace oversee us and your righteousness instruct us, in Jesus name, Amen!

*Judith Freeman is a student
in the Doctor of Ministry program*

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Ezekiel 1:1-3

Thank God

Ezekiel 1:1-3

“This is the last stop; all passengers must exit”. As Josiah peered at the train route placard, he realized that he was riding Train C and not Train B. He thought to himself, “How did I end up here?” Luckily, Train B was scheduled to depart from the train station in ten minutes. Josiah sighed in relief as he thought, “Thank God, I will be home before dinner.”

As a nation, the children of Israel thought that they were headed in the direction of victory, but were ultimately destroyed by the Babylonian empire. The prophet Ezekiel and the exiles found themselves displaced, far away from their homes, and emotionally lost during the exilic period. Ezekiel and the exiles, like Josiah, most likely wondered, “How did we end up here?”

In 2020, the world was exiled, socially displaced, and lost from the traditional ways of communal living. The COVID-19 pandemic forcefully separated the nation from the comfort of normalcy when everyone was forced into physical isolation due to the pandemic shutdown. During isolation, we as a Christian community remained confident in knowing that God was with us.

On this 30th day of Lent, let us rejoice in Christ Jesus by remembering those whom God restored, healed, and delivered from this sickness and disease. Amen

5-10 Minute Reflection:

Carve out 5-10 minutes of your day to create a grateful report of your experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown.

Begin your grateful report with the following sentence, “I am blessed because I am a child of God. I am grateful because during the COVID-19 shutdown, God did...”

*Kia L. Inman is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Friday, March 24, 2023

Ezekiel 33:10-16

We've seen a lot of wickedness. It's been there all along but with 24 hour news and social media, evil is on display and it's hard to tune out. 2016 brought about the phrase "headline stress disorder" and the pandemic brought about the term "doomscrolling."

As believers, how do we respond to it all? It is overwhelming. When we see the perpetrators of evil, do we wonder why they continue to live when so many good people have died?

Ezekiel reminds us why we should we pray for our leaders, no matter their rhetoric or voting record. He reminds us why we pray for the people who have committed unspeakable atrocities. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would rather see them turn from their wicked ways. Imagine the most wicked people in the news coming to know Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, we pray for local, state, national and world leaders. We pray for those in positions of authority. We pray for those who have the power to inflict harm and take life. We pray for those spread lies and those who have been misled. We ask that You change hearts and minds. We ask that You intervene in the darkest of places where sinister plans are plotted. Just as you transformed Saul into Paul, may Your light shine from heaven to illuminate hearts and minds. And let us not forget the shadows in our own hearts; cast your light upon us so that we may reflect Your glory. Amen.

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Annunciation of the Lord

Luke 24:44-53

Luke 24: ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

His Hands

Hands that Bless,

Hands that Believe.

Hands that Feed,

Hands that Forgive.

Hands that Heal.

Hands that Hold.

Hands that Lift,

Hands that Love.

The Hands that give Life.

Hands that Praise,

Hands that Promise.

Hands that Save,

Hands that Speak.

Hands that Work,

Hands that Welcome.

The Hands of Christ that were Nailed to the Cross for our freedom and reconciliation. Let us be the hands, the eyes, ears, feet, mouth, and heart of Jesus Christ as we build God's church together to proclaim the Good News of the Risen Savior.

*Janet Cardillo is a student in the dual
Master of Divinity/Master of Arts (Theological Studies) program*

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Psalm 130

Out of the Deep is the second movement of composer and conductor John Rutter's *Requiem* based on Psalm 130. It was written in C minor and begins with a deep and powerful cello solo and builds to a glorious crescendo. The music has us wade in the deep dark waters until morning comes when we are reminded that our hope is in the Lord and his unfailing love.

John Rutter wrote his requiem influenced by his admiration for the requiem by Gabriel Fauré and also by the death of his father to whom he dedicated the piece. While he was working on his requiem, Rutter was sick and later said, "illness intervened, which was slightly worrying when I thought of poor Mozart writing his Requiem and dying before he could finish it. Luckily, however, I got better." Rutter suffered for seven years with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME, or chronic fatigue syndrome).

