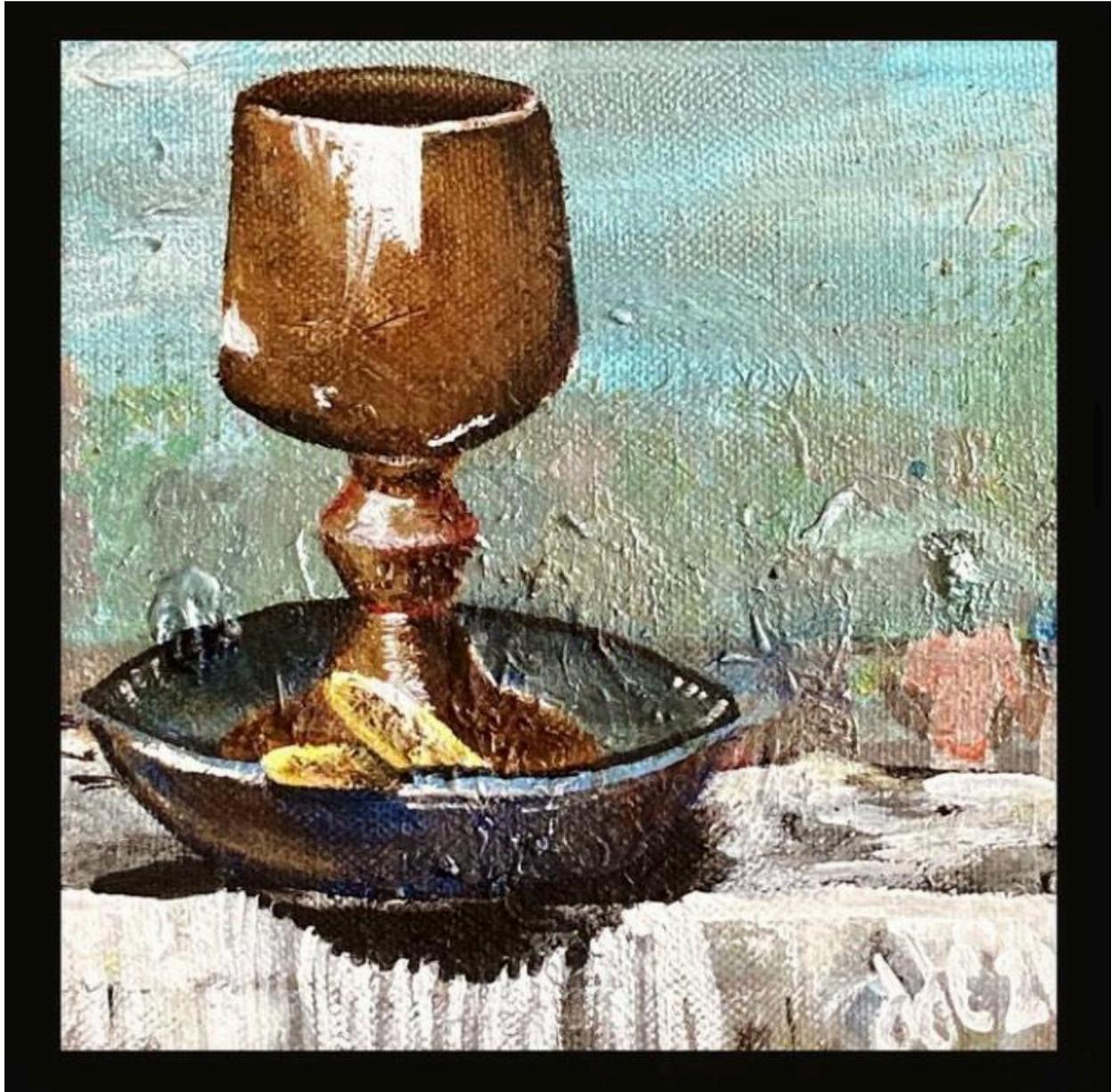


Prayerful Reflections

A Daily Devotional for Lent 2024



Edited by Julia Styles

Prayerful Reflections: A Daily Devotional for Lent 2024

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Cover art by Julie Jane Capel

About the Artist



As an internationally selling modern impressionist painter, Julie Jane Capel looks at the common world and human emotions by capturing the passage of time.

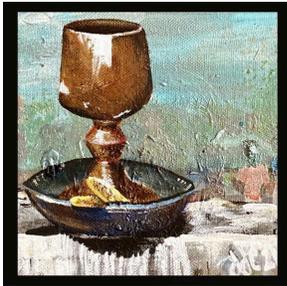
Specifically, the ever changing movement of beauty, justice and faith. Art then becomes a window into her life motto:

Love God. Love others. Laugh and paint the colors. Lament and change the injustices.

@JJCPAINTINGS is a collection created to be accessible – art that can easily be hung in your kitchen or living room. Art that may provoke comfort and/or conviction.

Julie has been painting since she was 14 and over these past two and a half decades her style and subject matter have evolved with her lived experiences as a: pastor, trauma chaplain, community organizer, census worker, field director for a national congressional campaign and global traveler.

In 2009 she received her BFA, and in 2013 her MDiv (Masters of Divinity) from North Park University and Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL. Since then she has had a coast to coast traveling exhibit of 40 paintings on Isaiah 58 that is currently residing in Chicago, IL. She has also been in numerous communal and solo shows - selling commissioned and pre-created paintings for 14 years. Currently, Julie has a solo show of over 150 paintings in Arlington, Virginia at Century21 Redwood. All are welcome to the Closing Art Night held on April 12th from 5-8pm at 1934 Wilson Blvd. Arlington VA.



The Body of Christ by Julie Jane Capel, 2021

The Body of Christ started in May during the first in-person church service I attended. During the Covid era I had learned that painting was a way I, personally, truly entered into corporate worship. The art stayed in process until many months later when we took the Eucharist together as a congregation. I was struck by how creating with your hands and taking Communion are both deeply woven into the physicality of Jesus' presence on earth.

Hope, Even in Darkness by Julie Jane Capel, 2021

One night during a spiritually challenging portion of being a transitional pastor I was doing a prayer walk around the church building. Interceding for a congregation returning from Covid to a new normal. (At the same time searching for a settled pastor) While praying, the moon illuminated the outdoor cross and brought a deep hope that the darkness would not prevail. We learn from Jesus' experience that real resurrection requires real death. Thus, as Resurrection People, who live amongst darkness and death, light and hope exist and can be found.



A note from the editor

Prayerful Reflections is a daily resource for connecting with God and the larger Christian community during the season of Lent, the 45 days prior to Easter. Christians around the world practice Lent as a way to meditate/reflect on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how Jesus influences our lives today.

Inspired by the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, or sacred listening, each daily reflection will be an opportunity to **Read** the Bible, **Reflect** on the message, **Respond** to what we have heard, **and Rest** in the love of God. This devotional could be read independently or with a community. If you would like to connect virtually, the reflections are posted daily at www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com/blog with opportunities to comment.

You are welcome to share this free resource with anyone you like, just send them the link www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com/prayerful-reflections and they will be able to download a free PDF version of *Prayerful Reflections: A Daily Devotional for Lent 2024*.

I started publishing *Prayerful Reflections* in 2021 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the new reality of socially-distanced churches. An online devotional seemed like the appropriate way for Christians from around the world to connect in their shared identity in Christ, especially during Lent and Advent. I also published *Prayerful Reflections* out of a deep yearning to share my thoughts about God and to amplify the voices of female theologians. You will notice that all 45 authors presented in this devotional are women. Jesus called women to proclaim the Good News to the world, not just to women or children, but also to men. So although this devotional is written by all women, it is meant for ALL people.

The theologies and interpretations of scripture held in these pages are valuable and worth reading. The women represented in *Prayerful Reflections* are pastors, chaplains, authors, spiritual directors, teachers, parents and community leaders. We range in age, ethnicity, race, denominational background, political and theological stances, and are from varied locations across North America. What do we have in common? We all follow Jesus and have been prompted by the Holy Spirit to share the insight God has given us through scripture. I want to thank all of the women who made this volume of *Prayerful Reflections* possible; your time, thought, prayers and insight are invaluable.

-Rev. Julia L. Styles

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Opening God's prayers to God

A Reflection for Ash Wednesday, February 14 by Rev. Mary Putera, Ph.D.

Lectionary Texts for 2/14/2024: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 51:1-17; II Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 58:1-12

Read

Isaiah 58:1-12; The Inclusive Bible

- 1- “Shout for all you are worth,
raise your voice like a trumpet!
Proclaim to the people their faults,
tell the house of Leah and Rachel and
Jacob their sins!
- 2- They seek me daily
they long to know my ways,
like a nation that wants to act with
integrity
and not ignore the Law of its God.
They ask me for laws that are just,
they long for God to draw near.
- 3- Yet they say, “Why should we fast
if you never see it?
Why do penance
if you never notice?
- 4- Because when you fast, it’s business as
usual,
and you oppress all your workers!
Because when you fast, you quarrel and
fight
and strike the poor with your fist!
Fasting like yours today
will never make your voice heard on
high!
- 5- Is that the sort of fast that pleases me –
a day when people humiliate
themselves,
hanging their heads like a reed
lying down on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call fasting,
a day acceptable to YHWH?
- 6- On the contrary!
This is the sort of fast that pleases me:
Remove the chains of injustice!
Undo the ropes of the yoke!
Let those who are oppressed go free,
and break every yoke you encounter!
- 7- Share your bread with those who are
hungry,
and shelter homeless poor people!
Clothe those who are naked,
and don’t hide from the needs of your
own flesh and blood!
- 8- Do this, and your light will shine like the
dawn –
and your healing will break forth like
lightning!
Your integrity will go before you,
and the glory of YHWH will be your
rearguard.
- 9- Cry, and YHWH will answer;
call, and God will say, “I am here” –
provided you remove from your midst
all oppression, finger pointing, and
malicious talk!
- 10- If you give yourself to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your shadows will become like

noon.

11- YHWH will always guide you,
giving relief in desert places.
God will give strength to your bones

and you will be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never run dry.

12- You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
and build upon age-old foundations.
You will be called Repairer of Broken
Walls,
and Restorer of Ruined Neighborhoods.

Reflect

The Word of God is always a “we thing”, spoken to a people! This text addresses the community of God. Therefore I gathered a small community to bring forward this devotional. Our work together has influenced what I have written here. We began by reading the text above and Rabbi Harold Kushner’s quote: “In Jewish thought, a sin is not an offense against God, an act of disobedience. A sin is a missed opportunity to act *humanly*”. In preparing this devotional, I trust that wisdom is formed in relational interdependence, with one another, with God and with the Living Word. This is an application of the meaning to Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. This is one way we act more humanly, to invite to the table a multiplicity of God’s people to God’s table to chew on God’s Word.

Personally, I have been reposing in this text of Isaiah 58:1-12, sitting with a trust that in doing so God would speak through this WORD. God is Faithful. In the quiet, this came: “Pray the prayers of God to God until you enter the flow of God’s answers to the prayers of God”. My heart became so soft and my body eased, and I wept. God prays so lovingly over our misunderstandings and choices to be less than we are formed by God to be.(v.3-5)God prays to God that we would regain the full circle of Loving God, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.(v.6-7; 10) I felt warm waters cleansing all the ways I guard and protect myself from grief, loss and the awareness of the suffering of others. I am washed bare. What to do now?

And then I listened to my Sisters! Here is the essence of each contribution! From Cara “Break Out!” of all the ways we contribute to violence and injustice. From Elisabet, SHOUT! When the light comes, even as a sliver, for the light restores the generations of suffering endured! For the light is like the floodwaters of Love gushing forth. From Elizabeth: “I seek You... You Lord are the Light... You set us free! Then Lori shares that change is different than making changes, that change is of the heart, and everything is made different when we dwell with God and are changed.

YHWH compassionately responds to our misunderstandings and misdeeds towards others with a passionate plea for us to remember to BREAK OUT of what we participate in that is not loving,

to OPEN to the Light that comes and washes the grime from the lamps of our hearts, to TRUST the Lord's ability to set us free, and to SOFTEN us into a stance of vulnerability before God. God's prayers to God moving around, in and through us will bring change, in and amongst us. God never changes. God simply loves and implores us to do the same. Fasting from everything we participate in that is less than loving, this is the way of Lent. Amen

Respond

What would it be like to pray God's prayers to God through Lent? What would it be like to listen for the changes in our hearts that come when we do so?

Rest

Oh God may we sit in the prayers you pray and trust what we learn when we do. May we fast from our chosen agenda's and what we have decided to give you, that we may be filled with your desires and ability to bring your heart contentment.

*Thank you for loving us so much,
Amen amen.*

About the Author



Rev. Mary Putera is ordained with the Progressive Christian Alliance. She works locally and globally as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Expressive Arts Therapist, Faculty member, and Consultant. Please visit her website for more details and an opportunity to connect:

<https://theartofintegrity.org>

Seen, heard and looked at

A Lent Reflection for February 15 by Rev. Elizabeth McColl

Lectionary reading for 02/15/2023: [Psalm 25:1- 10; Daniel 9:1-14; 1 John 1:3-10](#)

Selected passage for reflection: 1 John 1:3-10

Read

1 John 1:3-10 *NRSV*

What we have seen and heard we also declare to you so that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Reflect

There are two themes in this passage which intrigue me: the contrasts of light and dark and how our senses are engaged in experiencing God. The first is obvious; the latter, not so apparent. Light and dark is explored throughout John's gospel and in this letter, he's very clear: walk in the light. But what does that mean? Surely dark and darkness cannot be all bad? Before birth, creatures are in the darkness and protection of a womb. Good and deep sleep is easier when one is completely in the dark. We can't see galaxies without surrounding darkness and the first light of dawn still has some darkness and dusk brings a mixture of light fading into dark. So I wonder if contrasts of light and dark are related to the second theme: what we have seen and heard? Earlier in this letter, John talks about other senses which have experienced the living Christ: our hands have touched, and our eyes have looked at. The writer is helping us to think about what we experience through our bodies.

We are generally used to engaging our intellect as we live as Christ followers, but not so aware of how our bodies experience our surroundings unless we really engage our senses and turn our focus on what is in our immediate surroundings.

Respond

Make a point of going outside and be aware of your surroundings. Where is the light (or dark)? Do you see anything around you which brings more light or dark? Be aware of what you see and hear. Go for a walk with no tech in your ears or your hands. Allow your senses to take in what is with you during this time. What do you experience? Can you bring your attention into prayer as you walk? Depending on the time of day, you may be aware of fading or growing light. Does this change what you see, hear, feel or even taste?

Rest

Lord, in this time of Lent, as we experience the change of seasons, call our attention to what is happening in our senses, and the growing physical light around us. May this remind us of your continual presence with us. Amen.

About the Author



Elizabeth is an ordained pastor and vocationally a musician and educator, teaching across primary and secondary schools in Scotland's capital city of Edinburgh. working with under-resourced young people using music as a way to social change and educational justice. She loves to spend time in wide open spaces outdoors whether that's in her home city or when she gets to travel across the water. Yoga has become something of an obsession over the past few years.

Desperate Pleas for God's People

A Lent Reflection for Friday, February 16th by Pastor Katherine Mayer

Lectionary reading for 2/16/24: Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Selected passage for reflection: Daniel 9:15-25a

Read

Daniel 9:15-25a NIV

15 “Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong.

16 Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

17 “Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. 18 Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. 19 Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”

20 While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the Lord my God for his holy hill— 21 while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. 23 As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision:

24 “Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place.

25 “Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens,’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.

Reflect

Oftentimes when I go to engage Old Testament texts it is easy for me to get distracted by the desire to understand. I want to go through all the commentaries and try to better understand what the meaning of the passage is. As I prepared to write this devotional I found myself doing the same thing. I wanted to be able to explain Daniel's motivation for his pleas. I wanted to be

able to give insight into the numbers and meaning behind his vision, but as I prepared to do just that I went back one more time to reread the scripture. All of a sudden all of the facts and knowledge didn't matter because all that came through was Daniel's desperate pleas. Daniel is coming to God asking for God to have mercy and grace on the people of Jerusalem. He is acknowledging the goodness and mercy that God has showered down on them in the past by rescuing them from Egypt. He is desperate and is desperately calling out to God.

As I sat with Daniel's pleas, I was reminded of Jesus' own pleas as he hung on the cross. Jesus' plea in the garden before the guards came to get him. Jesus desperately asked God for another way in the garden. As he hung on the cross and prepared to take his last breath Jesus prayed for the people who persecuted him. He cries out saying "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:24a). These pleas are of desperation not for Jesus himself, but for the people who persecuted him. Jesus, like Daniel, was crying out to God the Father for His mercy and grace to be shown to the people. Neither Jesus nor Daniel asked for the sins of the people to be erased but they did ask for forgiveness. They did ask for mercy. They did ask for grace.

How do Daniel's pleas relate to our society today? As I read and reread this passage I was overcome with my own feeling of desperation. I want the same righteousness and mercy that Daniel is praying for his people for my own. The desperation that knows only God can correct what has been broken. The cry that was answered by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The cry that was answered by Jesus asking God to forgive us because we did not understand what we were doing.

This Lenten season we have the opportunity to press into Jesus. We have the opportunity to press into his desire for restoration and forgiveness. How do you see Daniel's pleas in your own community? How is God meeting you as you pray for those around you?

Respond

Take a moment to check in with your body. What are you feeling? Where are you feeling the most emotion? As you check in with yourself, go back and reread the scripture above. As you do take time to engage with the emotions that can be felt as Daniel pleads for his city. As he pleads for his people. How can his pleas be felt this Lenten season in the communities we find ourselves?

