

 **NEW BRUNSWICK**
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Think Critically • Act Justly • Lead Faithfully



**WORSHIPING CHRIST,
WITNESSING TO THE WORLD**

**ANTHOLOGY OF DEVOTIONAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS
LENT-HOLY WEEK-EASTER 2024**

Foreword

Dear Community and Friends of New Brunswick Theological Seminary,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

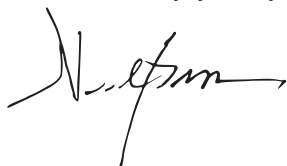
These words, or a slight variation of it, are the salutations we find in every one of the epistles attributed to the apostle Paul. The First Letter and Second Letter to Timothy add “mercy” so that it is “Grace, mercy, and peace.” But in every one of them, there is this epistolary reference to the triune God, as the Spirit’s presence and work are later invoked in the letters. We gain this deep and abiding sense of the communities which are rooted and grounded in the heart of the triune God, with one another, bound together in fellowship that includes and which transcends their contexts.

First century C.E. communities which the Spirit deployed “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) were people of The Way. Theirs was a distinctive character of living out and embodying the life of the resurrected Jesus, a pattern of community marked by love as expressed in communal worship and in service. In doing so, early church communities were counter-cultural while being residing in Hellenistic cultures, counter-cultural in being counter-imperial. The Way of Jesus was not about the imperial values of aggrandizement, power and control over others, colonization and oppression of lands and people; our Lord’s way is about love, compassion, and all the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Early church communities were worshiping-witnessing communities: regularly gathering for worship/prayer/praising God/breaking bread and then sent out to bear witness of Christ in their homes, neighborhoods, and the wider public. This consistent pattern of worshiping-witnessing or gathering-sending, ordered believers Sunday through Saturday so that by the time it was time to re-gather for Sunday worship to receive the promises of the resurrected Christ again, they can testify of and pray for how they bore witness the prior week, and be recalibrated in worship for the upcoming week’s divine encounters in witnessing to Christ in the world. We see this summarized in Acts 2:42-47 and then manifested in the rest of the New Testament corpus as these worshiping-witnessing communities understood their unity in the triune community of the living God is what animated, inspired, empowered, and enabled them to be who they are and why they were called by God to be community.

Thank you to DMin student (in Transformational Preaching), The Rev. Robert “Bobby” Williams for proposing this 2024 Lent-Easter devotional theme, “Worshiping Christ, Witnessing to the World” inspired by the cover photo of the liturgical space of Mast Chapel. Many thanks to student government leaders – the SSIM (Student Society of Inquiry and Ministry) – for their financial sponsorship of this anthology of devotionals and prayers. And many thanks to NBTS students, faculty, staff and families related to or supporters of NBTS who have contributed a devotional reflection and prayer based on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B.

May this Lenten-Holy Week-Easter anthology bless you, your loved ones, and communities to being and becoming worshiping-witnessing people of The Way, as we sojourn these next weeks towards the cross, the silence of the tomb, and the Easter morning of our Lord’s resurrection.

In Christ our joy and justice,



Rev. Dr. Neal D. Presa, PhD

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

Daniel 9:1-14

Worship as Confession: ***“We have not obeyed God’s voice”***

It is easy to point the finger at others but not at oneself. When we read Daniel’s prayer it shows that Daniel does not point the finger, but accepts the blame of the collective, he speaks confession as an Israelite in the face of others walking away from the will of God. Yes, in these days of war, political upheaval in society and within the church, it can be easy to take a side and point the finger at the other, but the call of God is to humbly pray and collectively take responsibility for where society has come. We are called to walk in the obedience of God’s liberation through acceptance of where we are and what we have done.

As a Trinidadian we have all just ended a season of revelry and liberation, called Carnival. While others may see it through its negative forms, I must state as a part of the family, that there is beauty in seeing how an event can bring diverse persons together, with a cry of liberation, that came from the history of slavery and indentureship. But I must say that in that liberation, we as a local church have been part of the move to segregate. Just consider the segregation of churches based on race and class, is this the true church or is not the church called to see our own faults in the face of being a part of the empire of the ‘ism’s’? The church must confess its role in judging others when we should truly be humble in confessing our own faults. This, therefore, is an invitation to join in Daniel’s cry to our righteous God. Let us pray as a believing community together:

O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who show love, we come saying that we have collectively fallen, we have rebelled and turned away from our first love, we have not listened, and we cry to you,

‘Have mercy on us.’

As your church, we have not followed your guidance, but chosen the ways of the rulers of this world, we have loved money, power, and buildings, but not your people of every color, class and lived experience - ‘Have mercy on us.’

We have chosen the rulers over us, and we have chosen war instead of peace, we have indeed walked far from your righteousness- ‘Have mercy on us.’

Yet through Christ, you brought a way for us to life and love, so teach us to see our own faults, prejudices and to walk in your mercy and love. Help us to know if we but turn from our wicked ways and look to you, we will find and make this world a better place. Hear us for we pray in Christ’s blessed name. Amen

Keron Khellawan is a Doctor of Ministry student (Pastoral Care and Counseling)

Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:15-25a

Forgiveness and Restoration

In the passage from Daniel for today, we get to see into life before there was Easter, before Christ was among us and there was a crucifixion and a resurrection. Here Daniel is calling out to God, confessing how the people have not been able to live up to God's righteousness. Daniel asks God to forgive the people, not because of their good works, but because of God's mercy. He is begging God for forgiveness. This time of Lent is a time of preparation, a time for us to consider the ways we do not live up to God's righteousness. Spend some time reflecting on where you need God's healing hand in your life, where you need restoration. Cry out to God and prepare yourself to receive the good news that Christ has risen and you are forgiven.

Let us pray the using the words God has given us in the Psalms today:

O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust. Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation. Help me to be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord! Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, [God] instructs sinners in the way. [God] leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble [God's] way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep [God's] covenant and [God's] decrees. AMEN
(adapted from Psalm 25:1-10)

Amanda Bruehl is Vice President and Chief Operations Officer

Psalm 32

Reflective Poem on Psalm 32

Sin is a burden that one chooses to carry;
It is heavy, it is costly, it is scary.
Sin can be seen by the God of Love;
God sees our sins from above.
Sin is a judgment upon another;
It is wickedness placed upon a sister or brother.
But do not fear,
For forgiveness is near.
Because...
The burden of sin is nailed to the cross
As the God of Love gives sin a toss
Gone is sin as it goes to the grave
Carried by Jesus for he is brave.
Then the blessing rises,
and we are saved.

Janet Cardillo is a Master of Divinity student

Mark 1:9-15

The Worth of the Wilderness

For most of us, “wilderness” has a negative connotation. It is barren and desolate and fruitless – in the natural sense. Nevertheless, this familiar text nestled in the oldest Gospel has some lessons for you and me to consider about the wilderness. First, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness! After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, Scripture says, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” (v. 12). Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days and 40 nights. Many scholars believe this text is the basis for the 40 days of Lent, and why during the Lenten Season, we fast. Of course, fasting takes on many forms. Perhaps this year, you will consider fasting more as a regular discipline – outside of the Lenten Season. There are times when the Spirit will lead you into the wilderness for a period. It will be fruitful! And yes, you will be tempted. Our adversary, the devil, will never cease trying to get us to fall. The devil did it to God the Son. Pray for greater discernment to know what is of God, and what is not. In the Matthean account of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, we see the discourse between Christ and Satan, and Satan twists the WORD of GOD! (Matthew 4:6). Hide the WORD in your heart, allow the wildernesses to fortify you, and remember, the wilderness can be fruitful.

Prayer

Eternal God, I now realize the wilderness has worth. May I not complain during those “hard times” when you have, by your Spirit, led me into the wilderness. Instead, I pray that I will discern your presence and your purpose, that I will be intentional in fortifying my spirit because following the wilderness, there is purposeful ministry. God, during this year, I want to fast more. I want to draw closer to you through the discipline of prayer and fasting. I pray that you will strengthen me in this. In Jesus’ name I pray. AMEN!