Whether we experience illness or endure a difficult time of worry or sorrow, we are impatient to move from darkness to daylight. With no words for our pain, the psalmist provides the words to help us cry out until we can remember that we are God's beloved and our hope is in the Lord.

Prayer

Come to me O Lord and grant me your peace. My spirit cries out to You because I need You and only You. I am lost without You. Forgive me my sins and wrongdoings, those I do knowingly and those I do unknowingly. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation. Amen.

Monday, March 27, 2023

A Prayer for Hope

Holy, merciful, and miracle-manifesting God, we come to you seeking hope in this Lenten season. You turned darkness to morning for leaders like David; despair to hope for a grieving parent through Elijah; and cries of mourning in the church to rejoicing through Paul. We ask you to touch our hearts and the hearts of others with this hope. May all believe that You, our God, the Risen Christ, still hear our cries — even silent ones — and that Your friends will behold your Compassionate Presence working in us and through us and in and through others also. May you, the Christ hear our prayers as we wait patiently on You in faith and may all be much comforted. Amen.

*Ann M. Garrick is a student
in the Master of Divinity program*

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Ephesians 2:1-10

At the time of its publication in 2002, *The Purpose Driven Life* was highly acclaimed and hit the best-sellers list. It followed the 1995 publication of *The Purpose Driven Church* also authored by Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Church's* publication occurred during the advent of "missional theology," a term coined by the Gospel and Culture Network to describe what was extant in Scripture and biblical theology but which had been elided by the Church's tendency to acquire and retain power and privilege rather than focusing on engaging and participating in God's mission in the world; missional theology was a corrective at the time to awaken the Church to its purpose – an existence not for institutional survival and all the trappings of organizational power, but a community called and to be in service to God's mission. *The Purpose Driven Church* was an exhortation to be the Church, not just attend church. So by the time *The Purpose Driven Life* was published at the turn of the century, the public was primed to receive its message. From a century that saw two great world wars, two major regional wars and other proxy wars, the Holocaust, nuclear detonation, civil rights movements for racial and gender justice, among so many other pivotal and consequential events, many were left pondering – so what is the purpose of life, of human existence, and what will the new century bring?

As we near the quarter-century mark, Ephesians 2 is the timeless Word that speaks to us from the first century with the consistent and constant message: from the life focused so much on the self, we have been saved, we have been given the gift of faith not by our own merit, our own sophistication, our own strategizing, but solely by the grace and mercy of God. Such salvation is not for the purpose of being content with blessings, or somehow we can rest on a hammock (although we should sometimes), but that we have been created for a purpose, we have been redeemed and saved and loved for a purpose. Christ calls us to share the Good News of God's love, of God's justice, of loving neighbor and stranger as God did in Jesus Christ.

Yes, let's live in and with purpose. What is God revealing to you?

Prayer

Creator God, in Your wisdom and love You created us with divine beauty in Your image. When we lose our way, when the world around us often hijacks our identity, turn us back to whom You created us to be. Thank you for saving us by Your grace, giving us the gift of faith. Set us on a lifelong course to work and pray for your transformative justice in the world. In Christ our justice we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Psalm 143

Psalm 143:8

***“Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust.
Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.”***

David’s cry for deliverance is often experienced today, especially by the families of suffering patients. Recently, as a Chaplain intern at a local hospital, a patient asked me to pray for her for “Whatever God wants to do to me.” When pushed on that statement, she said she trusted in God to do his will, and if she were to die that day, she would have been ok with that. But, instead, we prayed together, and she confessed all the reasons she should be “punished” by God and then let go — she said her heart was lifted, and she knew she would be ok. Then, a few days later, she went home from the hospital. While her condition was serious, was this just a coincidence that she went home? Did God answer her prayer?

During this season of Lent, we look toward the resurrection. God does answer our cries for deliverance from evil, through the cross. Jesus suffered and died for us. But, he says, “Father, into thy hands I commend/commit my spirit.” One translation defines this statement as entrusting his spirit to God. My patient entrusted her spirit to God through confession and prayer. David says, I “trust in you.” How do you entrust your spirit to God?