Rest

May we rest in the knowledge that we are loved. May we take a moment to breathe in the Breath of Life. This Lenten season may we cling to the love that we feel knowing that our cries are heard. That the pleas we might have for our own community is heard by God.

About the Author



Katherine Mayer is an Associate Pastor at One Church in Louisville, KY. She is originally from Northern California but has called Louisville home for seven years. She is married with two kids. She is in the process of becoming a Spiritual Director and started seminary at North Park Seminary this fall.

Seeking Jesus

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, February 17 by Samantha Wade

Lectionary reading for 2/17/2024: Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-10

Selected passage for reflection: Matthew 9:2-10

Read

Matthew 9:2-8 CSB

2 Just then some men brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher. Seeing their faith, Jesus told the paralytic, “Have courage, son, your sins are forgiven.”

3 At this, some of the scribes said to themselves, “He’s blaspheming!”

4 Perceiving their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why are you thinking evil things in your hearts? 5 For which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? 6 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—then he told the paralytic, “Get up, take your stretcher, and go home.” 7 So he got up and went home. 8 When the crowds saw this, they were awestruck and gave glory to God, who had given such authority to men.

Reflect

How nice would it be if God used the “path of least resistance” to fulfill his glorious purposes? It seems like a nice idea. The moment we pray our prayers are answered. The moment someone confesses that Jesus is Christ their whole life is changed for the better. Moments of miraculous change can and still do happen in the Christian experience, but God frequently uses what seems like convoluted means to fulfill his will.

“Your sins are forgiven,” Jesus told a paralytic man that lay before him. Jesus has healed crowds of people at this point of his ministry. I wonder what Jesus said to each person that was brought to him? I like to think that Jesus personalized his interactions rather than saying the same thing to each person. Regardless of what he has said before, the Pharisees were not expecting him to say, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The reaction of the paralytic man was not recorded. The scripture does not even state that the paralytic man had faith. It was the faith of the men that brought in the paralytic that Jesus sees and acts upon.

Then we have this crowd of spectators. They came to be in close proximity to Jesus. They came to see him, hear him, and perhaps receive something from him. It is the crowd who rightly respond with awestruck worship when they witness the work Jesus has done.

Take a moment to read through the passage a few more times. Which character in this story resonates with you: the faithful intercessor, the one longing for healing, the doubting cynic, or the expectant spectator?

Matthew 9:2-8 leaves me with a sense of joyous satisfaction that Jesus gives us what we need. Jesus not only physically healed a paralytic man, but first and most importantly restored the paralytic to the Father through the forgiveness of sin. Through this interaction, Jesus was able to use this situation to minister to everyone in the room. The faithful were acknowledged, the doubtful were confronted, and the expectant were witnesses of the glory of God.

Know that Jesus has an intended purpose for the work that he is currently doing in your life and the life of his Church. While his schemes may seem convoluted, I pray that when he reveals his power all around may glorify him.

Respond

Make some time to sit at Jesus' feet during this season of Lent. Throughout the Gospels, people are seeking out Jesus to see him and spend time in his presence. Let us not grow weary of finding ways in our modern world to be in the presence of Christ.

Rest

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for this time you gave us to read this devotional. May the Holy Spirit continue to stir our affections for you. As the deer pants for water, so our soul longs for you, Lord. May you ordain time for us to sit at your feet that we may receive the good gifts you have for us. All to the glory of the Father, Amen.

About the Author



Samantha Wade is currently a stay-at-home mom caring for her three young boys. Samatha received a Masters of Divinity from Denver Seminary in 2018 and was a chaplain in the Army Reserves. As a military wife and mother to young children, life is in constant transition for Samantha, so she strives to do ministry wherever the Lord may take her. Samantha and her family currently reside in Palmer, AK.

The Rainbow that Kept Me from Swimming

A Lent Reflection for Sunday, February 18 by Rev. Julie Jane Capel

Lectionary reading for 02/18/2024: Genesis 9:8-17 • Psalm 25:1-10 • 1 Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:9-15
Selected Passage: Genesis 9:11-17

Read

Genesis 9:11-17 CEV

I promise every living creature that the earth and those living on it will never again be destroyed by a flood. The rainbow that I have put in the sky will be my sign to you and to every living creature on earth. It will remind you that I will keep this promise forever. When I send clouds over the earth, and a rainbow appears in the sky, I will remember my promise to you and to all other living creatures. Never again will I let floodwaters destroy all of life. When I see the rainbow in the sky, I will always remember the promise that I have made to every living creature. The rainbow will be the sign of that solemn promise.

Reflect

Lake swimming is one of the best ways for me to connect with God, and in 2021 I *desperately* needed that divine restoration to occur. Sadly, I lived nowhere near swimmable freshwater. So I drove three hours to a small beach hoping to submerge my body and realign my soul. To my dismay, lightning was spotted *immediately* before I dove into the water. Instantly, the waterfront was shut down to the point that even my big toe was not allowed in!

No rain came but the park did not budge on their 2 hour closed waterfront policy. Thus I sat on the sand, painting and patiently hoping that I would be allowed to swim. One hour and fifty minutes later, another crash of lightning dashed my desires. In the meantime, I had prayed and painted, wrestled with God and named my irritation with the timing of it all.

I was so annoyed that a storm that was not even getting me wet was *still* keeping me from connecting with God in the way I wanted! Ultimately, I did console myself with the silver lining: at least I had artistically captured an interesting slice of time with passionate frustration. At hour three of sitting on the sand, the sign of Genesis 9:8-17 came into view!

Truly, it wasn't a glorious version of the covenant promise that God made to Noah. It wasn't a double, it wasn't full, there was no pot of gold at the end, and *at first* only three colors meekly peaked through the clouds.

I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will

remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. (Genesis 9:13-15 NIV)

I rapidly added the muted colorful promise on the left side of the stormy painting. Accurate to life, an individual has to diligently look to recognize it. Relatively quickly the rainbow became more pronounced and then the storm blew over (recorded by the other paintings), but by that point the park had closed and I *still* was not allowed in the water.

Besides swimming, the other authentic way I connect with God is through painting. Mid way through painting this rainbow, I finally recognized I had done just that. Objectively not the way I had planned, expected or desired but realignment had occurred.

Fast forward to 2024 when a woman was moved by the three part painting series – and she not only bought the triptych but also got her corporate office to sponsor an art show. As we discussed what the paintings stirred in her, she articulated the very real Genesis 9 tension; a common experience for many of us.

Storms in life often keep us from our plans, our hopes, our expectations and our desires. Sometimes tumultuous clouds are metaphorical and of our own doing. Other times the literal or metaphorical floodwaters are completely out of our control. We are just experiencing the effects of earthly chaos. Yet, Genesis 9 says these storms, clouds and floodwaters are not forever and we are not alone in them. God sees and remembers. And sometimes, we are granted the gift of the rainbow in order for us to recall God's promise to us and to the earth.

Respond

Recall a rainbow memory. Potentially you can visualize a double rainbow while you are driving. Or you may recollect how seeing the array of colors at a particularly painful juncture of life inspired/offered hope. Perhaps your rainbow memory was a sign of God's promise that storms are not forever. Respond by allowing your mind and body to reminisce on your rainbow memory.

Rest

God, thank you for your promises to never leave us, nor forsake us, nor let the floodwaters destroy all of life. We praise you for granting us rainbows in the midst of life's storms. Help us to continue to trust your timing and your deep love for us and all of creation. Amen.

About the Author

Rev. Julie Jane Capel is a painter, ordained Covenant pastor and community activist. After a decade plus of pastoring and justice work in Chicago, she recently got married (became a dog mom) and moved to Alexandria, Virginia. For this season of life Julie is working as an international impressionist painter.



In Christ

A Lent Reflection for Monday, February 19 by Rev. Oreon K. Trickey

Lectionary Reading for 2/19/24: Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 2:1-10

Read

Ephesians 2:1-10 NRSVue

You were dead through the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, **4** but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us **5** even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— **9** not the result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Reflect

There are so many life-giving concepts and declarations in this brief portion of Scripture that it's difficult to know where to begin applying this to our Lent experience.

Included are:

- Our old “dead” life with its self-focused nature,
- God’s gracious mercy and kindness toward us,
- Christ’s salvation given to us as a gift of grace,
- Our current position of being seated with God in the heavenly places,
- And the good works we are created for, that will flow out of our daily walk with Jesus.

Seriously, this is a lot!!

I read through these verses three times - two times silently and once aloud. Each time the small phrase “but God” grabbed my heart, and the “with Christ” and “in Christ” statements that follow.

Observing Lent each year gives us the opportunity to take some inventory of our lives, our souls, and our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A good place to begin is to honestly name and own our self-focused tendencies and actions, our sins and short-comings, our brokenness. This isn't about shame or even guilt, it's about showing up to Jesus as all of who we are: all of the good, the bad, the ugly, the wounded parts of us. It's not pretty, but it's real. And Jesus honors our coming to him "Just As We Are."

If we stopped here, it would be nothing short of overwhelming and depressing. However, this is the place where the BUT GOD happens.

We have laid ourselves open before our God, and now God gets to show us a renewed sense of God's mercy, kindness, grace, redemption, giving us the opportunity to once again embrace and live into our IN CHRIST reality.

Respond

- Take a few deep centering breaths.
- Read verses 1-3.
- What "old life" area or situation do you want to bring to Christ for His forgiveness and redemption and healing?
- Say out loud, "BUT GOD."
- Read verses 4-10. What aspect of being In Christ most resonates with you this Lenten season? What do you desire to have a greater awareness of?

Rest

To conclude today's reflection, here are two options, depending on your time constraints:

1. Take a few quiet moments to listen to
"You Are Always With Me" by iAmSon on your preferred music platform
Or here:
<https://open.spotify.com/track/2RunqrUDNUBMFBUGbtcvFH?si=b345bfcb90cc482e>

2. Slowly pray this prayer:
*Dear Jesus,
Thank you, thank you, thank you.
Amen.*

About the Author

A long-time resident of Chicago, Oreon is a seasoned urban ministry practitioner, spiritual director, retreat facilitator, and Enneagram consultant. She currently lives and serves with the Jesus People community in the city's Uptown neighborhood. Oreon plays a mean blues guitar, loves to laugh deeply, and appreciates a serious cup of coffee. @oreont



My Gethsemane Moment – But God!

A Lent Reflection for Tuesday, February 20 by Rev. Dr. Cynthia P. Stewart

Lectionary Reading for 2/20/24: Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 2:1-10

Read

Psalm 77 NIV

I cry aloud to God,

aloud to God, that he may hear me.

² In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;

in the night my hand is stretched out
without wearying;

my soul refuses to be comforted.

³ I think of God, and I moan;

I meditate, and my spirit faints. *Selah*

⁴ You keep my eyelids from closing;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

⁵ I consider the days of old

and remember the years of long ago.

⁶ I commune^[a] with my heart in the night;

I meditate and search my spirit:^[b]

⁷ “Will the Lord spurn forever

and never again be favorable?

⁸ Has his steadfast love ceased forever?

Are his promises at an end for all time?

⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has he in anger shut up his
compassion?” *Selah*

¹⁰ And I say, “It is my grief

that the right hand of the Most High has
changed.”

¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;

I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will meditate on all your work

and muse on your mighty deeds.

¹³ Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;

you have displayed your might among the
peoples.

¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your
people,

the descendants of Jacob and
Joseph. *Selah*

¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God,

when the waters saw you, they were
afraid;

the very deep trembled.

¹⁷ The clouds poured out water;

the skies thundered;

your arrows flashed on every side.

¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the
whirlwind;

your lightnings lit up the world;

the earth trembled and shook.

¹⁹ Your way was through the sea,

your path through the mighty waters,
yet your footprints were unseen.

²⁰ You led your people like a flock

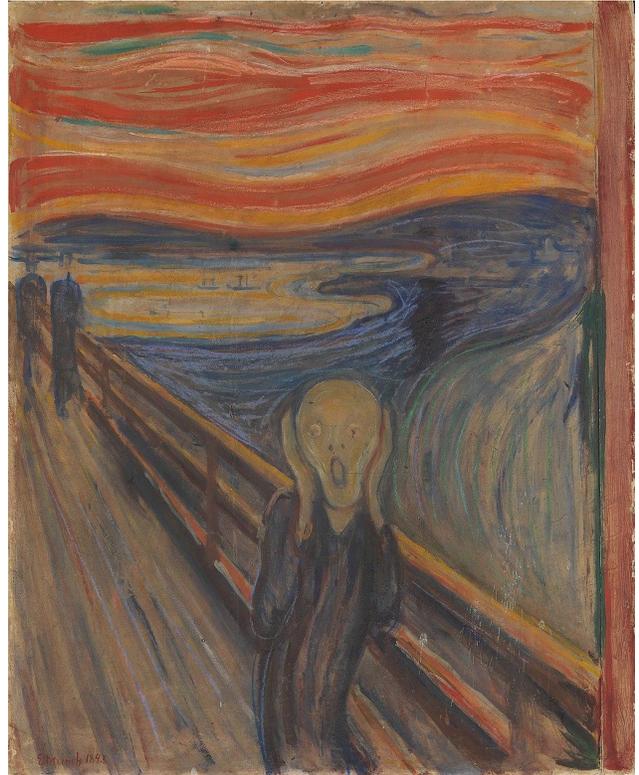
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Reflect

I would like you to read this poem a few times and see what resonates with you.

The Scream, Munch wrote the poem that inspired the image many of us have seen:

*I was walking along the road with two
friends. The Sun was setting —
The Sky turned a bloody red
And I felt a whiff of Melancholy — I
stood
Still, deathly tired — over the blue-black
Fjord and City hung Blood and Tongues
of Fire
My Friends walked on — I remained
behind
-- shivering with Anxiety. I felt the great
Scream in Nature.*



When I read this poem, I am reminded of people who are no longer in my life. Yes, it created anxiety, because I questioned what happened, what did I do, what did I say, what could I have done differently. But it took some time to realize it was time for them to “walk on.” This created a sense of grief and suffering for which I did not expect, a part of me had been torn apart. I said, I am overwhelmed, I am helpless, there is nothing I can do and when I try to convey it, it just seems as if the words can’t come out. But like Psalm 77, I was able to say, “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me.” The poem resonates because there are times when life gets difficult, and we just want to “scream” and question what is really going on. As we continue to read the Psalm, we hear the voice of someone who is troubled, can’t sleep, is speechless, feels alone, and if God has forgotten them. But they did stay there, they stretched their hands to God and prayed, and God “heard” as they cried out aloud about their pain and suffering. Verses 10-20 changes gears, because the one who was suffering, realizes what God had done in the past and begins to say, “I will call to mind, I will remember, I will meditate.” That is when God brings to one’s remembrance how he has brought them through trials and tribulations before and if he did it then, he can do it again. So, there is HOPE, keep praying and trusting. God got you!

Respond

During this Lenten season, answer any of these questions:

- What is troubling your soul?
- What keeps you up at night?
- Are you grieving the loss of a loved one?
- What promises are you still waiting to manifest?
- What do you need to cry out aloud to God about?

Rest

(Imagine Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane praying - Luke 22:39-46)

Lord, during this Lenten season, may I remember I am not alone, you are always with me, and you give me strength. Whenever I am suffering, may I like Jesus say, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." I may not understand right now but open my heart to what it is you want me to learn. God, I put my trust in you.



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Cynthia P. Stewart will complete her Advanced Spiritual Direction Internship through Loyola University Chicago where she also works for Parkinson School of Health Sciences and Public Health. She is an adjunct professor for North Park Theological Seminary. Intercessory Prayer is her calling. Thai food, Tennis, and Time away are her favorites.

The Beauty and Pain of Deliverance

A Lent Reflection for Wednesday, February 21 by Rev. Alicia Vela Anderson

Lectionary reading for 02/21/2024: Psalm 77, Proverbs 30:1-9, Matthew 4:1-11
Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 77:1-3, 14-20

Read

Psalm 77:1-3, 14-20 NRSVUE

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out
with wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints. *Selah*

You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among
the peoples.
With your strong arm you redeemed your
people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
Selah.

When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were
afraid;
the very deep trembled.
The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
The crash of your thunder was in the
whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
Your way was through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters,
yet your footprints were unseen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Reflect

Psalm 77 urges me to remember the both/and of deliverance. The joy and celebration coupled with the grief, the terror, and the loss of control. It's funny how often we skip to the joy and celebration, we even sing songs like "*Pharaoh, Pharaoh*" and dance along to a story of destruction and death. The Psalmist takes us through the crying out to God - the utter loneliness of feeling abandoned by God. Through the remembering of how God is the God that does wonders. The Creator that can command the elements of the land and sea for their own purposes. All the way through to the unseen footsteps of the Deliverer, guiding the people of God through to safety.

We forget that even when the promise before us is a land flowing with goodness, gifts that we didn't know we wanted or needed, the journey there is marked with moments that can only be described as giving up complete control to the One you're following to safety. There are times that we know it's the only way out, so we are willing to take the treacherous journey to get to

something better. But there are also times when what we're leaving behind is a complicated mix of beauty and pain.

Because the truth of this life we live is that alongside the pain that comes from shrinking oneself to fit spaces not meant for us, there is the beauty of community that is in it with us. There is both brokenness in the systems that don't recognize our humanity or care to change to make room at the table. And there was comfort in the familiarity of things that held us back. Even when what you're moving to is the abounding grace and fertile soil for new life, it's hard not to look back at the ashes behind you and mourn the life lost among the weeds. Even when it's what you asked for - you asked for the deliverance, the cleansing fire to come and bring about new life.