Ann Tait is a Doctor of Ministry student (Transformational Preaching)

Psalm 77

This Psalm reflects a paradox of pain. Asaph's anguish toggles between his sorrow, needing to be comforted, crying out to God, and yet feeling sorrow.

To a certain degree, I can relate to the Psalmist, and perhaps you can too. For me, experiencing the sudden loss of a child caused an anguish that my heart had never known. All I knew was to cry out to God. I thought God would massage my heart and that in that moment, I would be lifted out of the valley. But it didn't happen. This Psalm also is reminiscent of the New Testament account of the Apostle Paul who persisted in prayer, and yet God did not remove the thorn. Instead, God said, **"My grace is sufficient for thee..." (2 Corinthians 12:9)**

Let me encourage you my sisters and brothers. All of us will experience the depths of sorrow in this life, and there are times when we cry to God with our loudest voice – with full intensity of our hearts – knowing God hears and will answer yet in the moment, as the Psalmist declares in v. 2, **"my soul refuses to be comforted." (ESV)**

In verse 3, Asaph seems to be in contemplative worship and as he remembers God the Hebrew Hymn inserts the word "Selah" – meaning to pause. Where it appears in this text is significant. Even in the middle of anguish, pain, and sorrow, will you to pause and reflect on what you know about God?

Prayer

Eternal God, we come now some are burdened beyond what we feel we can carry. We feel like Asaph and we cry out, but we're so low in the valley, our spirit is doubtful that you are hearing us. Would you increase our faith in this moment? You said, "Call unto me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty works that we know not." I pray for my sister who rife with pain touch now in the name of Jesus. Would you remember my brother too? Remind him that nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, and allow him to feel your love even in the depths of his sorrow. In Jesus' name! AMEN.

Ann Tait is a Doctor of Ministry student (Transformational Preaching)

1 Peter 3:8–18a

When I began theological education as a seminarian almost 27 years ago, I took an apologetics class. The text from 1 Peter 3:15b was employed as a principal reason to learn the philosophical underpinnings of the Christian faith. Using the Socratic method, we were taught to disarm a skeptic's worldview, the doubts of an atheist, and the challenges of heresies or an increasingly secular culture. Indeed, all believers should "[a]lways be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in you." The histories of Christianity are replete with examples – from the earliest days of the Christian faith with Justin Martyr or from the 2nd century C.E. St. Hippolytus and Bishop Tertullian, to even confessions of faith like the Theological Declaration of Barmen during World War II and the Belhar Confession in the 1980s challenging the apartheid regime of South Africa. Oral accounting, proclaiming and speaking of the hope that is in us must be done, with love, with confidence, with humility.

But let's also lift up a point of emphasis that the apostle Peter underlines: the apologetics of living. Living the faith, embodying our faith's confession. God's salvation is less about argumentation and fine points of debate, and more of how we live the faith. See the number of imperatives that Peter exhorts: "have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another" (3:8a), "[d]o not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse" (3:9a), "but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord" (3:15a), "[k]eep your conscience clear"... all of this connected to "your good conduct in Christ" (3:16b) so that we can be upright and blameless in doing good, in loving others, in serving others.

The apostle Peter connects the life we live to that of Jesus Christ, who suffered for doing good (3:17). Ours is a cruciform life, shaped and inspired and empowered by the One who gave His life so that the world may have life. That there, beloved, is a daily sermon that preaches to a world in need of love.

Prayer

God of love, who in Christ, you show us what love is about. Enable us to preach and testify of the hope that is in us by doing good, by living a life worthy of our calling as children of God, followers of Jesus, as ones redeemed by your love. Amen.

*Neal D. Presa is Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach
and Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

Psalm 77

In verses 1–10, the psalmist cries out inconsolable and wondering if he will ever find favor with God again. In verse 5, he stops to remember the days of old. A lot of us tend to do that. We miss the good old days when our metabolisms easily burned the calories from ice cream, our minds were vaults that could recall names and places, and we didn't have a cloud of anxiety overhead. We were strong and beautiful. Youth and vigor radiated from our smooth and luminescent skin. Remember the days of old? Driving to hang out with friends, going dancing, disposable income before kids, mortgages, and student loans made your paycheck evaporate all too quickly? The church likes to reminisce about the good old days too. So many conferences, studies, speeches and books address the decline of the church, what happened, and can we get back to those glory days? Perhaps that is why it's not so hard to understand why so many who identify as evangelical Christians have a deep nostalgia for the good old days and passionately want a return to the days when identifying as a Christian wasn't maligned in movies or labeled as out of touch, but a badge of honor and belonging. The days when we shared a common language with most neighbors, the majority belonged to a church, and being a mainline Christian meant we were part of a large community with influence.

But were your good old days good for everyone else? Were the days when you were young easy for your parents or siblings? Were they as good for those who weren't as popular, talented, smart, or athletic as you? When the mainline churches were powerful and influential were those good days for those who were excluded from the fold? Was it good for those who weren't in line with the proper behavior and beliefs of the church and the elders? Let's be honest. The good old days were good for those who enjoyed strength, freedom, power or control. After moaning and groaning, the psalmist has a turning point in verse 11. Instead of remembering his own good old days, he turns to remember God and His mighty deeds. He recalls God's miracles and strength. Not his own. God is thunder, lightning and the unseen footprints all at once. Each time we partake in the Eucharist, we partake in an anamnestic act that connects us to God's "good old days" which comforts us today because the same God of the past, is the God of our present and future.

Prayer

Lord, help us so that in remembering the good old days, we are not looking to remember our own strength and abilities, but remember your strength and abilities; your miracles and faithfulness. You were here long before us and you will remain long after our time on this earth. Use us in this brief time on earth to be a blessing to others.

Grace Presa is a Presbyterian deacon and President/Owner of Hollym Int'l Corp

Romans 3:21-31

“All means all” so went a chorus in one of the many songs at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 2022 in Karlsruhe, Germany. When God loves, all means all; which means, we are called to love all. All means all.

Romans 3:21-31 is quite comprehensive in its description. Verse 23 says “all have sinned.” It says “[f]or there is no distinction” (3:22b), which means every single person whom God created has sinned, is broken, has fallen short of the glory of God.

The text is also comprehensive in a couple more ways. It says that God’s righteousness has been disclosed through faith in Jesus Christ “for all who believe.” Here, some may be quick to say, “Aha!” God limits God’s salvation for some but not for all. But, the text continues in speaking about the comprehensiveness of God’s work in Christ as encompassing Jews and Gentiles (3:29), which is the entire world, which is all, “since God is one.” (3:30a) And to answer the human temptation that such love somehow gives license for boasting, or free license to break God’s loving commandments, the text goes on to say that all faith and all of the law are not incongruous; both matter, after God is the maker and giver of both (3:31a). It is by faith in Christ, the One who is both law-maker/law-giver and fulfiller of the law, that we desire to follow God’s desires; such desire driven not by fear, nor by some sort of transaction that we seek God’s favor. That because God’s favor is already for us, such a desire to live a life that God wants from us comes from a heart of gratitude, love, and joy because of God’s fierce love in Christ for all of us. When God means “all,” God means “all.” God would have it no other way because God gave God’s whole self for the life of the world. That’s what love does. All means all.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for giving your whole self in Jesus Christ your Son for the whole world. Help us to love you with all of our heart, with all of our soul, with all of our mind, and with all of our strength, and to love one another as we love ourselves. Teach us your ways, dear God, and enable us to not restrict how much we love nor whom we love, but to share your abundant love to all. Amen.

*Neal D. Presa is Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach
and Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

Genesis 16:1-6

Sarai was 65 years old when Abram first heard God's promise. For 120 months Sarai waited in the foreign land of Canaan for the fulfillment of God's promise. Each month her hopes rose, only to fall again when she discovered she was not yet with child. After 10 years of waiting, Sarai drew the conclusion that God had prevented her from bearing children. She couldn't reconcile the promise God had made to Abram with her own human calculations. It just didn't make sense. So, at age 75, she drew her own conclusion. She created a nexus; she had no child, therefore God must have prevented her. Hagar becomes part of her human-constructed creative solution.