Prayer

Living God, thank you for abiding with us and hearing our prayer even when we can’t utter a word or find it difficult to pray. Help us to entrust our whole self to You. Amen.

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Thursday, March 30, 2023

1 Samuel 16:11-13

New Brunswick Theological Seminary is in the business of vocation (calling) – being a community where prospective students, current students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni/ae and the wider public are welcomed to discover God’s call and loving intentions for your life, or perhaps to be re-calibrated to God’s call,, and to be supported and equipped for that call. All of us are called, in fact. It began when God birthed us, and at the baptismal water, we are named child of God, belonging to the One God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. How that foundational call — as child of God — is lived out comes in many ways: as student, as spouse, as parent/ grandparent, as sibling, as friend, as business owner, as social worker, as facilities staff, as professor, as student, as president, as pastor, as chaplain, as non-profit executive, as trustee. You get my point. The Seminary as a theological institution is not a trade school nor is it necessarily a career placement service; rather, we are a community called into being to be in service to the Gospel to support and equip God’s people in living out their/your/our vocational calling as we live that out in Church and society. Yes, let’s use that A-word: anointed.

1 Samuel 16:11-13 is that famous dialogue between Jesse and Samuel. The Lord has anointed, has set apart the sheep-herder David but David doesn’t even know it yet, neither does Jesse nor does Samuel. What Samuel knows is that God is calling someone, but all that Samuel can do is connect with this unknown shepherd-kid and see how the Spirit of the Lord works and speaks. It’s connecting and engaging, it is intentionally praying and discerning, it is... and I’ll use another A-word: apprenticed. Samuel and Jesse, and we with them, and David with them are all being apprenticed to the mind and heart of God. God calls, God anoints leaders, God sets apart those whom will be the proclaimers, the teachers, the evangelists, the ministers of the Gospel who will bear witness of God’s love and of God’s justice in every part of the world.

Beloved, you and I have been anointed for a particular calling in service to the kingdom of God. What are you discerning and discovering in this season?

Prayer

Jesus the Anointed One, You have been called and elected to be the Savior of the world. Thank You that we are elected to serve in You because You are the elect One. Illuminate to us what and how You would have us to serve. Provide all that we need to be faithful to You and Your mission. Amen.

Friday, March 31, 2023

Job 13:13-19

Tyre Nichols. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Trayvon Martin.
Monterey Park 2023. Atlanta Spa 2021. Mother Emmanuel AME 2015.
#StopAAPI Violence.
And so much more. So much more. Much, much more. Again, and again, and again.

We protest on the streets for police reform. We plead our case to local, county, state, national legislators through phone banking, letter writing, campaign involvement, voting. We pray and await judicial cases to make their way through the appellate and Supreme Court processes.

We want to plead our case, like Job 13, we would be silent and speak, gritting our teeth, clenching our flesh, contending with God. Confess our brokenness, cry out to God. Whatever it takes, Lord, whatever You want, just bring deliverance, just bring justice.

We connect with Job's desperation – his heartfelt and soul-felt yearning, in the deep recesses of his being.

It's this knot-in-the-gut passion that animates the Son of God to give His life for the life of the world. It's that deep desire for what could and should be, a world marked by justice, where all flourish, where the wicked and purveyors of hatred and violence are dealt with justly, where victims are heard, healed, restored.

Hear us, Lord. Hear our cries. Hear us, God, even in the silence, we will speak to You.

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Lamentations 3:55-66

Imagine walking down a hallway and you hear commotion in a closed office, you hear picture frames and vases being smashed, a lot of yelling, loud crying. You barge in to see what's going on. You see the indignant individual and opposite that individual is another person, a therapist/counselor, who is non-anxious. You wonder why the individual is enraged. You ask, "Why don't you just calm down and express your anger in a 'civil' way, in a 'dignified' manner without all the yelling and screaming."

Someone stepping into that context and who hasn't sojourned with the back-story, who hasn't listened and understood the trauma of history will step into what appears like a destructive expression of violence, when, in fact, it is righteous anger, pent up hurt.