As I look back on the journey I've had so far with God, I am at awe of the ways that the Spirit has pushed me, pulled me, carried me, or simply let me stand still where I was at the moment. God has never been in a hurry to get me to my destination and I still don't feel like I've arrived. But what I do know is that I can look backwards and hold the grief and beauty while imagining the goodness that is ahead of me.

Respond

Wherever you are in the journey this Lenten season, take a moment to take stock of the world around you. Where are you sensing God is at work? Where do you see the guidance of the Deliverer? What power are you asking the Almighty to reign down in your life?

Rest

Almighty God of Power and Might, may we feel the movement in the world around us, your power shaking free those who are trapped, delivering us from what holds us. Jesus, our Saving Grace, may we pay attention to where you are leading us - towards grace and abundance. Holy Spirit of comfort, help us to hold the space for both joy and pain in the midst of the journey. Amen.



About the Author

Rev Alicia Vela Anderson serves as the Associate Pastor of Formation at LaSalle Street Church in Chicago, IL. She spends her evenings and weekends exploring the neighborhoods of Chicago with her husband looking for local bookstores, cafes, and shops to learn the stories of the communities around her.

Hear and Believe

A Lent Reflection for Thursday, February 22 by Rev. Bronwyn Leigh Murphy

Lectionary reading for 2/22/2024: [Psalm 22:23-31](#); [Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18](#); [Romans 3:21-31](#)
Selected passage for reflection: [Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18](#)

Read

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18 NLT

1 Some time later, the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great.”

2 But Abram replied, “O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since you’ve given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. **3** You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir.”

4 Then the LORD said to him, “No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir.” **5** Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him, “Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!”

6 And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith

12 As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. **13** Then the LORD said to Abram, “You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. **14** But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. **15** (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) **16** After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction.”

17 After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. **18** So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, “I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt[a] to the great Euphrates River—

Reflect

Despite all evidence to the contrary, sometimes I still believe that I know exactly what God is doing, what He should do or what He will not do. That sounds ridiculous even typing it out, but it is true. The limits of my finite imagination of what is possible are on full display when my ignorance and arrogance impede my understanding and deference to God.

In Genesis 15, Abram had a choice to defer to God or not. We see God's plan for Abram blow any plans Abram had for his life right out of the water. By any earthly measure, it would certainly be outlandish for Abram to think that his descendants would populate the Earth for generations as God promised when Abram had exactly zero children. In fact, it is such an outlandish thought that Abram surmises that one of his servants will have to fulfill the role. God then draws Abram's attention to the stars in the sky—the unmistakable work of the Creator— to emphasize that God absolutely has a plan that is much more than Abram could hope for or imagine. In verse 6, Abram chooses to believe God's word to him, though he has little tangible evidence to do so. In his belief, Abram is counted as right in the eyes of God—righteous. God's incredible blessing then comes in the initiation of the Abrahamic Covenant in verse 18. Though they will face opposition and oppression, God will protect and multiply the children of Abraham.

God's plan for Abram is quite different from what Abram believed was possible as we see from his skepticism in verses 2-3. But God spoke and Abram heard the words of God as truth and promise. This divine truth and promise was far beyond any capacity Abram had to do for himself. Abram did not race ahead of God, nor did he hear the Word of God and forge his own path, but rather he heard and believed.

Respond

In what area of your life do you allow ignorance or arrogance to usurp the voice of God? Are you trying to race out in front of God? Are you insistent on forging your own path? Take some moments to pause and listen. Resist the urge to tell God what you wish He would do and sit in the presence of God with the expectation that He has something to communicate to you.

Rest

God, thank you that your ways are bigger, better and higher than our ways. Thank you that your plans and purposes extend far beyond the limits of my mind and will. Thank you that you know me, see me, love me and have a plan for me. Give me the humility necessary to trust your plan. Amen.



About the Author

Bronwyn is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church currently serving in Northern California. Bronwyn is passionate about serving and equipping marginalized populations and challenging the church to build supportive, inclusive and accessible cultures for all. Her favorite beverage is a venti water with ice from Starbucks.

Rejection, Adoption and the Redemptive Power of Jesus

A Lent Reflection for Friday, February 23 by Kim Delp

Lectionary reading for 2/23/2024 Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12
Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 16: 1-6

Read

Genesis 16: 1-6 NASB

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him a child, but she had an Egyptian slave woman whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing *children*. Please have relations with my slave woman; perhaps I will ^[a]obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ And so after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave woman, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. ⁴ Then he had relations with Hagar, and she conceived; and when *Hagar* became aware that she had conceived, her mistress was insignificant in her sight. ⁵ So Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be upon you! I put my slave woman into your ^[b]arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was insignificant in her ^[c]sight. May the LORD judge between ^[d]you and me." ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, "Look, your slave woman is in your ^[e]power; do to her what is good in your ^[f]sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

Reflect

About 15 years ago, my husband and I had made a conscious decision to start trying to have children. We were so excited to begin that next part of our journey. The next journey was one of infertility. I know many know this journey. It is hard and painful in all the ways; physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It can break you and make you feel broken. So this passage is very relatable in so many ways for me personally. I have felt the weight of not feeling fully identified as a woman because I couldn't do what my body was created to do. I have felt the urgency of wanting the process to speed up. This can be agonizing as month after month you check the tests, and they are negative. Praying before and over each one for THIS one to be the one that reads POSITIVE and then feeling the pain and even shame month after month when it is negative. I believe Sarai felt all of these things and more. During this time in history and, even now, so much of a woman's worth is found in her womb. Even though it was Sarai's idea for Abram to take her slave in the hopes of building up through her the promise God had given to Abram. I can't imagine though that she did that willingly. I just imagine the utter shame rejection she must have felt as she gave Hagar to Abraham.

Hagar on the other hand likely carried a different shame and rejection than Sarai. Her name speaks to this, meaning, "flight" or "forsaken" in Hebrew. She was a slave, a foreigner, living on the margins with her life in the balance and in the hands of Sarai. I'm sure she had little control

over what happened to her, least of which, being forced to bear Abraham a child as a surrogate. Forced into fulfilling a promise that was not hers.

The rejection that both of these women must have felt was very different, but also the intersection where their paths crossed was similar; the womb.

Imagine Hagar sitting with her hands on her baby bump wishing this baby had been something within her control and Sarai sitting with her hands on her empty belly wishing that her barren womb was within *her* control. Both sitting in their rejection and powerlessness in circumstances beyond their control.

BUT GOD...

The story of Sarai and Hagar is bigger than this one excerpt. It is the story of their adoption, not rejection. In this small piece of their journey, we don't see the whole picture, just as Hagar and Sarai didn't. They were throwing power back and forth when they had it and used the power they had, Sarai as a mistress and after conceiving, Hagar used the power in her womb with the "promised baby" to mistreat Sarai.

As 1 Peter tells us in 2:4-5 as well as Romans 8:15-17, we are chosen and adopted into His kingdom.

As with our story of infertility. it doesn't look as we expect it to, but it looks like God always created it to be. Parts of our journey aren't the whole of our journey. We see that God's redemptive work in our lives and the lives of Sarai and Hagar do not look like they imagined. But Jesus redeems it all. In this season of Lent, as we journey to the Cross with Jesus, remember that our stories are stories of redemption, not perfection, but redemption.

Redemption, or *apolutrosis* in the Greek meaning *the work of Christ on our behalf, whereby he purchases us, he ransoms us, at the price of his own life, securing our deliverance from the bondage and condemnation of sin.* Jesus redeems us and our stories to speak and live into our adoption into His kingdom, not to stay in our places of rejection.

Respond

It is easy for all of us to remember or reflect back on a time we felt rejected. Maybe you are in that place right now or maybe you will be in this place in the future. It is easy to stay in that place of rejection which leads to other things like depression and bitterness, I encourage you to speak this over yourself in those moments:

I am known, seen, cared for, redeemed, forgiven and loved by Jesus Himself. I am a child of God and I receive the spirit of adoption.

If you like music, like I do, here are a couple of songs to focus your mind and heart on today.

- In the Room: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m6EFPXm57g>
- Shadow Step: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgmTOyJeW3w>
- Sufficient for Today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EACaMzyUbLY>
- Edens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JK4nDB9iiUE>

Rest

Redemptive God, you have called us out of places of rejection, pain and sin to be chosen and adopted into a holy priesthood. We are God's prized possession and declare His praises being called out of darkness into his light. May we live into this adopted life not timidly, but boldly experiencing and sharing this light with all those we encounter. Amen.

About the Author



Kim Delp is a wife to Joel, mom to Simeon (13), Esther (9), and Ephraim (8) and serves in Ecuador, South America as a missionary. She is a Family Nurse Practitioner and the Co-Founder of the Santiago Partnership which partners in Ecuador to start medical clinics, Homes for At-Risk Children, different community-based programs with the goal of working herself out of a job. Her passion is empowering women to see their value and worth and to use their passions to experience both of these things. She has only realized

recently that writing is something that shows her identity and worth in Jesus. She is a lover of coffee, experiencing nature and being with people in authentic ways. Learn more about the Santiago Partnership at <https://www.santiagopartnership.org/>

Who do you say that I am?

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, February 24 by Mary Rodriguez

Lectionary reading for 2/24/2024 Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:7-15; Mark 8:27-30
Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 16:7-15 & Mark 8:27-30

Read

Genesis 16:7-15 NRSV

7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her,

"Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael, (*God hears*)
for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.
12 He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

13 So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi" (*God of seeing or God who sees*); for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; (*Well of the Living One who sees me*) it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

Mark 8:27-30 NRSV

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Reflect

I remember when I learned that in Hebrew, the name Mary (derivative of Miriam) means “bitter waters.” I am not going to pretend that it didn’t make me feel a little bitter, until I also learned the Egyptian root word means “love or beloved.” I thought to myself, Okay, I can work with that. I thought maybe I could be one who brings love to those experiencing bitter difficulties.

The Bible has a lot of names for God. El-Shaddai (God Almighty), Elohim (Creator), Jehovah-Jireh (The Lord our Provider), the Alpha and Omega (beginning and end), Immanuel (God with us), Yahweh (I AM), God of Justice, God of Mercy and Lovingkindness, Abba (father/caregiver), Wonderful Counselor, Jesus (The Lord Saves), etc.

Hagar names her son “God hears,” and she responds by calling God: the “God who sees,” for she felt her cries were heard and she felt seen by God.

Jesus is the closest iteration we have of what God is like, understandable in our own terms as humans. Jesus called himself: the Son of Man, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, etc. The words we choose matter. What we call others matters. It affects not only how we view each other, but ourselves. What we call God affects how we act and interact. May we choose to use language that helps center us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to fill the hungry with good things, to loose the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free, to love our enemies and lift them up in prayer, and to show loving kindness to all. For we are all kin.

Respond

What do you call God? Who do you say Jesus is? Maybe try to expand your vision today, and consider what someone who is in need might call God. Or consider what your neighbor, or the person you pass along your walk today, might call out to Jesus for. See if it changes how you respond to God and how you respond to them.

Rest

God of many names, center us, today, in your love. Our Good Shepherd, draw us close to you and to one another, that we may recognize that we are all cared for by you. Spirit, guide us to see and treat each other with the goodness and kindness that makes everything safer and more whole for every last one. Embolden us to pray and to serve, to observe and to act in ways that effect change, to remember and to respond.

Amen

About the Author

Mary Rodriguez has been a case manager in Chicago for the past 14 years, working with individuals with mental illness, seniors, individuals in permanent supportive affordable housing, and for those in need of healthcare advocacy. She enjoys helping people navigate public systems, while ensuring their dignity and humanity is kept forefront.



Faith

A Lent Reflection for Sunday, February 25 by Jillian Evans

Lectionary reading for 2/25/2024: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25 • Mark 8:31-38 or Mark 9:2-9

Selected passage for reflection: Romans 4:13-25 NIV

Read

Romans 4:13-25 NIV

13 It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. **14** For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, **15** because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. **17** As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."^[a] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."^[b] **19** Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. **20** Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, **21** being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. **22** This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." **23** The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, **24** but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. **25** He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Reflect

Here's a true story: David grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday in their Sunday best. But outside of church, David's parents were not living a life pleasing to God. As he grew, he rebelled against Godly teachings to the point that he found himself in trouble with the law. This led to him being grounded at home and there was only one place he was allowed to go other than school - to church with his grandma. Years of hard living showed on his body through scars and tattoos. David did not expect that his outer appearance would be accepted by churchgoers because of his earlier dealings with the church. Much to his surprise he was accepted by the church and nourished by the body of Christ. While a member of this church, David felt the call of ministry on his life. When he told the ministers of the call placed on his life

he was once again rejected because of his outer appearance. He was told that tattoos were not acceptable in the pulpit. Through their faith in God, David and his wife kept the faith that David was called to ministry and remained open to finding a church home where he could live out his call. They eventually found a church where people are accepted for their faith and not their looks.

In chapter 14 of Romans, Paul is mainly addressing the Jews but the lesson is for everyone: Faith is more important than the law. Most Jewish people believe that in order to go to heaven, they must keep the Law. As Christians, we believe in salvation through our faith in the Holy Trinity. God's covenant with Abraham was dependent upon his faith in God and not how well he kept the law. Despite the years that had gone past, Abraham kept the faith that God's promises would come true.

David's family was more concerned with outward appearances than living out their faith in God's teaching, so much so that they pushed David away from God for a period of his life. Do you spend more time worrying about presenting as a perfect Christian versus planning your quiet time with God? Are you walking in faith or is your walk dependent upon how others see you? Are you more concerned with following the law than having faith in God's Word for your life?

Let's honor God with our walk and our faith. Seek God to order your steps in life and believe that He Will.

Respond



Visio Divina

How To Pray:

- Prepare: close your eyes, breathe, clear your mind
- Lectio (read): Open your eyes and scan the image. Note what draws your interest, but continue to scan the whole image. Close and rest your eyes a minute.
- Meditatio (meditate): Open your eyes and let your eyes be led. Focus on just this part of the image and name it. Close your eyes, seeing that piece of the image in your mind.
- Oratio (pray): Open your eyes and look again at the piece of the image that caught your eye. Allow it to bring forth a word, image, or emotion. Close and rest your eyes.
- Contemplatio (contemplation): Open your eyes and gaze at the image. What is God speaking to you today through this image?



Rest

Dear God,

Grant me the fortitude to live according to your Word and not earthly expectations. Help me to open my heart to receive your guidance. God help me to exercise faith in all that I do. I petition you for strength to live according to your Word in all my days. Amen



About the Author

Jillian Evans resides in Chicago, Illinois with her husband. They have three young adult children. She is passionate about ministering to children, youth and their families. She spends her days traveling, doing spiritual direction and ministering to youth. Jillian holds degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and North Park Theological Seminary as well as a certificate in Spiritual Direction from C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction at NPTS.

What Does Infinity Look Like?

A Lent Reflection for Monday, February 26 by Rev. Johnna Hayward Muniz

Lectionary reading for 2/26/2024: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 21:1-7; Hebrews 1:8-12
Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 1:8-12

Read

Hebrews 1:8-12 NIV

⁸ But about the Son he says,
“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and
ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of
your kingdom.
⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated
wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you
above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy.”^[a]

¹⁰ He also says,
“In the beginning, Lord, you laid the
foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your
hands.
¹¹ They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
¹² You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.

Reflect

What does infinity look like? What's it like to look at the world from the beginning of time? I am someone who likes to pride myself for living in the present. I'm not very aware of daily or weekly rhythms, let alone yearly trends or what happens in various decades or centuries. History has not been my forte over the years and was my worst grade in school. But now that I am getting older and officially considered to be middle-aged, there is comfort in recognizing that God will last for ever and ever and that the Lord laid the foundations of the earth (see reading above). Images in this passage spring up from words like justice, righteousness, wickedness and joy. They provide a different and more powerful angle for me when I consider that God has the long view. Our God was there in the beginning *and* knows the end of the story. God is the Alpha *and* the Omega. The image in the second half, of the foundations of the earth and the heavens as a garment... a piece of clothing that our Creator can just "roll up like a robe".

I'm in a leadership class right now that has us look at our leadership failures over the years. Through that paper and other books we're reading, I have been confronting my codependency and my inability, at times, to differentiate myself from others. I have been reflecting on my anxiety and paying more attention to when I feel shame. I try to note it on paper when I feel shame in my chest or gut because I'm learning that shame seems to be one of the motors for my anxiety. Besides going for long walks, talking to friends and counselors and living in the fullness of community, being reminded of God's sovereignty and infinitude also brings a sense

of peace and calm over me. In a day when we have information over-stimulation, less time outdoors, and a heightened sense of worry and anxiety, this passage certainly puts things in perspective. My conclusion is that a God like this can handle all my worries and anxieties, my shame and my fears. May we be on the lookout for new and holistic ways to trust Jesus, the Eternal Christ who was the Word in the beginning. The Word was with God and the Word was God; the Word was, the Word is and the Word shall be (John Chapter 1 and Sara Groves' song, *The Word*).

Respond

What are your obstacles in trusting the goodness and sovereignty of God? Write out your current worries and anxieties. Some like to fold them up and put them in a "God box" to look at later and keep praying for them or respond in gratitude for the evolving answers to prayer. A book recommendation for dealing with anxiety: Cuss, Steve. 2019. *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Rest

Jesus, whose throne will last forever and ever, help us rest in your words and your infinitude. Thank you for having the long view. Give us your perspective today over our lives, our work, our studies, our loved ones. Remind us of your goodness and sovereignty. Help us to rest in you, our Creator since before there was time.