Once Hagar is pregnant, Abram says to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. Jealousy, envy, frustration. Sarai felt it deeply. Abram knew it but didn't want to deal with it so he gives her *carte blanche* to do as she pleases.

Perhaps living and waiting in Canaan for 10 years, Sarai had felt powerless. But Hagar was under Sarai's power. Sarai had both power and privilege when it came to the Egyptian slave-girl. In light of bigger systems, entrenched hierarchies and centuries-old oppression, we often feel powerless. But within our own sphere, we possess and exercise our own modicum of power or privilege. Whether at work, or with our own kids, with newcomers to church or the neighborhood, with a daughter-in-law or brother-in-law; if you have seniority, knowledge, a social or professional network, you possess some power and privilege. If you are able-bodied, live in the United States and speak English, you have power and privilege.

As we approach the time when the One who possesses ultimate power and privilege, humbled Himself on the cross, we can ask ourselves, for what and for whom will we use our power and privilege for good?

Prayer

Lord, more often than not, we feel powerless in the face of the world's wars, violence and storms. But where we do have power and privilege, would you grant us the courage to exercise it for good? To share in whatever wealth we possess? To help those who are not able-bodied or English-proficient? To extend hospitality to the newcomer at church or the neighborhood? Prompt us to be gracious to the lonely and downtrodden. Thank you Lord, for your goodness and mercies. Amen.

Grace Presa is married to Neal, parent of two college-age sons, and a 4-legged canine

Mark 8:31-38

Contemporary music artist, Toby Mac, put Mark 8:36 to a song titled "Lose My Soul." The lyrics of that song can be found at: <https://genius.com/Tobymac-lose-my-soul-live-lyrics>

Notice the examples Toby Mac gives from his life and how he prays he will live in such a way, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" He prays that, "I don't wanna gain the whole world and lose my soul." What this looks like for him is: "Like I'ma be a daddy who's in the mix/ And I'm a be a husband who stays legit/ And I pray that I'm an artist who rises above/ The road that is wide and filled with self love."

Life, and not just this Lenten season, is a journey. Jesus calls the crowds and all his disciples to prepare them for what a life committed to Him and the cross means. His journey to His certain death and what that means for God's mission and for the calling upon all those who desire to follow him is a life marked by a heart that pursues Christ, that lives a life worthy of the calling, that exhibits that we want to comport our lives the Lord's way. Count the cost, pray to God to give you grace and courage, lean upon the power of the Spirit. When we are tempted or pressed on every side to not live up to our responsibilities, or to be less than truthful, or to cut corners because it would gain a bigger profit, or whatever might be the case that would besmirch the name of Christ and our confession of Christ as Lord... let's count the cost. With God, we have all. There is no one and nothing in the world that can even match or is worth who God is to us in Christ.

Prayer

Lord, I don't wanna gain the whole world and lose my soul. So help me when I'm about to fall. And if I do, rescue me and restore to me the life of joy and love you give to me. Light my path, grant me your wisdom, guide and guard my heart, my eyes, my ears, my mind, and all that I am so that you are the focus of my life. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

*Neal D. Presa is Vice President of Student Affairs and Vocational Outreach
and Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship*

Genesis 21:1-7, Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45, and Hebrews 1:8-12

Sick, sick, sick... all around me, it seems everyone is sick. There's nothing better than the flu, strep throat, RSV, or the latest round of Covid, to remind me that there are many things out of my control.

Like the young Arabic father I saw today at Urgent Care, whose own daughter will miss school because of her 104 degree fever and his quandary of caring for her while still making it to work... Like the growing numbers of families struggling to feed their children and still pay their rent... Like the wars in Gaza and Ukraine with all their devastation and loss of life... Like the South American migrant woman who drowned in the Rio Grande along with her two, young children, as people stood on the banks and watched... Like our nation's political and ideological divisions, humanity's callousness toward one another, or the growing divide between the world's wealthy and poor... All serve as daily reminders that so much of life is out of my control. Considered all together it could threaten to overwhelm me, a wave of sorrow, fear, and anger threatening to take me down on a wet, cold, grey winter's day.

But then I am reminded in Genesis that a barren Sarah bore a child in her old age, just as God had promised. And Psalm 105 reminds me to call on the name of the Lord, who remembers God's covenant forever and kept God's promise to rescue God's people from slavery, giving them the law and securing for them a place to live. Hebrews also reminds me that God spoke to us through God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh for us and our salvation, who will come back to make all things new. With these promises my eyes are lifted, once again, above the suffering and sin of this world, to see the eternal promises of our God our Savior. Because of Christ's redeeming grace, I need not fear what the future holds. By these assurances I hold fast to an eternal God who remains forever, and trust that the God who created "in the beginning" will keep God's promise to make all things new again.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for coming into the world in order to reveal these things to me. Thank you, holy Father, for continually reaching down to humanity, in order that we might be forgiven of our brokenness and sin, and lifted up from the darkness of this world to join in the vision you have for the world to come. Thank you for giving me this vision of hope for tomorrow, even as I live in this world of sin, today. By the Spirit's holy power, keep me ever confident in your love and of your promises.

Arlene Romaine is a Doctor of Ministry student (Pastoral Care and Counseling)

Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

In this sacred season, we embark on a pilgrimage of prayer, penitence, and preparation. This spiritual journey invites us to embrace acts of discipline, momentarily setting aside the treasures that hold significance in our lives. This Lenten season, let us draw spiritual inspiration from the great patriarchs and matriarchs who came before us. Their unwavering faith propelled them into the unknown, enabling them to endure as strangers in a foreign land. Through trials and tribulations, they clung steadfastly to the promises of God. The promises of a son to a barren family and the faith of that family to offer him back to God as an act of faith. The promises of a progeny too numerous to count, and the faith to persevere in the midst of dwindling numbers from war, famine, and exile. The promises of a Savior and the crushing reality of the cross did not dislodge the people's faith. During the weakest and darkest moments of their existence, they remained steadfast, and unmovable, relying on God Almighty as the originator and sustainer of their faith. During these 40 days, let us glaze inward, reflecting on our own journeys of faith. Where and in whom does our faith reside? As God remembered God's promises to these faithful servants, will God not honor God's promises to us? Therefore, let us give thanks and call on the Lord who is continually near to us, whose mercy is unwavering and love unending. Let our acts of discipline symbolize our commitment to a deeper connection with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as we prepare our hearts and minds for the resurrection joy that awaits us at the end of this Lenten season.

Prayer

Redeemer God and loving Savior, we come before you with hearts of gratitude and reverence. Let this Lenten season remind us of the depths of your mercy and benevolence toward us. This season, we call upon your peace that transcends all human understanding as we recognize you alone are our God of peace. Let our acts and actions towards others manifest as humility the result of the same mercy you extend to us, a people flawed but unconditionally loved by a nurturing and compassionate God. Grant us the strength to follow you faithfully, love you deeply, and depend on you fully. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

*Terry Ann Smith is Associate Dean of Institutional Assessment,
Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, and Director of the Certificate Program*

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Psalm 105 opens by telling us to give thanks to the Lord and sing praises to him; tell the world about his wonderful works. So what do you do if you're not feeling that way? Are you weary and burdened? Can you cover this month's rent and all your other expenses? Are your shoulders tight, your fingers are arthritic, or your knees no longer reliable? Has the tyranny of the urgent got you in its grips and you're not sure how you're going to meet those deadlines, attend that meeting and make time for friends and family who need you? Do you have enough energy to serve others with true joy?

The Lord our God has an answer.