I recall when I returned to my largely White congregation the first Sunday after my eldest son and I joined a peaceful protest of hundreds of teenagers and young adults calling for policing reform following George Floyd's murder. I vividly remember two congregants – White, affluent, a man and a woman — who were offended we went, who wondered out loud why was a protest necessary, why did the anger spill over into storefront property. Although we weren't part of the post-protest property vandalism, these congregant members (who were Deacons, by the way) were more concerned about the vandalism, than about the protest itself, the young people who expressed their voice. They could not even discuss George Floyd's murder or the crimes committed by the police officers. Their protestations were squarely focused on the manner in which the protest was conducted, and how uncivil it was.

The writer(s) of Lamentations is seething with indignation because of injustice. You would think that this Spirit-inspired writer(s) were calling for the assassination of their perpetrators. Here's a flavor of it: "Pay them back for their deeds, O Lord, according to the work of their hands! Give them anguish of heart, your curse be on them! Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the Lord's heavens." (3:64-66) Even if we toned down the poetic hyperbole three notches down, it would still feel and read like madness bent on revenge.

But that's the point, isn't it. The book of Lamentations, as with the prophetic books, as with the power of the Psalms, as with Jesus turning over the money-changers table, as with Jesus calling a segment of the Pharisees and Sadducees "brood of vipers" — this is not "civil" and "dignified" talk as if you were at a tea party with porcelain china and sliced cucumber sandwiches. No! What's at stake is justice for humanity, for righting wrongs that continue to hurt, that continue to inflict violence — spiritually, bodily, mentally, materially, emotionally, intellectually, politically – with no end in sight. And when confronted with denialism or anti-justice, the wounds are widened and it becomes the very destruction of one's personhood and sense of being.

Lord, hear our cries. Lord, deliver us. Lord, don't delay. Carry out your divine justice.

Sunday, April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday

We wave palms and shout "Hosanna!"
thinking it a song of praise,
but, beneath our glad patina,
we plead "Save us from these days!"

In a world we know is broken,
life has crossed a fearsome line:
news is grim and prospects darken;
we cannot pretend we're fine.

You arrived to hear us cheering,
knew the truth past our façade
and welled up with boundless caring,
tearing with the love of God.

Save us, Jesus! Touch and heal us!
Feel our fears and hear our cries!
Pour your life out! Do not fail us!
Give us grace to die and rise.

James Hart Brumm

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Monday, April 3, 2023

John 12:1-9

As I reflected on this passage of Mary anointing Jesus with expensive perfume, it reminded me of the phrase “stop and smell the roses.” This scene in John is happening just a week before Jesus is to be crucified. Jesus has been dropping hints of his future death and resurrection. Yet, it would seem his disciples are not catching on. Mary on the other hand seems to get it. She takes time during one of these last meals with Jesus to sit and just be with Jesus. And Jesus sits with her. He doesn’t say, “I have more important things to do in my last days” or scorn her for the cost of the perfume. Instead, they sit together enjoying the smell of the fragrance. This has been a good reminder for me of the importance of just being. Taking time out of my busy schedule to just sit and enjoy the moment. As we begin this holy week, I want to encourage you to take time to “stop and smell the roses” (or perfume, as it may be). Take a deep breath and just sink into the presence of Jesus.

Prayer

Spirit, Breath of God – help us to delight in You and Your presence. Give us time to breathe, to rest, and to know that You are God and we are not. Amen.

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and is Vice President and Chief Operating Officer*

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

John 12:20-36

It seems that every part of our faith journey is a transition, a point-in-time for preparation. There's no such thing as ever being settled because the living God who created us, who redeemed us, who empowers and inspires us, is the God on a mission, the Spirit of life who is ever on the move. Yes, of course, there is the Sabbath rest; and yes, there are seasons of our life where we can breathe and say we have arrived; but the arrival is about starting something else, preparing for the next adventure, prepping for the next challenge. It's being in the moment for what it is, while anticipating what the Spirit of the Lord might be nudging at us.