About the Author

Johnna Hayward Muniz is a cross-cultural bridge builder in Lyon, France where networking through language learning, intercultural adaptation, refugee and immigrant support, and practical resourcing builds community. A trauma recovery companion to women around the world, Johnna resides with her Brazilian husband and two young girls where they run Meetup groups as global personnel of ECC Serve Globally.

Remember God's Goodness

A Lent Reflection for Tuesday, February 27 by Rev. Jodi Mullen Fondell

Lectionary reading for 2/27/2024: Psalm 105:1-11; 37-45; Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:1-3

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Read

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45 NLT

1 Give thanks to the Lord and proclaim his greatness.

Let the whole world know what he has done.

2 Sing to him; yes, sing his praises.

Tell everyone about his wonderful deeds.

3 Exult in his holy name;

rejoice, you who worship the Lord.

4 Search for the Lord and for his strength;

continually seek him.

5 Remember the wonders he has performed,

his miracles, and the rulings he has given,

6 you children of his servant Abraham,
you descendants of Jacob, his chosen ones.

7 He is the Lord our God.

His justice is seen throughout the land.

8 He always stands by his covenant—

the commitment he made to a thousand generations.

9 This is the covenant he made with Abraham

and the oath he swore to Isaac.

...

37 The Lord brought his people out of Egypt, loaded with silver and gold;

and not one among the tribes of Israel even stumbled.

38 Egypt was glad when they were gone, for they feared them greatly.

39 The Lord spread a cloud above them as a covering

and gave them a great fire to light the darkness.

40 They asked for meat, and he sent them quail;

he satisfied their hunger with manna—bread from heaven.

41 He split open a rock, and water gushed out

to form a river through the dry wasteland.

42 For he remembered his sacred promise to his servant Abraham.

43 So he brought his people out of Egypt with joy,

his chosen ones with rejoicing.

44 He gave his people the lands of pagan nations,

and they harvested crops that others had planted.

45 All this happened so they would follow his decrees

and obey his instructions.

Praise the Lord!

Reflect

The Psalm opens with a charge to give thanks to the Lord and to proclaim his greatness. It continues with a call to remembering the miracles God has done, the justice God desires, and the covenant that God has made and stands by. The last section of the Psalm recalls some of the ways God's faithfulness has been revealed and it is recounted to us so that we too would follow God's decrees and obey his instructions.

Fundamentally, I don't doubt God's faithfulness and I believe we should indeed give thanks to God and proclaim his greatness. But I must admit that at times, God's presence in our present world feels elusive and distant. I feel utterly flummoxed by the Evangelical support of a politician who I see as a con man and a pathological liar, a man clearly out to only protect his interests, and a man convicted of sexual assault. There is nothing in this person that reflects the character of God and yet many who love God continue to blindly offer their support for him.

I don't doubt that God's heart is a heart that is deeply desirous of justice and compassion and yet in the face of the war in the middle east, I wonder where that manifests itself. Where is the justice and compassion for the Palestinian people? How can we accept the innocent slaughter of these beloved people?

There's a family in my church who recently lost their mom to pancreatic cancer. She was a dear soul, a faithful servant in our church and I was so grateful to get to know her as she lived out her final days. But the real tragedy is that she lost her daughter to ovarian cancer just before Christmas. Her other daughters were caught up in the grief of losing their young sister all the while knowing that their mother's days on earth were also waning. What word of hope do I offer them? As a pastor I often feel utterly impotent in offering a word of hope to those in pain.

But the Psalmist also points me in a direction that helps me in the midst of perilous times. Verse 5 exhorts us to remember...remember the wonders God has performed. Then in verses 37-45 we are given a front row seat to some of those memories. These amazing moments in biblical history where the faithfulness of God was on full display. Remembering...it is a powerful tool in our lives. We all have times in our lives that we want to remember and savor. Equally true are those days we long to forget and somehow erase from our memory. But memory is an important device that God longs to use to encourage us. For just as the Israelites need to remember how God led them by a cloud at day and a fire by night, so too do we need to remember the moments in our own lives when God's faithfulness was more fully on display than perhaps at this present time. We can be assured that because God showed us his faithfulness in bringing us through a difficult time in our lives, God will faithfully do the same for the present challenge we are facing. In a sense, it is in our remembering that we find a lifeline to keep going. God's covenant is best displayed in our memory. The faithfulness of God in our past encourages us to remember that God too will be faithful in our present even if we cannot see it immediately. Remember the wonders that God has done in your life. And allow God's past faithfulness to give you sustenance and strength for whatever you may be facing today.

Respond

If you are familiar with the old hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, there is a great line that talks about raising an Ebenezer. It's such a strange reference and perhaps many of us have overlooked it even as we've sung it multiple times. An Ebenezer literally means stone of help, raised by Samuel after a rough battle was won. Raising Ebenezers is a helpful way of remembering. We mark Ebenezer moments when we know without a doubt that God has intervened in our lives. And it is to these moments that we can return when our faith and confidence is wavering. Take some time today to ponder when in your life you were absolutely sure that God was with you, real and present. Mark that moment with a stone of remembrance so that you may return to it as a touchstone when your confidence in God is lacking. In this way, we too remember God's covenant and gain confidence that it holds even when we feel it is wavering.

Rest

Loving and present God, help us to remember the times in our lives when your presence in our lives was palpable. Give us the strength to trust in your Sovereign presence even when there are so many factors in our lives that seem to contradict this. Lord, for our memories we give you thanks. Help us to mark those moments in our lives when we have known your faithfulness in clear ways and to allow those moments to propel us to greater faithfulness when times are hard. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

About the Author



Jodi Mullen Fondell is an ordained pastor currently serving as co-interim lead pastor of First Congregational Church in Nantucket, Massachusetts. Her co-worker is also her husband Doug. They have been ministering together for over 25 years having served churches in Sweden, England, France, and Luxembourg. Her experience of living abroad as a foreigner for so many years led her to write "I Was A Stranger: Encouraging the Church to Welcome and Embrace the Foreigner". She is available to lead a book group on this book should your church or organization be interested. (The book is available on Amazon). When she's not active with interim ministry, she hangs out at her house in the Palm Springs area of California, plays golf, and enjoys her adorable dog Maddie the wonder Lab. Someday she will join the pickleball craze.

Be Children of Light

A Lent Reflection for Wednesday, February 28 by Beth Knight, MAPC

Lectionary reading for 2/28/2024: Psalm 105:1-11; 37-45; Jeremiah 30:12-22; John 12:36-43
Selected passage for reflection: John 12:36-43

Read

John 12:36-43 The Message

³⁵⁻³⁶ Jesus said, “For a brief time still, the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so darkness doesn’t destroy you. If you walk in darkness, you don’t know where you’re going. As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You’ll be children of light.” ³⁶⁻⁴⁰ Jesus said all this, and then went into hiding. All these God-signs he had given them and they still didn’t get it, still wouldn’t trust him. This proved that the prophet Isaiah was right: God, who believed what we preached? Who recognized God’s arm, outstretched and ready to act?

First they wouldn’t believe, then they *couldn’t*—again, just as Isaiah said:

 Their eyes are blinded,
 their hearts are hardened,
 So that they wouldn’t see with their eyes
 and perceive with their hearts,
 And turn to me, God,
 so I could heal them.

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things after he got a glimpse of God’s overflowing glory that would pour through the Messiah. ⁴²⁻⁴³ On the other hand, a considerable number from the ranks of the leaders did believe. But because of the Pharisees, they didn’t come out in the open with it. They were afraid of getting kicked out of the meeting place. When push came to shove they cared more for human approval than for God’s glory.

Reflect

Being out in the open about our belief in the light of Christ is a choice we continue to have in our current culture; just as those who had a choice who actually encountered Jesus 2000+ years ago. It’s interesting to revisit verse 42 of the reading which states “a considerable number did believe... but didn’t come out in the open... they were afraid...” How compelling and timely verse 42 is. Perhaps we may also notice others or ourselves being afraid to believe, or if we do believe we are afraid to let it show in certain settings. We may admit to ourselves that we sometimes compartmentalize our faith by hiding it and only letting it show when convenient. Are we afraid of the lack of approval of others as those in Jesus’ day were afraid of the Pharisees?

In various ways and phrases, fear is spoken of in the Bible over 500 times. Often the phrases related to fear are: “do not fear” or “trust in the Lord”. Trust is key to the state of believing. One reason Isaiah said people couldn’t see or believe in this light – this Jesus - is because their hearts were hardened and they did not feel they needed to trust anything different than what they knew. Could that be true for us today? We are such well-informed people who can “google” anything for more understanding or knowledge. Yet the person who allows him/herself to deem spiritual matters as ultimately most important, knows there is vastly “more” beyond our accessible knowledge. And that “more” involves trusting in the light of Christ; plus, the ones who have come before us who actually experienced the light among them, believed in what they saw and then told the world. John 12:36 affirms that when we trust and believe, “Then the light will be within you and shining through your lives. You’ll be children of light.” Our Quaker friends model this so well, referring to themselves as Children of Light, as they apply and embrace Luke 16:8, John 12:36, Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

Many of us know missionaries who live out being Children of Light as they place their fears at the foot of the cross and go to serve in circumstances outside comfort zones. So, we who choose to believe in Jesus Christ (regardless of where we live or serve) can also remain in the light and avail ourselves of His power and peace. We affirm this each time we say the Lord’s Prayer and close with “for thine is the Kingdom, the power and glory forever, Amen”. This Lent season, may we consider what fears we might have in living our lives to the fullest in and through Christ and then surrender those fears. May we also consider if we allow approval of others to dampen our boldness in Christ. And whatever Lent brings to our awareness, may we align ourselves anew with Christ, so that we can prepare for Easter and “rise and shine!”, and most importantly to Be Children of Light.

Respond

- Watch Worship Video: Rise and Shine by the Belonging Co:
<https://youtu.be/kXLxxc-q3u0?si=usxHGFh8CHxduV7m>
- Read about Quakers by visiting: <https://quaker.org/the-inner-light/>
- Hum along to yourself the children’s song: This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. Also read about the history of this song here:
<https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/630051651/american-anthem-this-little-light-of-mine-resistance>

Rest

Let this prayer be a balm upon you: “The light of God surrounds me; The love of God enfolds me; The power of God protects me; The presence of God watches over me. Wherever I am, God is.” (Prayer for Protection by James Dillet Freeman)

About the Author



Beth Knight, MAPC, is an alumna of Asbury Theological Seminary, has held a Certificate in Spiritual Direction for 20 years from Seeking the Spirit, Anchorage, Alaska and is a commissioned ecumenical minister through Federation of Christian Ministries. After 19 years in Alaska, Beth lives now in Clermont, FL. She serves as a Pastoral Counselor, Spiritual Director, pulpit supply and On-line Chaplain. Her favorite thing beyond ministry is being “Nana” to three littles. Instagram @delenabeth_knight or Website: www.bethknightministry.com

God's Word is Both Truth and Beauty

A Lent Reflection for Thursday, February 29 by Rev. Jeannette Conver

Lectionary reading for 2/29/2024. Psalm 19; Exodus 19:1-9a; 1 Peter 2:4-10
Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 19

Read

Psalm 19 NLT

The heavens proclaim the glory of God.

The skies display his craftsmanship.

²Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.

³They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.

⁴Yet their message has gone throughout
the earth,
and their words to all the world.

God has made a home in the heavens for
the sun.

⁵It bursts forth like a radiant bridegroom
after his wedding.

It rejoices like a great athlete eager to
run the race.

⁶The sun rises at one end of the heavens
and follows its course to the other end.
Nothing can hide from its heat.

⁷The instructions of the Lord are perfect,
reviving the soul.

The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

⁸The commandments of the Lord are right,
bringing joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are clear,
giving insight for living.

⁹Reverence for the Lord is pure,
lasting forever.

The laws of the Lord are true;
each one is fair.

¹⁰They are more desirable than gold,
even the finest gold.

They are sweeter than honey,
even honey dripping from the comb.

¹¹They are a warning to your servant,
a great reward for those who obey them.

¹²How can I know all the sins lurking in my
heart?

Cleanse me from these hidden faults.

¹³Keep your servant from deliberate sins!
Don't let them control me.

Then I will be free of guilt
and innocent of great sin.

¹⁴May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing to you,

O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Reflect

Nothing compares to the vastness of the sky by night or by day. The clouds that appear suspended like gauzy wisps of fluff make an airplane look like a toy. The tiny twinkling lights we see at night are light years away. The James Webb telescope images continue to astound us with their beauty. Maybe you, like me, spend much of your day with what is immediately around you—addressing the mundane, routine tasks of daily existence. My vision is narrowed and constricted to the here and now...and I can lose perspective.

Psalm 19 reminds us to look up from our screens, our to do lists and look out. Only then do we really hear the voice of God in creation. Only then do we still have our whirling thoughts. Only then do we realize how small our problems are. Only then do we remember there is someone outside of time and space who holds our yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

Then vv. 6-11 draw our attention to another way God speaks to us—through the Word. The Word reveals a God of perfection, wisdom, truth, clarity, and worthy of our trust. When we heed the Word's warning, we respond with joyful obedience.

The conclusion of Psalm 19 in vv. 12-14, is the psalmist's humble response to God. God, the formidable rock and loving redeemer has spoken in creation and Word. May we join the poet and say, "May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you!"

Respond

- Take a walk in God's creation. Pause and observe the intricacy of lacy bare branches against the sky. Or step outside tonight to look up at the stars and planets. Be still. Listen.
- Be awe-inspired by this depiction of space from the Webb telescope.
<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/pillars-of-creation-seen-in-4k-via-james-webb-space-telescope/vi-AA1fAGpe>.
- Enjoy this poem, based on Psalm 19, written by Malcom Guite found in his book David's Crown: Sounding the Psalms:

XIX Caeli enarrant

*In that still place where earth and
heaven meet
Under mysterious starlight, raise your
head
And gaze up at their glory: 'the
complete

Consort dancing' as a poet said
Of his own words. But these are all
God's words;
A shining poem, waiting to be read

A fresh in every heart. Now look towards*

*The brightening east, and see the splendid
sun
Rise and rejoice, the icon of his lord's
True light. Be joyful with him, watch him
run
His course, receive the gift and treasure of
his light
Pouring like honeyed gold till day is done

As sweet and strong as all God's laws, as
right
As all his judgements and as clean and
pure,
All given for your growth, and your delight!*

Rest

O God, my rock and my redeemer... Creator of the vast heavens and our own small blue planet, thank you for hearing me even though I am so small in a universe so large. I love you, trust you, and worship you with wonder. Be glorified in my life, my words, and my deeds this day. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



About the Author

Jeannette is the mother of four amazing adults and grandmother to two outstanding grandchildren. She lives in the Skagit Valley of Washington state-- near majestic mountains, restless ocean waves, and tulips. Jeanette is the Lead Pastor of Community Covenant Church. She loves the beauty of words and nature and finds joy in riotous color. She's always ready for coffee and conversation, or a game of UNO.

God's Presence Anywhere and Everywhere

A Lent Reflection for Friday, March 1 by Rebekah Bolin

Lectionary reading for 3/1/2024. Psalm 19; Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40
Selected passage for reflection: Acts 7:30-40

Read

Acts 7:30-40 NIV

30 “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. **31** When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: **32** ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’^[a] Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. **34** I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’^[b]

35 “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. **36** He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’^[c] **38** He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. **40** They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’^[d]

Reflect

To understand this passage, one really needs to understand the context. Stephen, a recent convert to Christ, was on the chopping block (Acts 6:12). The religious leaders were accusing him of blasphemy, saying he was degrading the name of Moses, God, and the Temple (Acts 6:8-15). These verses in Acts 7:30-40 are part of Stephen’s defense. First, Stephen is showing his knowledge and respect for Moses by recounting Moses’ story (thus discrediting their accusation that he was speaking blasphemous words against Moses). Secondly, Stephen is defending himself by pointing out how God appeared to Moses *in the wilderness*. The religious leaders were concerned that Stephen’s Gospel message was in some way going against the

temple because they believed God's presence was *in the temple*. However, the message of Jesus, of which Stephen was spreading, says that God's presence is found everywhere, even inside people through the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:48-51). So here, Stephen is intentional in sharing a story about Moses in which God appears to him in a burning bush *outside* of the temple.

There are obviously many ways to dissect this passage in regards to what happened with Moses, but contextually, these verses are about Stephen trying to convince the people that God's presence can be found anywhere and everywhere. Interestingly, the religious leaders were so disturbed with this message and thought it so blasphemous they end up stoning Stephen (Acts 7:54-60).

Our initial reaction to the religious leaders might be one of disgust or disbelief. How dare they kill someone over such an obvious Truth! Of course God's presence can be outside the temple, or in our lingo--outside the church!

However, upon deeper reflection, many still do not fully believe the whole truth of Stephen's message: God's presence is literally *everywhere*. It may seem blasphemous in today's world to say God presence is amongst the poor, the rich, the oppressed, the oppressors, the widows, the orphans, the sinners, the saints, the republicans, the democrats, the drunks, the drug users, the queer, the happily married, the divorced, the Christians, the Muslims, the Buddhists, the bars, the corporate buildings, the churches, the Bible studies, the sports stadiums, the brothels, the mountains, the seas, and everywhere in between. And wholly with you.