- ⁴ Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
- ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
- ⁶ O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

Outward signs of faith are falsehoods without an inward search for God. Oh yes, it is easier to binge watch to forget, indulge in Ben n Jerry's, or worry on our own strength about family and the world. But God says: seek me; remember me; remember what I have done. Your lineage goes back much further than 23andMe can trace. You are part of God's chosen ones. When it feels like your days are filled with beatings more than blessings, remember you belong to the God who brought the Israelites out of slavery. You belong to the One who parted the Red Sea. God covered God's people with a cloud by day, provided fire at night. God provided quail and manna. God opened the rock, and water gushed out. If you're having trouble seeing the blessings in your own life, remember the blessings and miracles from long ago. That God is your God! You are one of God's chosen people.

Prayer

Lord, I am tired and weak. Fill me with your strength. Holy Spirit fill me so that I can testify to your goodness. When I forget, remind me whose I am. Remind me that the God who brought His people out of slavery is my God. The God who parted the Red Sea is my God...and I am yours.

Grace Presa grew up in the former Korean Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth, NJ

Exodus 19:1-9 and 1 Peter 2:4-10

“Resurrection and Reconciliation”

Once delivered from bondage in Egypt, “born on eagles wings and brought to God’s self,” the Israelites gather at Sinai to hear the voice of God. Just before God gives the Ten Words in Exodus, God gives Moses the identity of the newly delivered community: God’s treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation, one set apart. Peter’s first epistle borrows this language from the early Israelite writings to define the character of the newly forming Christ-centered communities. They too have similarly been “called out of darkness into his marvelous light:” a people belonging to God and a royal priesthood.

What is the significance of this connection between Old and New Testament writings? Both communities have been saved *from* oppression *unto* a new way of living. Deliverance and death from oppression is not the end, but for the purpose of being resurrected *unto* a new purpose. This purpose is priestly; it is one that mediates between God and humanity. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, the identity of a priestly kingdom is written on tablets of stone by the finger of God and delivered to the people by a mediator, Moses. These Ten Words define how the people should live in relationship to God and others not only to live together justly in community but to demonstrate God’s heart of justice and peace to the world. In the New Testament, Peter calls the readers to much the same purpose: a life that demonstrates God’s mercy.

Yet, the notion of being a kingdom of priests connects to being treasured children of God. How so? Is it not to be a people who mediate God’s “Shalom,” God’s “peace,” to the world? Is it not to be a people who live reconciled to God and then reconciled to each other as a witness for what life with God can be? It is not only to be people who have received God’s mercy, but through that mercy to live in peace with others, even as Christ teaches in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons and daughters of God.”

The cross and the resurrection of our Easter season signal the making of communities filled with light, hope, and peace. As children of God, we are the makers of that peace that is born out of our experience of God’s mercy and grace in our own lives. We will always have trouble. But as Christ reminds us, “I have overcome the world.” As we live into the resurrection of Christ, his overcoming of death and indeed all trouble, we are reminded that God is at work through our own hardships. By receiving God’s mercy and peace we possess the grist to make peace with others. We bring a more peace-filled demeanor with our words and actions. We bring a hope-filled perspective, one that sees beyond the present trouble into what God’s resurrection power can achieve.

This Lenten season, let us live into being resurrected from darkness and troubles into our new life: a treasured child of God that makes peace in the world.

Charles M. Rix is Director of the Master of Arts in Theological Studies & Ministry Studies

Acts 7:30-40

“Once upon a time...” From the earliest memories, a child remembers those stories, where they are invited to imagine. When we raised our two sons in our former home in Middlesex, NJ, in the first six years of their lives, we read them “Good Night Moon” and “A Very Hungry Caterpillar” and the favorite, “Brown Bear, Brown Bear.” We followed these readings with the four of us standing in the hallway where we had a framed picture of a Moses figure holding two stone tablets depicting the Ten Commandments, and we would recite the Decalogue together. As we tucked our sons to sleep, our family would then say The Apostles’ Creed together, and then pray the Lord’s Prayer (using debt/debtors). When they were around 4 or 5 yrs old, we would say the Lord’s Prayer in both Latin, Greek, and Spanish as well, and then when they were 6 yrs old, we would ask them which of the translations they wanted to recite. Of course, they chose the more difficult route... wanting to say all of them; it was a stall tactic to lengthen bedtime, but at least it was about the Lord’s Prayer. The translations are somewhere in the muscle memory of our brain/hearts, but you get the point. We remember by repetition.

Stephen, an early church deacon, offers a sweeping historical testimony in Acts 7 before the council presided by the high priest. Stephen’s is a sermon that takes his audience from God’s covenant with Abraham to Moses and then linking the prophets telling of those events to “the Righteous One” (7:52b). The story of the exodus with Moses, as with the story of Abraham is like a “Once upon a time” type of story. It’s an oral tradition that entralls, that evokes the collective memory because that story is our story. Like the creation narratives, the Flood, David and the kings and queens, the prophets, and the exile – these are the key moments that are etched in faith and inscribed upon hearts and minds. What Stephen does in our passage today is offer an added texture: just as God’s people rejected Moses, a promised prophet, then it is not far-fetched and, in fact, what occurred, that Jesus the promised One was also rejected. Stephen’s sermon/testimony calls his audience – yes, the high priest and the sacerdotal council but also anyone in the hearing of his voice and in the reading of his testimony, which includes us – to receive God’s prophetic messenger and the message. In fact, Jesus as the Word is both messenger and the message itself, the very embodiment of God’s promises and love. Yet again and again, humans reject, ignore, forget. Why?

That’s what this Lenten season seeks to figure out and seeks to undo.

Prayer

Righteous Lord, thank you for including us in your salvation story. Forgive us when we ignore, reject, or forget you and your word to us. Restore to us our heart’s memory so that we may delight you everyday. Amen.

Neal D. Presa is married to Grace, dad to Daniel & Andrew, & Calvin their puppy

Psalm 19

A pastor recently shared how her middle school students found the admonition from adults to “be kind” rather trite. In fact, they labeled it “cheugy” which meant the phrase “be kind” was uncool. This term was in an urban dictionary according to *The New York Times*. Something that is cheugy is out of touch with current trends or trying too hard to be trendy. In other words, “basic.” Be careful, because by the time you read this, the word cheugy will probably be cheugy so I don’t advise trying to slip it into conversation with young people. How did the word “kind” go out of fashion? Perhaps it was because they often heard adults being unkind. In the car or on the phone, parents didn’t seem to speak with kindness about other people at work, in the family or even at church. Complaints and criticisms, yes! There were plenty of examples of those heard. But how often do your kids or coworkers hear you proclaim, “I really like that person!” or “That waiter is really good at their job.”

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This verse so well encapsulates what we as Christians strive for that it is often heard in Christian worship. It reveals David’s humble acknowledgment that his words may not be true and his heart may not be pure, so he asks God to sanctify them both. It is reminiscent of Isaiah 6 when the angel touches his lips with a hot coal to remove his sin. That which emanates from our mouths reveal our iniquity so much so that in Matthew 15:11, Jesus teaches the disciples “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” Thankfully, our LORD is our strength and the One who redeems us from our sin.

Prayer

LORD, we ask you to purify our hearts and our lips so that we may not sin against you. Forgive us when our mouths and our thoughts are not in sync with your holiness. Holy Spirit dwell within and cleanse us of our iniquities. Bring us in line with you. You are our strength and redeemer and in you alone we trust. Amen.

Grace Presa is a Presbyterian deacon and President/Owner of Hollym Int’l Corp

John 2:13-22

A witness from the Temple janitor

Look at this mess! Sheep in the supply closet, pigeons nesting in the lampstands, droppings everywhere, tables overturned, account receipts blowing all around, and animals wandering all over downtown. What was this Jesus guy thinking?

Sure, the concessions may have gotten a bit out of hand. But we can't have people buying things in the Temple with Roman money, can we? And where are people supposed to get appropriate sheep or pigeons? And what would it be like to have sheep living in the middle of Jerusalem? Well... maybe kind of like things are right now...

So the concessions are NECESSARY, necessary so that we can do things the way we've always done them. And when the Sanhedrin Finance Team figured out that we could make money on it all... So maybe we need to reign it in a bit, but you don't just go around starting riots, tossing tables and coin boxes every which way, creating a public nuisance all because of what... how you feel about God?