The ministry of Jesus was a continual preparation for the disciples. From the moment he summoned them, "Come, follow Me" to every interaction of healing and feeding, to every teaching about loving and serving, to every parable that disclosed a kernel of powerful truth, to demonstrations of what the kingdom of God is about... in every instance Jesus was preparing them for what this text in John 12 is leading: Jesus is heading to His certain judgment and death. He says, "Whoever serves me must follow Me." (John 20:26)

We have been sojourning these past few weeks on this Lenten road – from Ash Wednesday, and now in the final week towards the cross, to the tomb, to the stone being rolled away. How is the Spirit of the Lord speaking to you to more fully and faithfully follow Jesus? Jesus is continually preparing our hearts, habits, attitudes, priorities so that we die to ourselves and live more towards the desires of God's heart: a heart whose mission is about reconciliation, peace, and justice enfolded in God's love for a broken world. What are we needing to bring to the cross of Christ?

Prayer

Crucified Lord, You are near the cross and You are preparing us to accompany You yet we find it difficult to go all the way. We are scared disciples, not sure what lies ahead, not sure if we have what it takes, afraid to be rejected, afraid that the road towards justice will be too much to bear. Gird us with strength and courage, abide with us and show us the way, Your way. Help us to follow You. Carry us and our fears with You, Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Hebrews 12:1-3

I love watching our youngest son run. I'll toot his horn when I share that he is one of the fastest cross country and track-n-field runners in San Diego County; his personal record is a 4 minute 27 second mile, and he gets better and better. As of this writing, though, he's struggling after an injury and so will have to undergo some intense physical therapy. As with any athlete competing at the top of their game, you keep your eye on the prize — the glory of the competition, being out there alongside other runners, and yes, winning the meet. One of the things my wife and I love about watching him and his teammates is the sheer fun they have. They run for the love of the sport, for the adrenaline of practicing, being cheered on by the team and by the assembled crowd, and then giving it your all. He runs not for an endorsement deal or a financial contract; he and his teammate do it because of team spirit, and the sheering enjoyment of running.

The text in Hebrews 12 exhorts us as followers of Jesus Christ to run the race of faith with perseverance, casting off all obstacles that would prevent us from fully and faithfully following the ways of our Lord. Similar to my son when he's training he has to make certain choices of what kind and how much and when to eat, exercising when he could be watching T.V., cutting off time to hang out with friends to get enough sleep, and yes, having time to do other things to change the pace a bit. There's choices he has to make (of course with the assistance and guidance of his full-time staff, i.e. us — his parents) in order to do well. Likewise, our discipleship, our following of Jesus calls forth from us our very best, relying upon the Spirit to empower and teach us. Additionally Hebrews 12 encourages us that there is a cloud of witnesses — the faithful who live and who live in the eternal peace of God — they are the communion of saints whose legacy of faith inspire us.

As we work and pray and struggle for God's *shalom* vision of transformative justice in the world around us, the track often has obstacles that seem impossible to surmount. The road is a long one, rife with peril, where the spirit to see it through seems to evaporate under the weight of the enormity of injustices. Hebrews 12 is a call to action: stay on the track, keep running, run alongside other runners, be inspired by others who have run the track, and know that the Holy One who is our justice is both our Captain, our fellow runner, and the prize.

Let's go for it. Ready, on your mark, Go!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You are captain of our salvation, the finisher and perfecter of our faith. Help us to persevere in pursuing You and Your desire for justice in the world. Amen.

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Maundy Thursday
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

“In Remembrance”

The gift of remembrance is precious. Memories, both good and not so good, find place and space in our hearts and our minds. The good memories we cherish. The not so good ones we revisit to sometime gain perspective and greater clarity.

Paul’s words penned to the church at Corinth served as a reminder of the last night Jesus spent with his disciples before making the ultimate sacrifice and the significance of his actions for their faith. Imagine reclining at the table with Jesus and listening to his every word.

However, these words of Jesus were probably unexpected. How strange for Jesus to speak to his disciples about his body and blood in such a way. Why would the disciples need to remember his words and his actions? Perhaps, for the same reason that we remember today.

When we, as believers, rehearse the ritual of the body and the cup, we remember that Jesus offered his life as a source of our salvation and eternal life. It is the gift of grace that created a covenant defining our relationship with God and one another.

On this day, remember, and be eternally grateful.

Prayer

Lord Christ, thank You for inviting us to Your table, to feast with You, to have our feet washed by You as You model and teach us how to love and care for one another. Thank you for giving Your life that we may have life and know how to truly live. Amen.