If at any point you read the above paragraph and questioned or thought, "Surely God can't be *there* or with *them*," then you have the same attitude as the religious leaders. If we are honest, it truly is hard to believe the extent not only of God's presence, but of God's love. Can God's loving presence really extend to all people in all situations? According to Stephen and the Gospel message, yes! What great news this is! Once we can embrace this truth, we are able to let go of judgements and live a life of love. We can also live in the truth that God is with *us*, with *you*. And may this Truth bless you each and every day.

Respond

Think of areas of your life where you have a hard time imagining God's presence. Is it in your job? Your relationships? Your finances? Your marriage? Your kids? Your boss? In rush hour traffic? Next to you in a bar? In your grief? In your sickness? In a decision you made? In a mistake you made? In areas where you are ashamed? Write these areas down on a piece of paper. Then spend some time praying over each of these areas and ask God to reveal God's presence in each of these areas. Be patient and allow the Holy Spirit to move and reveal where God is or was in all areas of your life.

Rest

Dear God,

You are not only a God who shows up in temples, churches, and burning bushes, you are also a God who makes your presence known through the whispers of our hearts. May you show your presence in all areas of my life. May peace and comfort come over me as I recognize that you are with me at all times and in all situations.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen

About the Author



After growing up in Wisconsin, Rebekah graduated from Fuller Seminary and has lived in Los Angeles since 2006 (minus a year and a half of living on the Big Island of Hawaii). In 2018 she started and pastored a church in Downtown LA. The church has been on hold since covid, but the vision is still alive and well and she hopes to eventually start it back up. Until then she is out traveling as she works for a major U.S. airline. In her free time, she loves to travel, hike, put together jigsaw puzzles, try new food, play soccer, laugh around the dinner table with family and friends, and enjoy the adventures of life the Lord takes her on.

Focus, Listen, and Obey

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, March 2 by Brandi S. Sanders

Lectionary reading for 3/02/2024: Psalm 19; Exodus 19:16-25; Mark 9:2-8

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 9:2-8

Read

Mark 9:2-8 *The Message*

Six days later, three of them did see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

Peter interrupted, “Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.”

The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

Reflect

This passage makes me think about myself, my two younger sisters, and our mom. I mean, I can literally see the scene in my mind. My mother brings my sisters and I to a special moment and my sister (I won’t say which one) just can’t be quiet. The only other thing that would have made it more like my childhood is if Jesus had turned around and told Peter to shut up. I giggle a little every time I read this passage.

There are two things in this text that stand out to me.

The first thing that stands out to me is God calling down to the disciples. Prior to this moment, the disciples are struggling a bit with who Jesus is and, in this moment, God settles it. He makes things clear, “This is my son...Listen to him.” So, for any of you who are still confused, this is my son. The next thing God says, which is probably the most crucial, is, “Listen to him.” It’s important to note that God was not simply commanding them to hear what Jesus says, but to obey him. I wish God would do something similar with my kids. “Listen up kids, I put your mom in charge. Listen to her.” But I digress.

The second thing that stands out to me is the moment when the disciples are looking around and no longer see Moses or Elijah. The text says that they see “nothing but Jesus. Only Jesus.”

It must have been pretty cool to see Moses and Elijah, but your focus needs to be on Jesus. As a matter of fact, Moses and Elijah, while walking the Earth, were pointing us toward Jesus. Focus on Jesus. I need this type of reminder daily. Brandi, focus on Jesus. I don't know about you, but I can get so caught up in things – good things that I need to be reminded that ultimately, Jesus is my focus.

Summary:

- We are to listen to and obey God.
- Our focus should be on Jesus.
- *I decided to sneak this one in* - Sometimes we need to just shut up (like Peter and my sister).

Respond

Take a moment and think about what you need to do to focus on God. How can you remove the distractions? In what ways are you listening but not obeying God? Make the decision to be obedient and fight like hell to do it.

Rest

Gracious and holy God, help me to focus more on you. I desire to not only listen, but to obey your word. Lord and in the moments when you are trying to speak to me, help me to be quiet so that I can hear your voice. Amen.



About the Author

Brandi S. Sanders is a minister and podcaster. In October she had her third daughter (and second IVF miracle) and is enjoying the cuddles. Leading worship and working to relaunch her podcast are other things that have her excited. Brandi, her husband and their three daughters live in the Chicagoland area. Follow Brandi on Facebook and find her on Instagram - @mrs.bransan.

Let Your Life Speak

A Lent Reflection for Sunday, March 3 by Rev. Emily Wickstrom

Lectionary reading for 03/03/2024: Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 19 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 • John 2:13-22

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 19

Read

Psalm 19 NLT

The heavens proclaim the glory of God.
The skies display his craftsmanship.

2 Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.

3 They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.^[a]

4 Yet their message has gone throughout
the earth,
and their words to all the world.

God has made a home in the heavens for
the sun.

5 It bursts forth like a radiant bridegroom
after his wedding.
It rejoices like a great athlete eager to run
the race.

6 The sun rises at one end of the heavens
and follows its course to the other end.
Nothing can hide from its heat.

7 The instructions of the LORD are perfect,
reviving the soul.
The decrees of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

8 The commandments of the LORD are right,
bringing joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are clear,
giving insight for living.

9 Reverence for the LORD is pure,
lasting forever.

The laws of the LORD are true;
each one is fair.

10 They are more desirable than gold,
even the finest gold.

They are sweeter than honey,
even honey dripping from the comb.

11 They are a warning to your servant,
a great reward for those who obey them.

12 How can I know all the sins lurking in my
heart?

Cleanse me from these hidden faults.

13 Keep your servant from deliberate sins!
Don't let them control me.

Then I will be free of guilt
and innocent of great sin.

14 May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing to you,

O LORD, my rock and my redeemer

Reflect

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” This common idiom suggests that language alone can’t fully describe what an image can. Perhaps David had this notion in mind when crafting this psalm. He begins by describing the heavens as proclaiming the glory of God, day after day, night after night (vs. 1-2). But the heavens did not declare this with mere words, but by simply living into what they were created to be. David writes that the heavens did not use words (v. 3), and yet they are known to everyone and everything. They speak to who God is, and what happens when we follow God, bringing revival (v. 7a), wisdom (v. 7b), joy (v. 8a), and insight (v. 8b). In a way, the heavens speak for themselves - their worth is invaluable.

As the psalm continues, David shifts the focus of the psalm from the heavens to himself. Perhaps he began to wonder what his own life would speak to. If the heavens declare the glory of God, does his own life give that same proclamation? He must have seen that there were things that are trying to distract him and pull him away from being focused on God. I find this to be true in my own life. There seems to be no shortage of things that want to pull me away from being fully present with God. Tasks and to-do lists seem never ending. Roles and responsibilities seem overwhelming. Current events and crises seem devastating. I often end each day with more things left undone than done - it can be discouraging and disappointing. And yet despite what I have done or left undone, my life still speaks. But what is it proclaiming? Where is God in the midst of it all?

David ends the psalm asking that all of who he is - from his words to the very essence of his soul - be acceptable to God (v. 14). May that be so for us today, so that like the heavens, our whole selves and our whole lives, in the fullness of who God created us to be, might proclaim and point to the glory of God; for we too are invaluable.

Respond

Picture your life right now in its commonness and complexity. What do you see? If you had to draw your current life as a picture, what would it look like? I invite you to either draw out what you see, or find a picture that depicts it.

What feelings arise in you as you reflect on this picture? Where do you see God in the midst of that? Let your life speak.

Rest

God, it's so easy for me to get caught up in life that I can forget who I am living for. Help me to proclaim your glory in all that I do, all that I say, all that I am. Amen.

About the Author



Emily is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church who serves in a co-vocational role in Sacramento, CA, both as an associate pastor at Common Ground Church and as a hospital chaplain student at Sutter Roseville Medical Center. Emily is passionate about becoming a better listener and cultivating spaces where people can show up as their full selves, especially in intercultural contexts. Some of her favorite things include: listening to people's stories, being with her husband Ben and 10-month old daughter Isabel, and spending time in and around water. You can follow along with her life, ministry, and everything in between on her Instagram (@emily.wickstrom).

Something Greater

A Lent Reflection for Monday, March 4 by Aisha Cox

Lectionary reading for 3/4/24: Psalm 84; 1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 84

Read

Psalm 84 NLT

1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of Heaven's Armies.
2 I long, yes, I faint with longing
to enter the courts of the LORD.
With my whole being, body and soul,
I will shout joyfully to the living God.
3 Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow builds her nest and
raises her young
at a place near your altar,
O LORD of Heaven's Armies, my King and
my God!
4 What joy for those who can live in your
house,
always singing your praises.
5 What joy for those whose strength comes
from the LORD,
who have set their minds on a pilgrimage
to Jerusalem.
6 When they walk through the Valley of
Weeping,^[b]
it will become a place of refreshing
springs.

The autumn rains will clothe it with
blessings.
7 They will continue to grow stronger,
and each of them will appear before God
in Jerusalem.^[c]
8 O LORD God of Heaven's Armies, hear my
prayer.
Listen, O God of Jacob. *Interlude*
9 O God, look with favor upon the king, our
shield!
Show favor to the one you have anointed.
10 A single day in your courts
is better than a thousand anywhere else!
I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house
of my God
than live the good life in the homes of the
wicked.
11 For the LORD God is our sun and our
shield.
He gives us grace and glory.
The LORD will withhold no good thing
from those who do what is right.
12 O LORD of Heaven's Armies,
what joy for those who trust in you.

Reflect

I'll never forget my niece's reaction the first time she visited Disneyland. Shortly after we entered the park she whispered to me, "Is this real or am I dreaming?" Rarely do I personally experience being in awe, but I got a front row seat on this day. Her eyes were filled with wonder and delight. Although she normally is a "busy bee" she asked if we could walk at a slower pace so she could take everything in. She was in full agreement that this was the happiest place on earth. When we returned home all she could talk about was how she couldn't wait to go back.

The psalmist shares that same awe as he gazes at God's temple. More than admiring the temple from the sidelines, he articulates a deep desire to dwell in His presence. Nothing on Earth can compare. One day with Him is more soul fulfilling than a thousand anywhere else. God's presence is not only a preference, it's a priority. However, life has a way of knocking our priorities out of order. The pursuit of happiness will have us seeking places, things, and people before we do God. Happiness is temporary. Happiness is fleeting. Happiness is dependent on our circumstances and rooted in external factors. The psalmist reminds us that God offers us something greater.

Instead of looking for something to make us happy, we have unlimited access to a person who brings us joy. Joy is internal. Joy is independent of circumstances. Joy can be sustained through the highs and lows of life. Joy equally sets us apart and draws others in with curiosity. Joy is contagious. Joy is a gift from God. The restrictions that were in place concerning the temple no longer apply to us. Unlike Disneyland there's no traffic, long lines, or entry fee required to experience His presence. We can boldly and authentically approach the throne of grace. Slow down, draw near, and experience the joy that is available to all who put their trust in Him.

Respond

The connection between joy and God's presence is a theme found throughout Scripture. Sometimes our desire to seek Him first, doesn't align with the reality of how we spend our time. Is there anything that is getting in the way of you seeking God first? How is joy on display in your life right now?

Rest

God I thank you for the joy your presence brings. Help me to not let my circumstances or feelings get in the way of seeking you first. May the joy of the Lord be experienced by all who come in contact with me. In Jesus name. Amen.

About the Author

Aisha Cox is a Speaker, Leader, and Mentor. She has made a commitment to trust where God leads her no matter how uncomfortable, inconvenient, or fearful it may be. Aisha is passionate about helping people grow in their relationship with God and develop rhythms to care well for their souls. She is also the founder of Authentically Arise which creates authentic spaces for women to arise into their God-given identity, purpose, and build community along the journey. She currently resides in San Antonio, Texas.

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Our High Priest

A Lent Reflection for Tuesday, March 5 by Seanna Wong

Lectionary reading for 03/05/2024: Psalm 84; 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19; Hebrews 9:23-28
Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 9:23-28

Read

Hebrews 9:23-28 *NIV*

"23 It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. 25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Reflect

I believe God designs us with the innate desire to right our wrongs, wanting to rid ourselves of the clawing, itchy, and uncomfortable burden of guilt in replacement for the freedom of forgiveness.

A mistake at work moves us to stay overtime and proceed with a heightened sense of caution in the future. Unintentionally bruising the feelings of another compels us to apologize and offer amends. A word spoken hastily in anger forbids us to sleep, nudging us towards an opportunity to reconcile. All threads and beautiful stitchwork in God's design for a soft heart. In this way, we work at forgiveness, atonement, and relationship with one another.

However, this framework does not apply to our relationship with sin and with Christ. We can't simply right our wrongs with God through our actions - working for our bread, butter, and forgiveness. We have a responsibility in our relationship with Christ, but it is not a performative one built on "showing our sorry" in good deeds or over-the-top sacrifices. Instead, Hebrews 9:23-28 shows us that there is only one who aptly and sufficiently atones for our mistakes, trespasses, and debts - that of Christ Jesus.

Throughout our passage, the Mosaic, or Old Covenant, of the Old Testament is contrasted to the New Covenant made by the mercy of God and the blood of Jesus' sacrifice. The Mosaic

Covenant hinged on our ineligibility to enter into holy spaces filled with the presence of God. Forgiveness required animal sacrifices, specific rites of atonement, and the liaison of a high priest - the only one who could go behind the veil and into the Holy of Holies to communicate with God. However, the New Covenant shines with more of God's mercy as Christ takes the place of high priest. He who need not enter ephemeral temples that fade but enter into Heavenly realms on our account. He who is not required to beg for our forgiveness or suffer crucifixion each time we sin but whose blood covers and washes away all iniquity with supernatural power.

At Jesus' crucifixion, the veil to the Holy of Holies was torn, giving us free access to God. This New Covenant frees us from ritual and allows us a relationship with God.

In our text's closing verses, we have the safeguard and promise of how it all inevitably ends. We read that the culmination of our time on earth will indeed come and that that fact is a part of our design. Likewise, Christ's design is to have lived, died, live again, and return to us expectantly awaiting Him. His second return is not for the atonement of our sins but to comfort and rescue our anticipating hearts, now softened, mended, and accepting of his sacrifice.

Hebrews 9:23-28 is a love letter from groom to church bride. One penned to wipe away the tears and shame of yesterday in remembrance that His blood shed on Calvary still works and will never lose its power.

Respond

Have you caught yourself working for the forgiveness of God?

Relying on others as your liaison because you feel unfit to enter into His presence?

On the cross, Jesus declared, It is finished. He has accomplished all the work of your salvation, your justification, and your place in His Kingdom. Now, this High Priest, above all others, seeks your friendship. Rest assured that you are made enough by The One who loves you, died for you, and seeks a relationship with you.

Rest

Lord,

We come burdened by sin and shortcomings.

With hands trying to fix messes that we and others have made, tiring ourselves in the process.

We come empty, Lord. And even so, we come before you knowing, declaring, and believing that you, our High Priest, have been sent to cover every debt, sin, and trespass in your blood. Grow in us the ability to lay our burdens at your feet. Settle our hearts in the truth that is it finished - that under your sacrifice we are covered. Deepen our relationship with, oh God.

Thank you, Lord, for your mercy and kindness, provision and love.

In Jesus' name, Amen

About the Author



Seanna Wong is an MBA graduate from Miami, Florida.

When she's not reading, leading worship, or cooking for her friends, family, or food vlog, she's writing on Christian life and restaurant hopping in the city.

You can read more of Seanna's work here:

<https://medium.com/@seannawrites>.

Reckless Love

A Lent Reflection for Wednesday, March 6 by Pastor Ieisha Hawley

Lectionary reading for 3/6/24: Psalm 84; Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 11:15-19

Read

Mark 11:15-19 NRSV

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; **16** and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. **17** He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

18 And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. **19** And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

Reflect

Mark 11:15-19 recounts the incident where Jesus drove out the merchants and money changers from the temple in Jerusalem. This event is significant because it highlights Jesus' righteous anger and his desire for the temple to be a place of prayer and worship.

In this passage, Jesus entered the temple and found people buying and selling animals for sacrifice and exchanging money. He was deeply disturbed by the commercialization of the sacred space. Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves, declaring, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

As we reflect on this passage during Lent, we can draw several lessons. Firstly, it reminds us to examine our own hearts and motivations in our worship and service to God. Are we approaching him with reverence and sincerity, or are we allowing worldly distractions and selfish desires to creep in?

Secondly, this passage challenges us to be vigilant against any form of exploitation or injustice within the Church. Just as Jesus confronted the corruption in the temple, we should also be willing to confront and address any practices or attitudes that hinder the true worship of God and the well-being of his people.

Respond

As we journey through Lent, may we be reminded of the importance of sincere worship, justice, and the sacrificial love of Jesus. May we allow his cleansing and transforming power to purify our hearts and guide our actions as we seek to honor God and serve others.

1. Reverence in Worship: This passage reminds us to approach God with reverence and sincerity in our worship. We should examine our hearts and motivations, ensuring that we are not allowing worldly distractions or selfish desires to overshadow our worship of God.

2. Addressing Injustice: Jesus' action of driving out the money changers and merchants challenges us to be vigilant against any form of exploitation or injustice within the Church. We should be willing to confront and address practices or attitudes that hinder true worship and the well-being of God's people.

3. Cleansing and Transformation: The overturning of the tables symbolizes Jesus' desire to cleanse and transform our hearts. Lent is a season of repentance and renewal, where we can invite Jesus to cleanse us from anything that hinders our relationship with Him.

4. Prioritizing Prayer: Jesus quotes the Old Testament, saying, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." This reminds us of the importance of prayer in our lives. Lent is an opportunity to deepen our prayer life and spend intentional time in communion with God.