Look at this mess! And what did he accomplish? I'll have to work some overtime, but the place will be cleaned up before we open tomorrow. It will take a couple of days to get reorganized, and the imperial inspector may have to come by, but all the vendors will reopen. Yep, by the end of the week, it will be as if nothing ever happened.

If this Jesus guy—he seems pretty bright, y'know—if he would actually take the time to go through channels, to work WITH the system, he MIGHT make some changes. And if he put that kind of effort in, he'd realize the tremendous pressure that comes from accommodating the government, and the economy, and keeping people happy; he'd realize you have to go along to get along.

Some things just aren't worth fighting... especially with nothing to gain. The powers of this world don't care about principles; they care about force. Does this Jesus really BELIEVE we should stand up for what we believe in? Does he really BELIEVE one person, standing up for principles, can change anything? For that to even BEGIN to work, we'd have to give up EVERYTHING for our faith, we'd have to be willing to DIE for our principles.

How will that make any difference... unless there's some sort of resurrection or new creation?

Prayer

Christ, shake us free from what we've always done. Spirit, help us dare to stand up to the powers and principalities. Maker God, give us strength to live our faith without compromise and grow into your resurrection. Amen.

*James Brumm is Assistant Professor of Reformed Studies and
Director of the Reformed Church Center and the Theological Writing Center*

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

At this writing, we were at worship service this morning and the closing hymn was that text written by Robert Keen (ca. 1787) whose first line serves as the hymn's title: How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,/ Is laid for your faith in his excellent word!/ What more can be say than to you he hath said,/ Who unto the Savior, who unto the Savior,/ Who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?

Another favorite classic hymn written by Samuel J. Stone (ca. 1866), whose first line also serves as the hymn's title: The church's one foundation/ Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;/ she is His new creation,/ by water and the word./ For heav'n He came and sought her/ to be His holy bride;/ with His own blood He bought her,/ and for her life He died.

As you read the lyrics of these two hymns, were you like me and hummed or sang the song? These two hymns have been in my heart's memory since I can remember singing these in that little congregation in San Bruno, California where 40 of us Filipino American immigrants helped established a Filipino American Worshiping community that would become the first Filipino American chartered congregation in the United Church of Christ. That community of faith, the experiences, and these songs provided a foundation of faith that lasts a lifetime.

When my maternal grandmother was bed ridden after an aneurysm and her cognitive capacities were declining as with her body, she still remembered hymns like these and the Lord's Prayer. But everything else and most everyone else, she forgot. This letter to the church at Corinth reminds us that God establishes our faith on the precious, eternal foundation of Jesus Christ, which no other builder, no earthly materials can withstand. Human strategies nor human wisdom in and of themselves are not the building blocks; they are tools used by Christ in service to Christ but they are not the building blocks. Lest we confuse Christ and our efforts, we would be rightly called foolish. Rather, the Spirit in this text renovates our thinking, re-designs our hearts, and does a makeover or even a do-over on our lives so that we do things God's way, we have the mind and heart of Christ. It's called being given a new life. God wouldn't have it any other way. After all, the Lord calls us precious, holy temples, in whom God's Spirit dwells. (3:16)

Prayer

Precious Lord, you are our rock, you are our foundation, the cornerstone who holds us together. Establish us upon your heart, your life, your love. Thank you that you make us holy because of your Spirit who dwells in us and among us. Amen.

Neal D. Presa is a pastor theologian ecumenist of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Mark 11:15-19

A congregation I previously served had, in the entry way to the sanctuary, a large wooden piece of art depicting this scene from the Gospels of Jesus chasing the money changers out of the Temple. It was an ominous piece, beautifully but ominous. After serving the congregation for a time, I suggested that we might find a different place to display it, as it did not necessarily convey the tone we wanted to offer for worship. Not long after we removed the piece, coincidentally, the family that donated the piece (who had moved away) came back to visit and inquired about its location. They disagreed with my assertion about the tone, and suggested it is always good to be reminded that greed is counter to our faith.

While I do not disagree that the dangers of greed are an important lesson, I am still not sure the art piece was right for the sanctuary entrance. Also, I am not sure I agree with that being the primary message of this particular passage. I believe it has less to do simply with greed than it has to do with the impact such actions motivated by our greed and selfishness have on the people with whom we interact each day. For, as we know, Jesus was not challenging the practices of the vendors and money changers in the temple, as this was necessary for the practice of temple worship for those traveling from afar. Instead, his anger was about how they were twisting their practices to take advantage of the people. Seems like something that should make one angry.

As we consider the call of “Worshiping God, Witnessing to the World,” we must always consider how our practices make it possible for others to do the same, and cease those practices that stand as obstacles for others. In this way, how we choose to worship itself becomes a witness to those around us. Further, we are called to righteous indignation when we witness others placing such obstacles in the pathways of others.

Prayer

Gracious God, help me remember that how I act in all aspects of my life demonstrate who I am as a follower of Christ. Open my eyes to the ways that my words or actions or those of others might be a stumbling block for others in their faith, whether intended or not. Guide me to be one who builds up those around me and calling for the fair treatment of all, witnessing as much with my actions as I do with my words. Amen.

Mark Pettis is a Doctor of Ministry student (Missiology and Global Christianity)

Jeremiah 33:1-9

Encouragement through the ages

In Jeremiah 33: 1-9, God reminds Jeremiah of the Lord's faithfulness and promises to restore God's people.

Jeremiah lived during the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE in the kingdom of Judah, during a tumultuous period marked by political upheaval and moral decline. Among the issues of the day included:

- Idolatry and Religious Apostasy
- Social Injustice
- Political Instability

Within a society that had real issues, Jeremiah found resistance to his messages of repentance and warnings of impending judgment. Jeremiah endured personal suffering as result of his prophecy. He faced ridicule, imprisonment and physical abuse for faithfully delivering God's messages to the people.

These were times of trouble, and it's safe to assume Jeremiah and those that followed God felt disturbed and discouraged, even dismayed with the conditions around them. But in spite of the desolation and chaos that surrounded Jeremiah on earth, God spoke words of hope and renewal.

This passage is a powerful reminder of God's supremacy & commitment to the Lord's promises. God's invitation for Jeremiah to call upon the Lord emphasizes the power of prayer, and God's willingness to respond. God has an intimate relationship with believers who are humbly willing to reach out, and the Lord comforts and strengthens those who seek God. It seems almost cliché to point out how God's word transcends time; nevertheless I find it incredibly soothing that encouragement to this major prophet almost 2700 years ago has words, concepts and reminders that are entirely relevant to me today. God's promises are deeply grounding and comforting, which is balm to my spirit that can feel depleted in 2024.

Heavenly Father, I am not a major prophet (more like a minor pilgrim) but I do seek a vibrant faith in spite of challenging modern circumstances. The words you spoke to Jeremiah are clear and meaningful & they remind me that you are a God who is faithful, and always at work for the good of your people. Thank you God. Your intimate care is food for my weary soul. Thank you for being faithful to your promises; thank you for your abundant patience for me as I attempt to make my way down a narrow path, towards a narrow gate. Thank you for the forgiveness that was given to me through the blood of your son Jesus Christ. I love you. Amen.

Matt Codling is a close friend of Neal Presa, and is a product manager with Claris, a software development subsidiary of Apple Computer

Isaiah 30:15-18

Action, production, results, due dates, deadlines, project completions... our reality thrusts around this unending list. Our decisions cannot consider anything that resembles inaction. We simply affirm “we can do anything”, “Just do it!”, “If you work hard, things will turn out right”. In the end, we embrace those things we can control. Yet, if we are to be saved, the prophet seems to affirm the opposite. The prophet is quite emphatic that it is God who makes things happen and has the final say in our world; even more, insisting we are to embrace God’s reality with complete confidence and total trust.