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Director of Field Education and Career Services, and Director of the NBTS–NY Site*

Friday, April 7, 2023

Good Friday

The darkest words in all the Bible, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34). Spoken by Jesus from the cross, the cry begins the darkness of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The time when the world waits for Good News.

Here Jesus echoes the words of Psalm 22 reflecting all the suffering before and after his earthy time. The cry is of one starving in a world with enough food, one shot in yet another mass shootings, or one who feels rejected by everyone including God. We do not like to wait, especially when we are suffering. We want a world where problems are fixed immediately, and bad things do not happen to good people. Jesus, the ultimate good, suffers at our hands. Our Lord knows the pain of abandonment, physical pain, and sorrow of rejection. He experiences humanity at its worst.

And so, now we wait for the turn from Friday to Sunday, from death to resurrection, from sorrow to joy. But today we sit with the harm humans do to others and the hurt we inflict on God. We wait and hope in the Lord, for Easter morning and the Good News of the rest of the Gospel story.

Prayer

Living God, when death’s shadow lingered over the cross and announces its arrival with violence and agony, You hear the cries of Your Son, You hear our own cries for deliverance. Don’t leave us nor forsake us, faithful God. Keep us close to You. Amen.

*Beth Tanner is Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs and
The Rev. Dr. Norman and Mrs. Mary Kansfield Professor of Old Testament Studies*

Saturday, April 8, 2023

Holy Saturday/The Great Prayer Vigil of Easter

Holy Saturday — Holy Pause

**On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, Matthew 27:62a
(NRSV)**

The work of ministry is both a burden and a joy. Unfortunately, too many ministers celebrate the death and struggle of Good Friday which promotes sorrow, grief, and mourning, and the glory of resurrection on Holy Sunday, without conscious awareness of Holy Saturday.

Holy Saturday is the time between the total end of the old and the total beginning of the new. Holy Saturday is the period between passion and renewal. This may remind readers of the statement, “The dash that is on the gravestone represents the time on earth between the date of birth and the date of death. That little line on the headstone is significant.”¹

Holy Saturday allows for us to turn inward and create a mental space to recalibrate and reason. Holy Saturday is a period of reflection and contemplation – between your crucifixion and your resurrection. Holy Saturday provides a necessary time of silence, and orientation and/or disorientation period between injury and recovery (healing).

In our reflection and contemplation, we like the early followers of Jesus, reflect on dying friendship, life as it once was, and dreams deferred. Holy Saturday stamps the emotions and things that scare, depress, wound, and disorient us as holy – as sacred, and meaningful.

We perceive the cross as a standing symbol and statement of what we do to one another and to ourselves – the violence, the oppression, and the disenfranchisement we perpetuate to maintain positions of privilege and power. The current writers conceptualize the resurrection as the standing statement of what God does to creation, in return for our use and misuse. The Holy Saturday is the time in between.

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¹ <https://beyondthedash.com/blog/grief/exploring-the-dash-by-linda-ellis/7166>

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday
Matthew 28:1-10

It was Easter Sunday morning, and my daughter led the young adult choir in a rendition of Matthew 28. I still remember the beautiful yellow dress she wore as she directed the choir. Their ministry resurrected something within me. It was a moment of relief, joy, and pride much like what I presumed Mary Magdalene experienced at the tomb. Her grief, layered with fresh sorrow, was removed. I understood this because my daughter had just returned home from being away at college, my spouse had just gotten her voice back after two years of a vocal injury that took away her ability to speak above a whisper, and I was celebrating my decision to leave my tenured faculty position and start my own company. Like Mary wanted to cling to Jesus, that moment I wanted to cling to my God who had restored so much. As the choir sang that resurrection song, I could hear God calling my name and I knew it was my God. I received that gift of a resurrected Jesus and my pains and sorrows were resurrected anew.

Prayer

Living God, you resurrected Your Son, Jesus the Christ, and in His rising we rise in newness of life. Thank you for resurrection possibilities and the promise that in You we have our hope, our life, our love. Thanks be to You, God. Our Savior and Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

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