Finally, this passage points us to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, His sacrificial Love. The temple was the place where sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus' sacrifice rendered those sacrifices obsolete. He became the ultimate sacrifice, offering himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Rest

As we journey through Lent, may we draw from these lessons in Mark 11:15-19 and allow them to shape our thoughts, actions, and relationship with God. Amen.

About the Author

Pastor Ieisha Hawley is the Lead Pastor at Arlington United Church Arlington, WA and an experienced Prison Chaplain. Pastor Hawley is a 2015 Masters of Divinity graduate of Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. Pastor Hawley is an anointed, vibrant and powerful woman of God, called to be a servant of the Lord. www.ieishahawley.com



Compassionate God

A Lent Reflection for Thursday, March 7 by Sarah Roquemore Day

Lectionary reading for 3/6/24: [Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#); [Genesis 9:8-17](#); [Ephesians 1:3-6](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 11:15-19

Read

Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22 *NRSVA*

1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble

3 and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

17 Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

18 they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,

and he saved them from their distress;
20 he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

21 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

22 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Reflect

Once when I was about 8 years old, my parents brought me to a Superbowl party and left me unsupervised near the food table. At the time, one of my favorite snacks was Nacho Cheese Doritos, so, naturally, left to my own devices in close proximity to an extra large bag of said Doritos, I went to town. Over the course of four quarters, I managed to consume the whole bag, right down to the last crumb of cheese dust. It doesn't take much imagination to guess how this story ends. I'll spare you the more gruesome details, but suffice it to say, the wee hours of that night were spent in my mother's lap, curled over the toilet. I can hardly stomach Nacho Cheese Doritos to this day.

As I read verses 17-22 in today's Psalm, I see the image of a child made sick by their inability to regulate their impulses. They think they know what they want and go hard after it without realizing the thing they're enjoying at the moment will make them sick in the end. The word "sick" here can also be translated as "fools". How often do we, like children, make foolish and stubborn choices that undermine our spiritual, emotional, and relational health?

Fortunately, this image of a foolish child is accompanied by the image of a loving parent who steps in to save us when we've gone too far. God is a compassionate mother, who, hearing her daughter's retching cries in the middle of the night, rises to her aid, graciously holding her hair and rubbing her back until she is no longer at "the gates of death." As soon as we cry out for help, God rises to offer us healing and compassion.

As adults, it can be especially difficult for us to recognize and admit when our foolish choices have led to suffering. This is not to say that all suffering arises out of our choices— it is important that we also recognize that there are many painful and traumatic events and illnesses that are completely out of the realm of our control and we should not blame ourselves in those situations. However, for me, an enneagram 4 with a penchant for leaning into bad feelings, I am often guilty of exacerbating my own suffering with unhealthy habits. And when this is the case, it is often shame that holds me back from seeking help and making healthy changes. Rather than admitting that I'm sick, I sink my heels in and engage in all sorts of dubious coping strategies until I finally find my head in the spiritual toilet.

If you, like me, recognize areas where spiritual, emotional, or even physical illness may stem from your own unhealthy patterns, I invite you to initiate the healing process by leaning into a practice of self-compassion, initiated by the compassionate image of God seen in Psalm 107. What would change if we could look at ourselves with the same compassion God offers us? If we could see the child within us who needs help to heal and allow ourselves to receive the steadfast love of God?

Respond

Take some time to journal about any unhealthy patterns in your life that may be impacting your emotional, spiritual, or physical health. How has your own shame about these patterns kept you from crying out for help? Imagine a God who "rises to show compassion" to his people (Isaiah 30:18). How does developing a compassionate image of God impact your ability to heal and change? Are there any changes that God's compassion empowers you to begin making today?

Rest

Compassionate God,

Thank you for meeting us in our weaknesses. Help us to recognize the ways in which our sinful choices and patterns sicken our minds and spirits. May we offer ourselves the same compassion you offer us, as we cry out for your mercy to help us heal and grow.

About the Author



Sarah Roquemore Day is a middle school teacher, sometimes a writer, and always a daydreamer. She has recently entered her auntie era and loves doting on her precious nieces, Kellyn and Kai-Ling. Sarah lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband Bob.

In Him

A Lenten Reflection for Friday, March 8th by Rev. Ruby A. Varghese

Readings for 3/8/24: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Daniel 12:5-13; Ephesians 1:7-14

Selected passage: Ephesians 1:7-14

Read

Ephesians 1:7-14 NIV

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Reflect

I remember as a little girl we made a big move as a family, my dad said “everything must go”! We began collecting all the items in the house to sell for our garage sale. Unfortunately in the hustle my prized teddy bear got added to the pile and was sold. I received money from the sale I had earned and I got to spend it on whatever I wanted. That day had slipped by, until I felt that flutter in my heart that something was terribly wrong. My teddy was gone and the money I received was spent. How was I going to get my precious bear back? I brainstormed all the ways yet I didn't have enough of what it would take to get my bear back in time. So I went to my father and he had enough to buy back my bear from my neighbor, my bear was redeemed. This precious bear was free from someone else's possession and returned back into my care! Whether it's someone/something that has possession of you, where are you in need of God's redemption?

Paul is in prison writing a letter to Ephesus about Jesus. He begins reminding them of all the things they have “In Him”. Like Ephesus we need these reminders too! As we reach our halfway mark leading up to Lent, remember it is Jesus who comes as the sacrificial Lamb. Jesus who was sold in an act of betrayal is the One whose death frees us from the bondage of sin. This sacrifice makes the impossible possible, only in Him! This act we can't do for

ourselves yet so often we think we have to come up with the solutions on our own or have found enough to bail ourselves out. But Paul proclaims it is the Redeemer who comes in His blood on the cross and displays the power of God to deliver us from sin. This grace is not something we deserve, that can be measured, or ever runs out but something that can only be given through the Father.

We know the story does not end here in death but continues in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's hard to conceive this radical news with all that we hold in our personal lives and all that is taking hold in our world. But In Him we know God has a masterplan, he has more than enough to bring hope, freedom, and redemption to his people. This act was necessary in order for us to be reconciled to God. This lavish grace was done for us. Despite knowing who and what we were, He loves us enough to extend the richness of God's grace over us. God sees us, hears us, and responds for our redemption.

This letter is Paul reminding Christians in Ephesus that Christ has come to dwell among them. This Lent remember the Holy Spirit is a seal upon our hearts for we are chosen, given an inheritance beyond our understanding, and as a redeemed people called to spread the Good News to others.

Respond

Where is God inviting you, as you have heard the Good News, to repent and put your trust and faith in Him? This Lent where is our focus on ourselves or on Jesus? It is the work of the Holy Spirit that you have been signed, sealed, and delivered. In whom will you put your trust, and in whom will you give your thanks?

Rest

Redeemer, it is because of the cross that I am forgiven. Your abundant grace was more than enough for me. Thank you for choosing me and for including me in your Kingdom. It's only through you that I can find strength, hope, and the ability to live a life that brings you glory. May I rest in this truth and believe today and always. AMEN.



About the Author

Ruby Varghese currently resides in Seattle, WA. She has served as Associate Pastor of Family, Youth, and Young Adults for over 24 years. She holds a Masters in Spiritual Formation, a soon- to-be completed certification in Spiritual Direction, and is embarking on a Masters in Marriage & Family Therapy at Fuller in CA this fall. As a second-generation, Indian-American she sees it as a great privilege and gift to serve the church. Also she can't wait for some more sunshine! Instagram: @rubyav Facebook: Ruby Varghese Website: newportcov.church

Longing for Transformation

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, March 9 by Mary Peterson

Lectionary reading for 03/09/2023: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 20:22-29; John 3:1-13

Selected passage for reflection: John 3:1-13

Read

John 3:1-13 NIV

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Reflect

Transformation is a word that gets thrown around a lot these days. The other day I stopped by Target and purchased some hair spray. The can promised to “transform my blow out routine.” Even my hair is longing for transformation, apparently! Many of us make decisions every day that reveal our deep longing for transformation... better hair, better diet, less worrying, less stuff, more time with friends, being more intentional in our marriages, training for that half marathon. Each of these reveal our deep longing for transformation. We crave a new and improved edition of ourselves.

Nicodemus- a high ranking, well-educated powerful member of the ruling council. John recalls the time Nicodemus found himself sneaking in to see Jesus at night. Nicodemus was curious and wanted to know who this was that could perform miraculous signs. We don't know why he came at night, but we like to make assumptions. Maybe it was out of fear of ridicule from neighbors? Maybe he got held up at the office? Maybe he stopped by home to have dinner with the family and tuck the kids in bed before he went to go meet Jesus? We don't know what motivated his timing. Perhaps our assumptions about Nic's motivations might reveal some of our motivations for seeking Jesus when we do.

In this short conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Babies weren't born in hospitals in those days. Child birth was front and center in a household. Nicodemus didn't need to recall his high school biology class, he knew something about how babies entered the world. Surely you can't enter the mother's womb a second time!

Nicodemus was an educated guy. He was taught to think critically and be able to follow logic. In this interaction with Jesus, he clings to his education. He always had the answer, but he might have lost touch with his ability to wonder. Nicodemus struggled to look past the things he had learned to get a glimpse at the kingdom of God. Instead of relying on God to guide him, he had faith in his own mind, education and social standing. He struggled to let go of those things to imagine what God might be doing in his midst.

It takes faith to trust the wind of the spirit to move us. You never know where God will take you. In this way, transformation is a risky endeavor. When you trust God to change your life, you will be changed in huge ways. Transformation requires us to let go of our old life- old ways of thinking and being- and rely on God to do the work in us. We will have to engage our sense of wonder to begin to imagine what the Kingdom of God will look like. We have to trust that God is at work in our lives to give us new life.

Respond

Where am I craving transformation? What do I rely on most in my life? What am I having a hard time letting go of in my life? How can I rely more on God?

Rest

Spirit of God, help us to pause and notice your presence in our lives like a cool breeze on a spring day. May we feel you working in our lives even though we can not see where you come from or where you are going. May we trust that you are transforming our lives so that we can glimpse your rule in this world.



About the Author

Mary Peterson lives right outside of Beaumont, Texas, with her husband, two teenagers and two cats. She is passionate about the beach, drinking coffee and traveling. Mary serves as Senior Pastor of a precious church called Providence Church and is completing her Doctorate of Ministry at Fuller Seminary.

Turnip Greens and John 3:16

A Lent Reflection for Sunday, March 10 by Rev. Anna George Traynham

Lectionary reading for 03/10/2024: Numbers 21:4-9 • Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 • Ephesians 2:1-10 • John 3:14-21

Selected passage for reflection: John 3:14-21

Read

John 3:14-21 NRSV

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.[a]

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20** For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21** But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”[b]

Reflect

No one has a neutral opinion about turnip greens. You either love them or you hate them, and whether you love them or hate them has a lot to do with your *experience* of them. Turnip greens are a little bitter, but not in a bad way; it just depends on how you season them. They’re tricky to clean, too. If you’ve ever grown turnips, you know that their leaves are a favorite home for pests. You have to turn the leaves over and over as you scrub them, or you may find a bug on your plate. Turnip greens are complicated. They’re polarizing. They come with baggage.

They’re a lot like John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...”

It’s the most memorized verse in the New Testament. Some of us might love John 3:16. We might have grown up on it, and have positive memories attached to it. *Sure, it’s a little bitter, but we know how to season it with just the right amount of butter and sop it up with cornbread.* Others of us would never order John 3:16 off a menu. We’ve got bad memories of someone trying to force feed it to us, or of watching a worm crawl out between its leaves.

Whether positive or negative, we've got baggage around John 3:16. What we don't have is context.

That's what we get in today's lectionary reading. We get to zoom out and see the whole plate.

Today's passage is just one part of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to him in the darkness of night, not yet ready to profess his faith in the light of day. Jesus tells him that through the spirit believers will be born from above, and Nicodemus asks, "How can this be?" That's the question Jesus is answering in our scripture today. He's not answering a question about heaven or hell, about eternal damnation or even personal salvation. He's answering the question, "How can this be?"

How can it be that we can be born of the spirit?
How can it be that what seems impossible is possible?
And Jesus answers, "Love."

That's the bottom line of this text: God loves the world, and God showed that love to us by lifting up Jesus in the most humble of ways. God loves the world enough to want life for us: not just everlasting life beyond death but full and faithful life right now, on this side of the grave.

That might be the trickiest part of this passage: the leaf that has to be scrubbed the most, because it has definitely come to house some unsightly parasites. (*Turnip greens are good for you, but the bugs who hang out in them are not.*)

There is a lot of language in this passage about perishing and condemnation, and on the other hand everlasting life and light. Our whole lives, many of us have been told that this passage is about what happens when we die. Even if you never heard that in Sunday school or in a sermon, you probably absorbed it from billboards or church signs. Evangelists though the centuries have watered down this passage so much that it's lost all its flavor. More often than not, all we taste is a threat. "Believe in Jesus or else."

Beloved, hear this good news. There is no threat in or around John 3:16. There is only a promise.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked, and Jesus answered, "Love."

Respond

If you have your own baggage around this passage, what would it be like for you to set it down and trust that God loves you?

What wonders of your life leave you asking, "How can this be?"

Rest

God of grace, we give you thanks for your love incarnate:

Your love poured out;

Your love that surrounds us;

Your love that will not let us go.

Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Anna George Traynham serves as Senior Pastor of Shallowford Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), in Atlanta, Georgia.

Bitter Turned Better

A Lent Reflection for Monday, March 11 by Rev. Rosalyn Bates

Lectionary reading for 3/11/2024: Psalm 107:1-16; Exodus 15:22-27; Hebrews 3:1-6
Selected passage for reflection: Exodus 15:22-27

Read

Exodus 15:22-27 NLT

²² Then Moses led the people of Israel away from the Red Sea, and they moved out into the desert of Shur. They traveled in this desert for three days without finding any water. ²³ When they came to the oasis of Marah, the water was too bitter to drink. So they called the place Marah (which means “bitter”).

²⁴ Then the people complained and turned against Moses. “What are we going to drink?” they demanded. ²⁵ So Moses cried out to the LORD for help, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. Moses threw it into the water, and this made the water good to drink. It was there at Marah that the LORD set before them the following decree as a standard to test their faithfulness to him. ²⁶ He said, “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his sight, obeying his commands and keeping all his decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for I am the LORD who heals you.”

²⁷ After leaving Marah, the Israelites traveled on to the oasis of Elim, where they found twelve springs and seventy palm trees. They camped there beside the water.

Reflect

Have you ever achieved a long-awaited victory and quickly thereafter faced a loss or impasse? We feel the thrilling satisfaction of reaching a goal after years of struggle. A challenge that once consumed us has converted into a trophy, a symbol of triumph. This is the place where we want to remain. We are okay with the learning curve ending right here. We want the taste of victory—sweet victory—to linger on our lips.

However, new battles and challenges lie ahead. Depending on the outlook about the reality of these uncertainties, either excitement motivates or dread paralyzes us. Because of the frustrations, inconveniences, and questions that accompany progress, “trust the process” is easy for us to say, but not easy for us to do.

The Israelites had experienced arguably their most historic victory as a people at the crossing of the Red Sea. There, they saw God part water to clear their path and create walls so that they could walk forward on dry ground. God then used that same water to drown their oppressors. Miriam the Prophetess had led the nation in a praise break like no other to celebrate this miraculous demonstration of God as Divine Warrior. This triumph over the Egyptian army

secured the people's faith in God and in God's servant, Moses. But Moses led the people away from that place to the middle of nowhere, a no-water wilderness. The people faced death in this desert. The salty oasis at Marah disappointed them. The taste of victory was replaced with the taste of bitterness here.

Places like Marah expose our human insecurities, limitations and vulnerabilities. These Israelites asked Moses, "What are we going to drink?" Their question captures the distress of wondering how they will survive. Their question more deeply also asks, "What will quench our thirst or satisfy us out here in our bitter situation?" After Moses cried to the Lord for help, God showed him a solution—a simple piece of wood that made the bitter water sweet for drinking. What is easy to miss about Marah is that God standardizes this place of bitterness and uses it as a testing ground. God uses Marah to test the people's faithfulness. The test involves listening to God's voice and obeying God's instructions. The process is not an exemption *from* the trial. It rather confirms the promise of God's preservation *during* the trial.

We tend to believe that our trials are methods for testing God's faithfulness to *us*. Verse 25 suggests the opposite—that the trials are testing *our* faithfulness to God. God is fully aware that we need healing from old wounds so that our history does not determine our destiny. God responds and is revealed to us as Healer. Like the Israelites, God does not leave us moaning and mourning at Marah. We move forward from places like Marah to the pure, abundant and refreshing waters of Elim, having been preserved through God's promise, transformed by our trials, and reminded of God's revelation.

Respond

Consider the places where you have been and where you are now. Note how God is revealed to you in those places. Offer thanks and praise for God's presence with you.

Rest

Prayer: Lord, I trust You in triumph and in trials. My faith is anchored in You, wherever and however You lead me. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

About the Author

Rosalyn Bates is a licensed clinical professional counselor, an ordained Staff Pastor, and founder of Rosgarden Productions, LLC. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Education and Social Policy from Northwestern University, a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Wheaton College, and a Master of Divinity degree from McCormick Theological Seminary.