This prophetic word seems to go against our DNA. We cannot sit still and let the world around us collapse. We say in protest, “Don’t just stand there, do something!”, because sitting back, inaction, doing nothing is not an alternative. Yet, we are victims of our own precocity. It is precisely this well-intentioned controlling activity that has brought the world to a place where the many ills we experience have caught up to us; and now, we can almost predict the extinction of humanity.

We can feel the full impact of our senses in our world. It is a challenge to look at the world we devour with our senses and ignore the weight it has in our decision making. There is hope yet because the prophet’s request is not a passive one, it is not inaction, rather it is a dynamic rest, a dynamic returning. Amid the injustice, the hurt, depression, and darkness we find it very difficult to stay put, to listen. Yet the prophet’s advice of waiting is a dynamic one because it is founded on our very hope of God’s dynamic mercy, grace, and power for justice for those who wait for God.

Prayer

Almighty God, this Lent we surrender into your dynamic action that is sparked by listening to your guidance rather than our own. We rest in and return to your mercy and grace as your justice is proclaimed. Help us listen to people and moments where we find you speaking to us in the midst of this dark and difficult time. Amen

Carlos Gonzalez is a Master of Arts student (Pastoral Care & Counseling)

John 12:1-11

Mary's Witness: A Sweet Fragrance

There is something about a lingering fragrance filling the air that recalls a former time and space. Even as you read this devotion, the memory of a fragrance, whether perfume or the blossom of a sweet flower, may bring back a time to remember. It does not need to be expensive to leave a lasting impression. It stimulates a connection to a memory.

It is the final week of Jesus' earthly existence. As each day unfolds, every experience proved significant. It was the time of Passover and Jesus arrived at the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary where a dinner was prepared.

In a move that was both controversial and against culture, Mary lavished perfume made of pure nard on Jesus' feet and, according to the text, dried them by releasing her hair. What an odd thing to do! Yet, scripture revealed that this is not the first time Mary found herself at the feet of Jesus. During another visit, Mary was at Jesus' feet soaking in his teaching to her sister's displeasure.

But this time was different. Mary's act of worship opened the way for Jesus to draw out his betrayer and, at the same time, affirm the nard's future use at the time of his death. Mary's act of worship was her act of witness. Her act solidified Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, and his salvific work on the cross.

The members of the crowd who showed up were convinced even the more that Jesus must be eliminated. Too many were drawn to believing in him.

How willing are we to go against culture and risks controversy to worship Jesus and witness to our belief in him? May our witness be a sweet fragrance that lingers and draws others to heart of Jesus.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, may we be as bold as Mary in our worship and our witness. Help us through the gift of the Holy Spirit to live in such a way that brings honor to you and ignites a desire in others to come to know you. Amen.

*Faye Taylor is Assistant Professor of Spiritual Formation & Field Education,
and Director of Field Education & Career Services*

Psalm 119:9-16

Obey Your Thirst

“Obey Your Thirst” is a former slogan of the soft drink, Sprite. This campaign, popular in the 90’s and early 2000’s employed the most influential athletes and music artists of the time to present Sprite as the supreme quencher for the thirst experienced in our physical bodies.

According to a study conducted at Harvard Medical School, the human body necessitates a steady supply of fluids to transport nutrients, eliminate waste, and lubricate and cushion joints. This study suggests that the human brain has a built-in mechanism, called the *lamina terminalis*, which signals that the body is running low on fluids and generates the sensation of thirst, indicating the need to drink water or other fluids.¹

Like our bodies, our souls need to be nourished, cleansed, and equipped to live in communion with God and humankind. In Psalm 119:9-16 NRSV, the Psalmist displays a *thirst of the soul*... a longing for righteousness which can only be satisfied by God’s Word. The Psalmist ponders the question of how to live a “*pure*” life (v.9). The Psalmist answers the query and asserts that the pathway to purity must be paved with a commitment to live according to God’s Word. God’s Word in this context encompasses God’s laws and God’s promises. The Psalmist proceeds and provides a blueprint of how to live according to God’s Word: *seek* God (v.10), *treasure* God’s Word (v.11), *learn* God’s Word (v.12), *speak* God’s Word (v.13), *rejoice* in God’s Word (v.14), *meditate* on God’s Word (v.15), and *remember* God’s Word (v.16). The Psalmist’s prescription for purity also seems to suggest that God’s Word be embodied in one’s heart (v.11-12), mind (v.12,15-16), body (v.13), and soul (v.14).

As we journey through this Lenten season, let us become more attuned with our spiritual thirst. Let us obey the thirst of our souls and quench it with “The Living Water,” Jesus Christ. Allow Jesus to be for us our soul’s sole nourisher and satisfier. Let us immerse our *whole* selves in God’s Word and through it find ourselves on the pathway to “purity” and righteousness.

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the precepts and promises of your Word. For your Word is indeed a “*lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway.*” (Psalm 119:105) Just as the deer pants for water (Psalm 42:1), help us to develop souls that thirst after you. Allow us, like the Psalmist, to desire to obey the thirst of our souls by living according to your Word. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Kimberly Tolbert is a Master of Divinity student

¹ “The Neuroscience of Thirst: How your brain tells you to look for water,”
<https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2019/neuroscience-thirst-brain-tells-look-water/>

John 12:34-50 (4, 34-36)

Walk in the Light

The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?" Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them."

I love all things Lent. I pull practices from my Reformed tradition but also practices from my Catholic friend. We even have set up the stations of the cross in the woods on my property for our families. I love Lent. When I think of Lent, I think of letting go of things that are unnecessary and sinking into the spiritual practices I may have let lapse throughout the year. It in many ways is a re-set spiritually for me. This Lent I approach it with a broken heart for our world. For the wars that are raging, the people that are hungry and the ones that have no Hope. I think of light and darkness when it comes to these things that overwhelm me. In regards to the scripture for today there is hope. There is hope for light to come in this world and that light is Jesus Christ. If we have Jesus, we have hope of better things to come, although they may not be on this side of heaven. The darkness can overtake us at times, but we have hope. We need to remember that Jesus is the light of the world and without him we are in darkness. Look for the light this Lenten season.

Prayer

Lord, bring light to the dark places in this world and in our hearts. Help us to share the light wherever we go and in whatever we do. In your mercy, hear our prayers. Amen.

Laura Osborne is a Doctor of Ministry student (Missiology & Global Christianity)

Philippians 2:1-11

Outside the context of religion, outside the doors of the local church, what do we think of when we hear the word “sacrifice”? Seems we often associate it with some sort of goal-oriented pursuit to better ourselves, our families, our companies, or a team we’re on. Great athletes sacrifice hours honing their skills. Successful entrepreneurs, years building businesses. Their sacrifices, while real, are not nearly as honorable or important as the sacrifices of Martin Luther King Jr. fighting for civil rights, or the hundreds of first responders killed on 9/11. What about those in war zones or impoverished places that sacrifice their safety to bring healing, comfort, and basic humanitarian aid to millions? Their sacrifices have impact, value. Sacrifice can change society, affect culture, dismantle systems, and save lives. It can be recognized and praised or go completely unnoticed. It can be lauded or ridiculed. Whatever the case, self-sacrifice is a Christ-like act.

During the season of Lent, we focus on sacrifice. Some sacrifice comfort or food, or a favorite practice. Suspending regular routines to allow the Spirit to speak at a louder volume. Inviting a bit of discomfort to create space for humility and reflection. Giving up what is easy for hard won perspective. Trying to connect with what Christ sacrificed not just at the cross, but to even walk the earth.

Paul writes in Philippians 2:6-8

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death —
even death on a cross!*

Sacrifice is about obedience. Learning from Christ to put away our own desires and instead strive to honor God in everything. To give ourselves fully for the cause of the Kingdom. To love as Jesus loved. To humble ourselves by becoming obedient even to death. As we reflect on that, until the stone is rolled away, let’s not forget to acknowledge the sacrifice of those around us seeking the same and to honor past sacrifices that exemplify Christ. As we do we will grow closer to the One who gave everything for us. Within sacrifice we find grace. Within grace we find hope.