“Meh” in the Life of Faith

A Lent Reflection for Tuesday, March 12 by Rev. Jessie Lowry

Lectionary reading for March 12th: Psalm 107:1-16; Numbers 20:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Selected passage for reflection: Numbers 20:1-13

Read

Number 20:1-13 *NIV*

1 In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

2 Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. 3 They quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! 4 Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? 5 Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”

6 Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. 7 The Lord said to Moses, 8 “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

9 So Moses took the staff from the Lord’s presence, just as he commanded him. 10 He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” 11 Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”

13 These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.

Reflect

It is hard to believe that this week will mark four years since our country was locked down for a global pandemic. Many of us in March of 2020 had never heard of Covid-19, but it turned out to change our lives and our world forever. What began as deep fear and panic gave way to restlessness, grumbling, agitation, helplessness and questions of why. With the world seeming to be back in full swing four years later, it can be easy to just want to move on and forget those hard times. But maybe that doesn’t serve us.

The Israelites had a prolonged period of such restlessness and questions. Instead of four years, they had more than forty. In the story told today in Numbers, we remember our ancestors not as giants of patient faith, but instead as people who falter and fumble and grumble and grieve. Their deepest dreams seemed far away. The journey to the Promised Land was not straightforward. And don't our stories work that way too? Maybe we too have witnessed miracles and moments of wonder (or not), but still we find ourselves tired and weary and (for lack of a better word) just "MEH".



Has anyone heard that word in recent years to describe emotions that are not as dramatic as total lockdown or Egyptian slavery, but are more uncertain and tentative? Haven't we all come out of the pandemic experience, many of us, struggling to move beyond the "meh"? To live into our true freedom? Maybe the only way to move forward fully is to fully grieve. Maybe we need to stop hardening our hearts against all the ways these difficult experiences have changed us. There is a Japanese writer named Haruki Murakami who says so well: *"once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what the storm's all about"*. May it be so...

Respond

Moses disobeyed God in this passage in a very subtle way. In his anxiety, he reverted back to what he had done before. Exodus 17 chronicles how Moses had struck the rock once before right after the people fled Egypt. And now, so much closer to the Promised Land, when faced with so much uncertainty, God commanded him to speak to the rock, saying that it WILL pour out water. But Moses was scared: so he went back to what he knew. This Lent, can we resist the urge to fall back into old patterns? Can we sit with the uncertainty, fall before God and pause before trying to fix everything ourselves? Our own Promised Lands are incomplete without the journey we take to get there; allowing the path to unfold.

Rest

Lord God, we are so tempted to grasp for the familiar strategies; the well-known coping mechanisms, as we continue to wrestle with our seasons of “MEH”. We pray that you would slow us down enough to listen to you and trust you enough to wait before we act; to see if you might lead us in a different direction. Thank you for all the ways you have already transformed us on the journey.



About the Author

Jessie Lowry is a solo Pastor at Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church in Annapolis, MD, where she lives with her husband and two young children. Prior to this, she worked with formerly incarcerated women, as a hospital Chaplain in various settings, and as a Chaplain-in-Residence at Georgetown University. She is from PG County in Maryland, which led to a lifelong passion for antiracism work. She is also an identical twin who loves to read and meet new friends!

Being Honest

A Lent Reflection for Wednesday, March 13 by Amanda Munroe

Lectionary reading for 03/13/2024: [Psalm 107:1-16](#): [Isaiah 60:15-22](#): [John 8:12-20](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 107:1-16

Read

Psalm 107 NRSV

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.</p> <p>2 Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their
story—
those he redeemed from the hand of
the foe,</p> <p>3 those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and
south.[a]</p> <p>4 Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they
could settle.</p> <p>5 They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.</p> <p>6 Then they cried out to the LORD in their
trouble,
and he delivered them from their
distress.</p> <p>7 He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.</p> <p>8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his
unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,</p> | <p>9 for he satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things.</p> <p>10 Some sat in darkness, in utter
darkness,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
11 because they rebelled against God's
commands
and despised the plans of the Most
High.</p> <p>12 So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to
help.</p> <p>13 Then they cried to the LORD in their
trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.</p> <p>14 He brought them out of darkness, the
utter darkness,
and broke away their chains.</p> <p>15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for
his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for
humankind,</p> <p>16 for he breaks down gates of bronze
and cuts through bars of iron.</p> |
|---|---|

Reflect

The 16th century mystic Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (and later canonized by the Catholic Church, to become St. Ignatius of Loyola), advises in his instructions for contemplative prayer that we identify moments of “desolation” and moments of “consolation” as we share our lives with God. Moments of “desolation” tend to be signaled by negative feelings and are sometimes wound up with estrangement from ourselves, our sense of God’s presence,

or from one another. Consolation is signaled by feelings of alignment, joy, and healthy connection. A key teaching in Ignatian Spirituality is that both desolation and consolation are valuable. Both can prove instructive: identifying both moments of desolation and consolation with loving care can cultivate a deeper awareness of God's involvement in our lives.

Psalms 107 paints a dramatic picture of the human experience of consolation and desolation—materially, spiritually, and everywhere in between. What the Psalmist appears most convicted of is God's participation in it all. Throughout the passage, God is described as highly active: God gathers, delivers, leads, nourishes, brings out, breaks, and shatters. By the Psalmist's account, if change is afoot, God is in the mix.

This passage reminds me to look for God in what is changing in my life, in the parts that feel consoling and in the parts that feel disconsoling. It's a relief, even a form of rest, to know I can be honest with God about all of them.

Respond

In prayer today, review the last 24 hours of your life and share honestly with God about the moments that felt whole and good to you, as well as about the moments that felt difficult, whether or not you know why. Invite yourself to be honest with God, and invite God to show you where God is active in your life. After your review, consider making a list of verbs describing God's activity in your day, perhaps mirroring the Psalmist's list of verbs.

Rest

God, we give thanks to you for your steadfast love, unchanging in its goodness even as our understanding of it changes. Thank you for the power of your love to liberate, to nourish, to redeem, to sustain, and to endure. Help us to be honest with you and with ourselves in moments of desolation and consolation alike. Amen.

About the Author

Amanda Munroe lives in the Hudson Valley and loves to hear crunching and sloshing sounds when they walk, whether it's through leaves, snow, or slush. She spends her days imagining a peaceful world and crafting strategies for how to get there in her job directing restorative practices at a small liberal arts college populated by as many trees as it is people.

Amanda holds an M.Div from Union Theological Seminary and an M.A. in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University. Amanda enjoys guest preaching and offers one-to-one spiritual care. Reach out to Amanda at am5520@utsnyc.edu and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amandamunroe123>.



Rhythms of Rest

A Lent Reflection for Thursday, March 14 by Mary Chase-Ziolek

Lectionary reading for March 14, 2024: Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18; Hebrews 4:1-13
Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 4:1-13 NRSV

Read

Hebrews 4:1-13 NRSV

4 Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. 2 For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "As in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. 4 For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." 5 And again in this place it says, "they shall not enter my rest." 6 Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, 7 again he sets a certain day - "today" - saying through David much later, in the words already quoted "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." 8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. 9 So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God: 10 for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. 11 Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs. 12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Reflect

What images come to your mind when you think about rest? It can be easy to think of rest as doing nothing. Some may equate resting with being lazy, yet many important things happen physically, mentally and spiritually during rest that are not evident to others, as bodies grow, repair and re-calibrate. Sometimes when you feel that there is no time to rest, that is precisely what is required in order to have the energy and focus to do what needs to be done.

In this passage rest is named as a promise from God. Indeed rest is so important to our relationship with God that it was included in the Ten Commandments in the requirement to keep the Sabbath. This has tremendous implications for physical as well as mental and spiritual well-being. It also may be the commandment that is the least observed. Sabbath is an invitation to take time and space for connecting with God through the rest and renewal offered by a changed pace. Even as Ecclesiastes 3 talks of "to everything there is a season," so too in

our daily and weekly rhythms there is a time to work and be productive and there is also a time to slow down so we can be renewed and refreshed.

Rest requires slowing down and making space. In our bodies it may be space to breathe more deeply and slow our heart. In our minds rest may allow space to see things differently or solve a problem. In our soul as we slow down through rest we can better hear the still quiet voice of God. We can engage with the wonders of God's creation and in so doing experience our connection to something greater than ourselves. If even God needed a rhythm of rest in the midst of creation, how arrogant of humans when we think we can not rest from our work. While sabbath is a commandment, it is also a gift that God gives us – an invitation to slow down, put up our feet up and hang out with our Creator.

Respond

- What are the rhythms of rest and renewal in your life?
- What enables or limits your ability to take time to rest in the Lord?
- What are, or might be, meaningful sabbath practices for you?
- How do the communities to which you belong influence your ability to make time and space for rest?

Rest

Creator God, who made each of us with the capacity to both do and to simply be. Help us to appreciate the beauty of slowing down and moving at a pace that keeps body, mind and soul together. May we rest in you trusting that we are enough and that you will provide for our needs as we listen for your still, quiet voice. Amen



About the Author

Mary Chase-Ziolek is a spiritual director and an emeritus professor of health ministries at North Park Theological Seminary with an interest in the connections between faith and health. Some of her life-giving activities include being in nature, gardening, exercise, cooking and spending time with grandchildren. She lives in Chicago with her husband. Mary can be reached at marychaseziolek@yahoo.com

Singing Self-Acceptance

A Lent Reflection for Friday, March 15 by Leana Lopez

Lectionary reading for March 15, 2024: Psalm 51:1-12; Exodus 30:1-10; Hebrews 4:14-5:4

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 51

Read

Psalm 51 NIV

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived
me.
⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the

womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret
place.
⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be
clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain
me.

Reflect

In the quirky symphony of parenthood, Psalm 51 became an unexpected soundtrack for my journey. This came about because during my frantic research to prepare for parenthood, I learned that the unborn baby can hear you sing. Further, a child can actually be soothed by that very same lullaby later in life. Sweet, right? Armed with this new wisdom and a very mediocre voice, I decided to sing the closing verses of Psalm 51 to my growing belly. I belted out my anthem *ad nauseum*, determined to soothe this child.

Fast forward to today, and my kids *can't stand* it when I break into the familiar tune of David's repentant plea. It's as if the mere mention of "Create in me a clean heart, O God" triggers a collective eye roll. Yet, amid their playful protests, I am still reminded of the transformative power of those words.

Psalm 51 is more than just my melody mishap; it's a timeless script of my own cycles of repentance and renewal. There are moments when the echoes of my mistakes, especially my parenting mistakes, reverberate, and the burden of guilt threatens to overwhelm me. In those depths, the words of Psalm 51 soothe ME. I ask God over and over to “restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and renew a right spirit within me”. His words become my own prayer and I feel the beauty of genuine repentance—a surrender of brokenness before the Creator who lovingly restores.

This passage serves as a timeless reminder that in our brokenness, we find God's boundless compassion. Psalm 51 has woven itself into the fabric of my family story—a reminder that even in our ineffective melodies, God's grace is the enduring refrain.

Respond

In response to the transformative power of Psalm 51, consider incorporating regular moments of reflection on our constant cycle of mistakes and renewal. We need forgiveness all the time, in our outburst of road rage, when we are late to pick up our kid, when we choose not to call a friend and binge watch a show instead, when we forget to listen. Allow this scripture to guide you in cultivating a spirit of humility and acceptance to the inevitable, leading to a profound connection with the enduring refrain of God's fantastic grace in your everyday life.

Rest

Gracious Creator, as I reflect on the resonance of Psalm 51 in my life, I come before You with a humble heart. In moments of mistake and burden, I echo David's plea, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," seeking Your restoring touch. May Your boundless compassion fill my soul and may the joy of Your salvation renew my spirit again and again. Amen



About the Author

Leana Lopez is a licensed clinical social worker and healthcare administrator working with the Medicaid population in Chicago. She has been supporting social service agencies and healthcare organizations in Chicago for over 15 years. Leana provides clinical supervision, training, and consultation.

Lovingly looking within

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, March 16 by Alex Hofmann Macias

Lectionary reading for March 16, 2024: Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13; John 12:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 51:1-12

Read

Psalm 51:1-12 NRSV

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions. | therefore teach me wisdom in my secret
heart. |
| 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin. | 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be
clean; |
| 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me. | wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. |
| 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment. | 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed
rejoice. |
| 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me. | 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities. |
| 6 You desire truth in the inward being; | 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me. |
| | 11 Do not cast me away from your
presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me. |
| | 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. |

Reflect

In Psalm 51, we find David wrestling with the fallout of his actions. From the introduction, we know that this psalm is his response to the story found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 in which David's attempts at covering up his abuse of power and sexual relationship with Bathsheba result in further deceit and ultimately the death of her husband. Despite the severity of the situation, it is not until the prophet Nathan illustrates it in a parable that David grasps the whole of what he has done.

In the psalm, we experience David's remorse and new perspective. He not only feels the pain of his most recent transgression, he more clearly sees the patterns of his life. He writes, "My sin is ever before me" even from when "my mother conceived me." At the same time, he acknowledges that God is the one who can hold both judgment and forgiveness, and that God's

desire is for David's own change of heart. In the purity language of his time and culture, he asks for God's cleansing, forgiveness, and restoration.

The Lenten season is a time of self-evaluation and reflection on the habits that have formed who we are today. Over the centuries, the forty days leading to Easter have been an intentional time for Christians to reflect, with many opting to give up a habit or choosing to practice another as a way of orienting themselves toward Christ. Like David, sometimes we can reach a very difficult place before we recognize we have unhealthy patterns in our lives, but hopefully, we are paying attention to earlier warning signs. Lent is one opportunity to consider what changes we need to make so that we can more fully live into our identities as new creations in Christ.

Perhaps you are experiencing the heart ache, stomach sick, or "crushed bones" of knowing that you have hurt someone. Or perhaps you are noticing smaller ways that you have acted primarily out of self-interest or otherwise gotten off course in your relationship with God and others. When we take the time to pause and explore our own patterns of thought or behavior, we are vulnerable with God and open ourselves to the possibility of growth and love. This Lent, may you know, as David did, that you can dare to face the "truth of the inward being" with the confidence that God's love is unwavering.

Respond

Practice the Examen from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. Close your eyes and become aware of God's presence with you. Ask God to give you the eyes to see what God wants you to see. Review in your mind the events of the day and how you felt about them. Choose one of the day's experiences and reflect on how you responded in the moment. Accept God's grace and orient yourself in God's love for tomorrow.

Rest

Loving and compassionate God, hold us with tenderness as we explore our own habits, motivations, and missteps. Help us to see ourselves more clearly and to open ourselves to the possibility of change so that we can live more authentically as Jesus followers. Thank you for your steadfast love.

About the Author



Alex Hofmann Macias has been in theological education administration for over fifteen years. A native of Tucson, Arizona, she now lives just outside of Chicago with her husband and two children. Alex loves international films, good food, novels, laughing, and singing really loud in the car. She serves as Director of Academic Programming at North Park Theological Seminary.

With an Open Hand

A Lent Reflection for Sunday, March 17 by Rev. Sally Carlson

Lectionary reading for 03/17/2024: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Selected passage for reflection: John 12:20-33

Read

John 12:20-33, The Message

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up^[a] from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Reflect

I love to garden. I love picking out and buying seeds and imagining all the things I can plant and grow. Well, actually I love to plant my garden but struggle with watering, weeding and maintaining it. Okay... in truth, I love the IDEA of a garden. I had a couple years where the seeds made it into the ground and I did a passing job of keeping it up, but in the last couple the garden has remained firmly in my imagination! Maybe a few pots but that's it, and my dear husband is the one who keeps them alive! In reality, I seem to like to visit and enjoy other people's gardens.

As I reflected on this passage, I was struck most this time by Jesus' references to a seed needing to be planted in the ground if it is to produce fruit. It seems obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of plant life, but when the metaphor points us back to our own life, we very

often miss the point! 'Anyone who holds on to life...' How tightly do we hold on to our own lives and not live into all that Christ has for us? How many things look good to us from afar (that metaphorical packet of seeds that we bought because we like the thought of planting them), but never release them for God's glory? Over and over again I find myself holding tightly to my own stuff, often out of fear or a sense of scarcity.

I love the Message's translation of the next verse, 'But if you let it go, reckless in your love...' It is a beautiful thought - to love recklessly like Jesus. We hold tightly to so many things, our life and dreams and goals in particular, and in the process don't love the world - our neighbors - the way we are called to. We save our love for only certain people, or offer it with condition. We love, but with a scarcity mindset. As if there isn't enough to go around. But what does being reckless in our love look like? We can look to Jesus to see what that is like. Again, I like the idea of it, but do I actually follow through? That is still a work that Christ is doing in me, and by His grace and with His power it is possible!

For the last few years during the season of Lent I have tried to cultivate a practice of saying 'Hello' and 'Goodbye' to things in my life. In order to make space for Jesus to do new things in me, I need to say goodbye to some old things - be it habits, thoughts, or whatever that keep me from hearing and recognizing the voice of God in my life. I say goodbye to help clear the noise in my brain and fog my eyes so that I can see Jesus in a new way. And maybe I can let those seeds out of the packet this year and actually plant them. Letting go is challenging, but it can also bring freedom to live and love more abundantly.

Respond

In what ways have you been holding on to your life? What is Christ calling you to let go of so that you can be 'reckless in your love?' As you reflect again on this passage, imagine that you are in your garden with seeds ready to plant. What seeds need to go into the ground so that new things may bloom in your life?

Rest

Creator, Saviour, Spirit. Help us to let go so that we can be reckless in how we love and serve. Help us to see your world as you do, and love it as you do. Relieve us of the fear of not enough and replace it with the knowledge of your abundance. Be with us. Amen.

About the Author

Sally Carlson serves as associate pastor at Shoreline Covenant Church in Shoreline, WA. She loves reading, the outdoors, hotdish (she's from MN!) and a good cup of coffee! Sally especially loves walking with people as they walk with Jesus. Sally lives in Shoreline, WA with her husband, Daniel.