Prayer

Gracious God, giver of all good things, tune our hearts to selfless sacrifice. Remind us of your love and inspire us to love each other. Empower us through your Holy Spirit to be obedient and grateful while drawing us nearer to you. Amen.

Jamie DeVries is a Doctor of Ministry student (Transformational Preaching)

1 Corinthians 10:6–13

Today's scripture reading is a grand sweep, but the center holds. From the outset we hear the echo of George Santayana's axiom, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We also hear an "us/them" paradigm, where "they" are wanton idolaters. The reader is confronted with quite a frightful setting. We are then admonished not to complain, and our confidence is questioned. Where then is the compassionate Jesus of the Gospels? Yes, here Jesus Christ is! The cosmic Christ is here with God proclaiming that (1) you are not alone; (2) God will challenge you; but (3) God will hold you steadfast throughout.¹

If you've taken on a new ministry, or let go of an unhelpful habit this Lenten season, then you are about one month into your journey. Accept 1 Cor. 10: 6–13 as your 3rd base coach's clap on the back. You've got this, and if you think you don't, God does anyway, just as God always did. May the Lord test you and bless you in every good way this Lent. With all the humility, faith, and hope Lent requires, Thomas Merton's prayer is ever-ready for us.²

Prayer

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end,
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

*T. Patrick Milas is Director of the Gardner A. Sage Library
and Assistant Professor of Theological Bibliography & Research*

¹ George Santayana (1905). *The life of reason: Reason in common sense*. NY: Scribner's, p. 284.

² Thomas Merton (1958). "The Merton prayer" from *Thoughts in Solitude*. Farrar Straus Giroux.

Mark 11:1-11

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.

We follow your Son, O God, up the mountain to Jerusalem,
seeing so much of the world stretched out,
hearing voices from all the world around us.
We follow your Son and hear your world crying out for help.
We need your help to become your help for them.

Silence

We follow your Son, O God, into the streets of Jerusalem,
seeing so much pain,
hearing so much despair and hopelessness.
We follow your Son and know so many are desperate for help.
We need your help to bring your healing to them.

Silence

We try to follow your Son, O God,
away from accolades and into selfless ministry,
seeing the powers of this world confronting us,
hearing the voices that expect us to fail.
We follow your Son and know we must take up our crosses.
We need your help to truly be the body of Christ.

Silence

Christ was truly God, and he gave up everything and died on a cross.
We are the body of Christ, doing our best to follow.
Amen.

*James Brumm is Assistant Professor of Reformed Studies and
Director of the Reformed Church Center and the Theological Writing Center*

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Following my ordination in the United Methodist Church the bishop appointed me to a former Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB). In 1968 The Methodist Church and the EUB merged and became The United Methodist Church. Having studied my Methodist History and Polity closely I knew this congregation descended from earlier mergers of German speaking Methodist congregations, Mennonite, and German speaking Reformed Churches. The mixture of Arminian, Anabaptist, and Reformed Theology was held together tenuously by their common German roots. As I began my work with the congregation, I quickly realized that reading about this and being sent to lead such a congregation are far different.

As I struggled to understand the divides within the congregation, I found even after all these years some who felt my preaching and bible studies contained messages with too little grace and others felt I preached and taught too much grace and not enough repentance. As we approached our first Maundy Thursday together, I thought it would be meaningful to share Holy Communion for the worship service. But the worship team disagreed, and they presented me with a different ritual – foot washing.

How many times had I wanted to have a foot washing service only to be told no one would participate? Now to my surprise the congregation asked for it. I imagined the people coming forward in a candlelit sanctuary to have their feet washed by the pastors. But this was a large congregation so how would we possibly wash each other's feet with so many? That was when they told me that the pastors were the ones who generally had their feet washed by the lay leaders. I immediately began to protest, and they reminded me of Peter.

Foot washing is a humbling experience, both to perform and to receive. But for that congregation it was more than just a remembrance of something Jesus did for his disciples – it was a sacramental moment. It brought together all of those disparate traditions into one meeting place where leaders, ordained and lay, could experience the grace that poured out when repentance and forgiveness unite through the sign of service in the towel and the basin. That congregation witnessed to a different kind of leadership through this act of worship that I share with my students to this day – one that requires leaders to get on their knees sometimes and other times to sit quietly and receive.

Prayer

Holy One, you humbled yourself for our sake and modeled true leadership for us. As we continue our journey through the Paschal Mystery guide us in your way, so we may be known for our love of you and one another. Amen.

*Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne is Assistant Professor of Worship
and Preaching and Director of the Chapel*

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

Sight is one of the five natural senses. What we look upon with our eyes often affects our outlook and destiny. Many of the things we give attention to are troubling and wearisome to our spirits. In our time we are witnessing wars, political chaos, oppression, bigotry, and hatred. Too often we focus upon distractions that add no value to life, but rather drain our time and energies. These include social media, suggestive images and readings, and other matter that enters our 'eye gates' and pollutes our minds.

God's Word reminds us that we are to walk, to live our lives, by faith and not by our (natural) sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). This was, and often still is, a problem for God's people. In the book of Numbers, the former Hebrew slaves, and a mixed multitude of others, wandered through the wilderness. After some time, they became frustrated with their journey, and the lack of desirable food and water. When they did not see any hope for improvement in their circumstance, they began to speak against God and Moses.

How often do we become discouraged with the pace of our journey, and the lack of seeing what we desire come quickly to fruition? In their impatience the people sought to lay blame on God and their leader. As a result of their disrespect, God sent poisonous snakes that bit many of the people, and they died. However, God also provided the means for the people to be healed. "The Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." (Numbers 21:8)

The image of the serpent upon a pole has become the universal symbol for medicine. And the Numbers passage foreshadowed God's provision of Jesus on the Cross. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:14-15)

God promised that whoever looks unto, and believes on, Jesus shall live eternally. This is the good news which causes us to rejoice in this season. It is summed up in the words of a hymn written by William Augustine Ogden in 1887 entitled "Look and Live."

"I've a message from the Lord, Hallelujah!
The message unto you I'll give.
'Tis recorded in (God's) Word, Hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live."
"Look and Live," my (friend), live.
Look to Jesus now and live.
'Tis recorded in (God's) Word, Hallelujah!
It is only that you "look and live."

Prayer

Gracious God, forgive us for looking upon things that are displeasing to you. Avert our eyes from whatever drains or distracts us from your will and way. And cause us to lift up our eyes, to look to Jesus, and to live.

Robert "Bobby" Williams is a Doctor of Ministry student in Transformational Preaching

The Great Prayer Vigil of Easter/Holy Saturday

If you have never celebrated the Easter Vigil, you should do so. Find an Episcopalian or Roman Catholic friend and attend together. Better yet, find an Orthodox friend and go to that Vigil; Orthodox Holy Week is usually a different week from western traditions, so you can spend Holy Saturday night out without too much strain. And Orthodox Easter Vigils often last all night and include parading and singing outside a bit, all to return to celebrate inside the sanctuary decorated in Easter glory.

We retell faith stories, covering the sweep of creation from beginning, through redemption and prophecy and more redemption, to Resurrection and endless possibility. We share fire, light, water, bread, and cup. We welcome old and new friends, share a meal, have a party, and we get another glimpse at how much bigger and more fantastic our Easter faith is than we sometimes remember.

If nothing else, read the Scriptures below and say the prayer with friends, saying the bold parts together.

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13; 22:1-18;
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:1b-13, 17-18;
Isaiah 55:1-11; 12:2-6;
Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6;
Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37:1-14;
Zephaniah 3:14-20;
Romans 6:3-11;
Mark 16:1-8

In your dying, O Christ, you destroyed our death.
All that required us to be who we were,
all that separated us from you, is gone.

**Help us to continue to turn from sin, every day,
to work every day to remove
the conditions of death, the causes of death, and the attitudes of death
from the world around us.**

In your rising, you restored our life.
Where before we had only a fate, now we have possibilities.

**Lead us to foster life wherever we are,
through our actions, through our relationships, through our economics.**

In your living among us, you transformed our life.
No longer does our survival need to be our chief focus, our chief end.

**Challenge us to live for others,
and, in living for others, to live for you,
and to have you live eternally in us.**

By your will and because of your boundless love for us
we find ourselves standing on the threshold between Old Creation and New,
looking at a world filled with your life and love.

**By your grace, walk with us into Easter and beyond;
help us see where,
even amid the shadows of the old life,
your new life awaits us;
help us, every day,
to embrace hope rather than fear,
joy rather than anger,
life rather than death.**

*James Brumm is Assistant Professor of Reformed Studies and
Director of the Reformed Church Center and the Theological Writing Center*

The Great Prayer Vigil of Easter/Holy Saturday

**Job 14:1-14; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16;
Philippians 2:1; Matthew 27:57-66**

Holy Saturday remains a favorite liturgical day because it includes liminal space. Holy Saturday, the day after hope has been transformed into hopelessness, is a space of contemplation. The hearts and minds of the disciples are confused by the trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. Holy Sunday (Easter) reminds us that “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”

But before Resurrection Sunday, Holy Saturday encourages us to become neither dejected or complacent as we stand at the threshold of transition. The critical task is to lean into and learn from the lessons of our descending. Viktor Frankl states, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Holy Saturday Liminal Lessons:

First, *humble and empty yourself* of the virtues that hinder your progress and prevent your peace. Successful ministry and mission is frequently confronted with sabotage that negatively impacts our emotions and behaviors. This sabotage can be the result of injustice, prejudices, and oppression (Philippians 2:3-5). Humility empowers us to survive the sabotage and rise in triumphant love. Your Holy Saturday liminal space provides an opportunity to throw off the old person and put on Christ.

Second, *look for the Gracious Givers* to comfort and protect you during your Holy Saturday. Matthew 27:57-62 reminds us that there will be Gracious Givers like Joseph of Arimathea who believe in our vision and program and will commit their resources to our success. *Look for the Gracious Givers* the Most High allows to cross your path. Let them offer you a resting place and comfort during your spiritual trials. Use your Holy Saturday to reflect on these human gifts.

Third, *wrestle with the “matters” of inquisitive guards*. Matthew 27: 63-66 tells us that there will be skeptics of your vision, plans, and directions. These individuals have studied your strategic directions. They know your strengths, challenges, actions, and talents. They place road blocks and barriers to contain and defeat God’s plan for your lives. Use your Holy Saturday to *wrestle with the “matters” of inquisitive guards*. Learn from the resistance to examine and maturely respond to ministry challenges.

Fourth, *choose with righteousness the righteous path*. Matthew 27:63-66 hints that a Holy Saturday with liminal space is not unique to Jesus. In the text the inquisitive guard calls Pilate “Lord.” Lord is not a title unique to Jesus. Also, human freedom to choose rightly is not unique to Jesus. Pilate had the opportunity to change his mind about Jesus and make a decision that was just and noble. Pilate had time to reflect on the exhortations from his wife, who warned him to do justice, love mercy, and walk humble with God. Pilate allowed his privilege, his position, and his perceived power to nudge him into an unjust, unloving, and arrogant decision.

Question: What will you do with your Holy Saturday Liminal Space?

Prayer: God of might and power move me to exercise the lessons of Holy Saturday

*Micah L. McCreary is President, John Henry Livingston Professor of Theology,
and a General Synod Professor*

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday

I can imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome walking to the tomb in the early morning darkness just before dawn. I see them grief-stricken, talking softly about the horrific crucifixion of Jesus on Friday; then turning their conversation to their task which was to give Jesus a proper burial with spices they had prepared. I imagine they were a bit weary and tired from lack of sleep and concern for the uncertainty of their lives going forward without Jesus, their Teacher and Rabbi.

I imagine them walking with their heads down in despair and in part to pay attention to the ground as they stepped in the darkness. In conversation, they began to discuss the logistics of their task, mentioning their concern about who would roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb. A task physically impossible for them and legally forbidden. Yet they continued on their way.

They arrived at the tomb, looked up and discovered the stone already rolled away. An angel was inside the tomb bearing witness to the fact, that Jesus of Nazareth had arisen and was once again among the living. I imagine Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome completely flabbergasted by what they are seeing and hearing—excitement, fear, puzzlement, confusion—speechless to explain something so extraordinary. The stone rolled away, Jesus gone, an angel dressed in radiant white clothing talking to them! Who would believe them? Who would believe us?

The women fled the tomb trembling and bewildered, afraid to share the miraculous news of Jesus' resurrection. We know from Matthew's account that eventually, the women found courage to tell the story of the risen Savior! What joy and hope it brings to individuals and communities to know that the Christ is among the living, going before us and at times walking along side us in the midst of every life circumstance that we encounter.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is still a jaw-dropping, supernatural story that can be hard to put into words when you experience the joy, peace, love and forgiveness of Jesus the Christ. Yet, for this very reason, the story needs to be told. Many in our local and global communities live daily in situations and circumstances that if Jesus was dead, there would be little to no hope. Thanks be to God, Jesus lives!

Prayer

Living God, we are reminded today, that the risen Christ is present in our world. May we cling to that reality in faith and find courage to tell our story and spread hope throughout the world.

Jacqueline Madison-McCreary is a pastor, educator, and spiritual director

Isaiah 25:6–9; Psalm 114;
1 Corinthians 5:6b–8; Luke 24:13–49
Easter Evening

After a day of grappling with the incomprehensible claims that Jesus (after a terrible trial, crucifixion, death, and burial) has been resurrected, two disciples trudge toward the village of Emmaus. They are astonished at the resurrection claims made by their sister disciples. They do not doubt the sisters; rather, they experience the whole situation as a trigger.

The claims of resurrection are of themselves incomprehensible, but coupled with the terrible abiding images of the crucifixion and the trauma of having their teacher killed by religious leaders and the state, the Good News is not enough to eliminate the pain and fear. The two disciples are on an emotional roller-coaster. They do not know what to think, feel, do, or believe.

Jesus joins them and says, “Oh foolish ones.” He may have been winking as he spoke. It reminds me of one of those teaching moments when you take your students to another level. You smile, you wink, and you say something provocative to summon their attention. Jesus is saying, “Hold on! You think you are trippin’ now—just wait.”

This is an Easter evening story. The miracle has occurred; now is an opportunity to stamp the miracle moment on the recesses of these disciples’ minds. Jesus is the master teacher. He is the Rabbi of Rabbis. His technique is andragogy at its best. Jesus does not spend time talking theory and obscure principles. Jesus shares, interprets, and presents Hebrew scriptures that reveal who he is, as well as the nature of his teaching and ministry. Jesus, the Bread of Life, makes himself known in the breaking of bread. Jesus, who is the Word, interprets the word.

Jesus’ sermon to the disciples on Emmaus Road, reminds me of a sermon by Rev. Dr. Frederick G. Sampson II. Dr. Sampson explained that since his brother had cancer, his sister had cancer, and his parents had cancer, he was not surprised to learn that he had cancer. Soon after the news became public, a member of his community came to him and said, “Preacher, I have heard you preach at your church and people are healed.

Sampson said, “You heard right.”

“Preacher,” she continued, “I also heard that you lay hands on the sick and they were healed. Is that right?”

Sampson replied, “You heard right.”

“So,” said the woman, “why are you talking about, worried about, and preaching about your cancer? Can’t you heal yourself? And if not, why aren’t you mad at God?”

Sampson said, “God knows everything. And if God knows everything, then God knows I have cancer and God knows how to cure my cancer. But maybe God wants me to be an example of trust and rest in a God that can, but sometimes does not, intervene in the mess we create.”

Questions: What trauma do you need Jesus to agitate and preach to? What tragedy in your life will God use to testify to others?

*Micah L. McCreary is President, John Henry Livingston Professor of Theology,
and a General Synod Professor*



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