Reflecting on Psalm 119

A Lent Reflection for Monday, March 18 by Ruth Jensen Zschoche

Lectionary reading for 03/18/2024: Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 43:8-13; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 119:9-16

Read

Psalm 119:9-16 The Message

How can a young person live a clean life?

By carefully reading the map of your Word.

I'm single-minded in pursuit of you;

don't let me miss the road signs you've posted.

I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart

so I won't sin myself bankrupt.

Be blessed, God;

train me in your ways of wise living.

I'll transfer to my lips

all the counsel that comes from your mouth;

I delight far more in what you tell me about living

than in gathering a pile of riches.

I ponder every morsel of wisdom from you,

I attentively watch how you've done it.

I relish everything you've told me of life,

I won't forget a word of it.

Reflect

Seventy-nine years ago on Christmas Day, 1944, my father gave my mother a Bible for her 21st birthday. They were married the following summer during WWII. On the inside page of this Bible he wrote Psalm 119:9-11, 89. Seventy-three years later, a couple of months before her 95th birthday and a few weeks before she died, I was with her reading to her from her newer Bible. I asked her what she'd like me to read to her. I had already read Psalm 23. Even with Dementia, she asked for Psalm 119. I opened her Bible to this passage to find it underlined in so many places. It wasn't until after she died that I was looking through that original Bible and found the note from my father to my mother. What was in Psalm 119 that kept my mother still focused on this passage? I decided to find out. I began to read Psalm 119, very slowly, one section at a time. As I read, I wrote in my journal each section in my own words. Just as Eugene Peterson in his Message Version wrote out the words in simpler form, my writing these verses sunk deeply into my heart.

Psalm 119 in its entirety tells us how to live a life according to God's truth. Look through each section, you will see that it is filled with instructions for following God's commands.

My parents loved and served the Lord as missionaries. They took these words seriously and lived their lives according to the truths in these verses. I like to think about what my father was trying to share with my mother when he wrote those words in her Bible. I think he was promising

her that he wanted to stay pure, by obeying God's Word. He didn't want to wander from the commands written in that Word. He was hiding God's Word in his heart so that he wouldn't sin against God and against my mother. He was a man of integrity, saturated by God, who studied the Bible daily and delighted in the decrees, not forgetting what the Word was saying to him. And he was encouraging her to do the same.

Some of my favorite memories are seeing both of my parents sitting in their favorite chairs, spending time with God in the Word. They lived their lives according to Psalm 119 even to the end of their lives. May it be the same with me!

Psalm 119:9-16 (Ruth's version)

How can I keep my way pure?

I can by living according to Your word.

I look for You with all my heart, don't let me walk away from Your commands.

I have and will continue to hide Your word in my heart, so that I won't sin against You.

Let all my praise go to You O Lord, teach me everything I need to know.

With my lips I remember and speak all of the commands that come from Your mouth.

I rejoice in following Your ways as someone who rejoices in great riches.

I meditate on what I read in Your Word and think about how You want me to live.

I delight in Your leading me; I will not neglect what You say to me and what You are teaching me.

Respond

Read this Psalm 119:9-16 in a different version. As you reflect on it, take time to write it down in your own words. What is God saying to you?

In this Lenten season as we are focused on Christ's final days before the crucifixion and resurrection, imagine spending time with Him, sitting at His feet, asking Him to share with you how He put these verses into His daily practice.

Rest

Lord, keep me from lying to myself; give me the privilege of knowing your instructions. I have chosen to be faithful; I have determined to live by your regulations. I cling to your laws. Lord, don't let me be put to shame! I will pursue your commands, for you expand my understanding. Teach me your decrees, O Lord; I will keep them to the end. Amen. (Psalm 119:29-33)

About the Author



Ruth loves her time as a Spiritual Director. She delights in holding space and walking alongside those who are listening for God's movement in their lives. She is mom to one son, a daughter-in-law and Omi to two beautiful granddaughters. She loves to travel with her husband and enjoys running, hiking, biking, swimming, reading, playing the piano and praising God in the beautiful Colorado mountains.

Experience the movement of the Holy Spirit

A Lent Reflection for Tuesday, March 19 by Rev. Dawn Holt Lauber

Lectionary reading for 03/19/2024: Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 44:1-8; Acts 2:14-24

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 2:14-24

Read

Acts 2:14-24 NIV

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

20 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

21 And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’[a]

22 “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

23 This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,[b] put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Reflect

The day of Pentecost: the highly sensory event when God poured out His Spirit on all believers and the church began. The crowd gathered in amazement, hearing the disciples proclaim the wonders of God with the words of their own languages. Of course, there were some scoffers – every crowd has them. But it's ok – *necessary and God-redeemed* – for the doubters set the stage for Peter to preach to this diverse group of God-fearing people about Jesus of Nazareth.

Peter speaks from the prophetic words of Joel, who foretold of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would be unlike anything anyone had experienced before. And on the day of Pentecost, it was. Joel's proclamation was revolutionary for his listeners – a startling vision of hope for the Israelites still fresh from exile.

Imagine being there that day when Joel proclaimed this Word from God. You are a daughter in a household of sons, in a culture that focuses on sons. You are an old man thinking you have nothing left to offer the Lord. You are a male or female servant and you have just been elevated by God as an equal to your master to receive God's Spirit and to prophecy. It's not about where you fit in society, what language you speak, what level your education is, or your age. Joel's prophecy revealed a hopeful future when God would rain down His Spirit on all who call on His name, regardless of gender, age, rank, social status: sons, daughters, the old, the young, the rich, the poor.

Imagine being there the day Peter preached, taking Joel's prophecy even further: the permanent indwelling of God's Spirit on all who believe in Jesus Christ, regardless of gender, age, rank, social status, language, or ethnicity. Peter speaks of prophecy, not as predicting the future, but as truth-telling, as a call to prophetic living for the people standing right before him, a call for them to repent and turn to Jesus and begin a new life in Him.

And it is the call for us here today to proclaim our salvation through Jesus Christ with everything we do, with everything we say, and with everyone we meet – to declare that from this day forward we are changed people because of the Spirit of Christ within us.

I consider the work of the Holy Spirit in my own life. I am a beneficiary of Joel's prophecy that includes both sons and daughters. I acknowledge with gratitude how God bestowed His Spirit on me throughout my life - my acceptance of Jesus Christ as a young child, through music, my family, and ultimately His call for me to pastoral ministry.

I have not always been aware of the nudges of the Spirit, but I look back now and see God's hand directing/redirecting me throughout my faith journey. If it is true what Paul says in Ephesians 1:13, that I was *included in Christ when I first heard the gospel of salvation, when I first believed the message of truth, and was marked in Christ with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit*, then the Lord has clearly been speaking to me since childhood - when I first began to follow Him.

And He is speaking to you - *differently than how He spoke to me* – but with words that are particular for you and your journey of faith. All believers in Jesus are invited to experience the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in the world and to offer a prophetic word of hope and salvation to a weary, waiting world.

Respond

We are the Spirit-filled believers that Joel longed for in his prophecy. We give thanks for those who heard and trusted God on that day. We, the church, join our Spirit-filled brothers and sisters in Christ from Acts who established the church through faithful obedience. Let us give thanks for God's invitation to all people: men and women, all ages, every nation, every walk of life, the growth of the church in every corner of this world. Let us be ready to receive again and again the pouring out of the Holy Spirit for growth and revival in our lives.

Rest

Heavenly Father, we thank You for saving us through the sacrifice of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and leaving the Holy Spirit to dwell among us, empowering us to be effective witnesses of the gospel. We offer words of gratitude to God for the gift of His Spirit that guides us, teaches us, redirects us, and comforts us. We ask for tender hearts to hear where the Holy Spirit is leading us today. We pray that we may live by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ, in a new and robust way from this day forward. AMEN.

About the author



Dawn Holt Lauber is an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church. She has served the church as a worship pastor, chaplain, and (currently) as Pastor of Congregational Life. Dawn is also a singer and songwriter specializing in sacred jazz. She has a new podcast, “Word and Song.” Find her on Apple music, Spotify, YouTube, and other media outlets.

Things Will Get Better

A Lent Reflection for Wednesday, March 20 by Pastor Mary Peterson

Lectionary reading for 03/20/2023: Psalm 119:9-16; Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23; John 12:34-50

Selected passage for reflection: Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23

Read

Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23 *The Message*

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the Word of God came through the prophet Haggai: “Tell Governor Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and High Priest Joshua son of Jehozadak and all the people: ‘Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious? And what do you see now? Not much, right?’

“‘So get to work, Zerubbabel!’—God is speaking.

“‘Get to work, Joshua son of Jehozadak—high priest!’

“‘Get to work, all you people!’—God is speaking.

“‘Yes, get to work! For I am with you.’ The God-of-the-Angel-Armies is speaking! ‘Put into action the word I covenanted with you when you left Egypt. I’m living and breathing among you right now. Don’t be timid. Don’t hold back.’

“This is what God-of-the-Angel-Armies said: ‘Before you know it, I will shake up sky and earth, ocean and fields. And I’ll shake down all the godless nations. They’ll bring bushels of wealth and I will fill this Temple with splendor.’ God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so.

‘I own the silver,
I own the gold.’

Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.

“This Temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness.’ Decree of God-of-the-Angel-Armies.”

Reflect

I’ve spent the past 25 years serving in a variety of churches- a new church plant in the best part of town, an old, established church in an urban setting, a small suburban congregation surrounded by Starbucks, a historic congregation in a medium sized town. It’s been an adventure! Through each of these gatherings I have seen God work in the lives of the people

and observed the ripple effects of God's transforming power through communities. I have also listened to many people lament that the church has changed so much.

"It isn't the same as it used to be."

"I don't recognize the church anymore."

"I just wish we could get back to the way it was."

In this passage from Haggai, God's people find themselves looking at the ruins of what they used to love. Their place of worship has been ransacked and the few people who have chosen to return from the exile are focused on rebuilding their homes- not the communal place of worship. No doubt the religious leaders must have been wringing their hands:

"We need more volunteers- especially young people."

"Our capital campaign fund is not growing quickly enough."

"Does the neighborhood even care that we are here?"

We are so quick to forget the promises of God for the people. Throughout the story of God, we see God reveal the plan to continuously recreate the world and draw people back to Godself. God has the plan, but we often lack the imagination to grasp the vision. And yet God continues to give the invitation to "get to work." Eugene Peterson paraphrases the instruction from God in this way: "Put into action the word I covenanted with you when you left Egypt." God tells Moses that the cries of the people have been heard and that God is preparing a place beyond their wildest dreams. After they were freed from Egypt, God began to help them see what God had planned for all of humanity. The commands Moses receives on Sinai help the people know how to respond to God and how to respond to one another. God is building something and the people are invited to participate.

Many years later, God's people had experienced many ups and downs of life, but they are reminded to continue working to create spaces that draw all people into the love of God and the love of the community. The prophet Haggai reminds the people that God is inviting them to participate in this holistic work that will be more glorious than anyone can imagine.

We need this reminder today as we continue to see churches in North America in decline. Even though it may not be as "good" as we remember, we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work. God's invitation to participate in the transformation of this world is not one we should pass up because we lack imagination and cling to nostalgia. The world is a different place than it was last week, but people are still longing to feel whole and good. God's work of transformation is still happening- and we are invited to join in the mission of God.

Respond

Spend a few moments thinking about how your faith community has changed in recent years. How do you see God moving in the midst of those changes? Where do you feel invited to join in the work of God through the communities you engage with? What might God be calling you to imagine and how can you get to work to help that vision become reality?

Rest

God, thank you for your faithfulness through all of the ups and downs of life. May your Spirit breathe life into each place we find ourselves gathered with others. Give us your imagination and help us to be courageous enough to get to work. May we experience wholeness and holiness in the communities you gather. Amen.

About the Author



Mary Peterson lives right outside of Beaumont, Texas, with her husband, two teenagers and two cats. She is passionate about the beach, drinking coffee and traveling. Mary serves as Senior Pastor of a precious church called Providence Church and is completing her Doctorate of Ministry at Fuller Seminary.

Passover Sacrifices

A Lent Reflection for Thursday, March 21 by Rev. Cindy M. Riley

Lectionary reading for 03/21/2024: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Philippians 2:1-11
Selected passage for reflection: Deuteronomy 16:1-8

Read

Deuteronomy 16:1-8, *NLT*

“In honor of the LORD your God, celebrate the Passover each year in the early spring, in the month of Abib, for that was the month in which the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night. **2** Your Passover sacrifice may be from either the flock or the herd, and it must be sacrificed to the LORD your God at the designated place of worship—the place he chooses for his name to be honored. **3** Eat it with bread made without yeast. For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast, as when you escaped from Egypt in such a hurry. Eat this bread—the bread of suffering—so that as long as you live you will remember the day you departed from Egypt. **4** Let no yeast be found in any house throughout your land for those seven days. And when you sacrifice the Passover lamb on the evening of the first day, do not let any of the meat remain until the next morning.

5 “You may not sacrifice the Passover in just any of the towns that the LORD your God is giving you. **6** You must offer it only at the designated place of worship—the place the LORD your God chooses for his name to be honored. Sacrifice it there in the evening as the sun goes down on the anniversary of your exodus from Egypt. **7** Roast the lamb and eat it in the place the LORD your God chooses. Then you may go back to your tents the next morning. **8** For the next six days you may not eat any bread made with yeast. On the seventh day proclaim another holy day in honor of the LORD your God, and no work may be done on that day.

Reflect

So, my husband Dennis has developed an allergy to yeast. We made several visits to the local fire department after a meal, often followed by a trip to the ER due to hives, dangerously low blood and his inability to breathe. At first, we couldn't figure out what the allergy was, so every meal felt like we were playing Russian roulette with his life. Finally, a test revealed a high sensitivity to yeast. We quickly learned just how many food items contain yeast. Our approach to meals completely changed because of this tiny food additive.

In today's reading, Moses reminds the children of Israel how to celebrate the Passover. Amongst other things, they're not to add yeast to bread during the passover. This is to remind

them of when they fled Egypt. God told them to make bread with no yeast for their journey. The bread would be easier to carry and keep longer without the leavening agent.

Yeast, in and of itself, is not bad. There is nothing sinful about ingesting yeast. Yet, in the Bible it is used to represent sin. A little bit of yeast will raise a whole batch of bread. A little bit of sin will spread and keep us from living the life God means for us to have. When God told the children of Israel to leave the yeast out of the bread, he was in a sense telling them to leave the sin of Egypt behind. The ways of life they had constructed to survive in Egypt would no longer serve them in their new life of freedom. God's people had a long journey ahead of them. They were entering a liminal space between Egypt, a land of bondage and the Promised Land, a land of freedom.

Perhaps like me you find yourself in a transitional season, a liminal space, on your way and not there yet. These seasons can be brought on by loss of a job, deaths, births, new relationships, illness, anything that brings immense change, whether internally or externally. In these spaces, what has worked before often doesn't work anymore. These spaces stretch us beyond our normal ways of coping. The only way forward is to let go of what is no longer serving us.

God calls us to let go of the habits, constructs and old ways that no longer serve us. The yeast in our lives could be sin, an attitude, a habit, a way of thinking, or anything that keeps us from fully living the life that God has for us.

Dennis no longer eats yeast of any fashion so that he may live.

I am finding that God is calling me to let go of some of my old coping mechanisms.

What might God be calling you to leave out or leave behind as he calls you to greater freedom in Christ?

Respond

1. Inhale deeply then exhale until you can't help but take a breath.
2. Notice how the emptying of your lungs makes room for a fresh breath.
3. Ask God what he is asking you to let go of. As you let go of it, there's room for a fresh breath.
4. Wait for God's response. It may not come immediately. Make this an ongoing practice. Room will be made for all God has for you.

Rest

Pray with me.

God, our deliverer, help us rest in your unfailing love so we may run the race before us with no unnecessary burdens. Help us walk in the freedom we have in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and live the life you have created us to live. Amen

About the Author



Cindy and her husband Dennis live in Swannanoa NC. They have 5 grandchildren. She enjoys watching the neighbor's cattle roam against the backdrop of the surrounding mountains and walking along the creeks and rivers that have formed the Swannanoa Valley. Her passion is to help people discover the power of who they are and live into their divine purpose. Cindy is a church planter also serving as the Program Director for Hope for Tomorrow, a transitional housing program for single moms experiencing homelessness.

Living Words

A Lent Reflection for Friday, March 22 by Rev. Julia Styles

Lectionary reading for 3/22/24: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 118:1-4, 19-29

Read

Psalm 118: 1-4, 19-29 NIV

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.</p> <p>2 Let Israel say:
“His love endures forever.”</p> <p>3 Let the house of Aaron say:
“His love endures forever.”</p> <p>4 Let those who fear the LORD say:
“His love endures forever.”...</p> <p>19 Open for me the gates of the
righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.</p> <p>20 This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.</p> <p>21 I will give you thanks, for you
answered me;
you have become my salvation.</p> <p>22 The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;</p> | <p>23 the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.</p> <p>24 The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.</p> <p>25 LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!</p> <p>26 Blessed is he who comes in the name
of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless
you.^[b]</p> <p>27 The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal
procession
up^[c] to the horns of the altar.</p> <p>28 You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.</p> <p>29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is
good;
his love endures forever.</p> |
|---|---|

Reflect

Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night, unable to go back to sleep? As you lay in your bed, eyes open with nothing to do, negative thoughts invade your brain. Insecurity, shame, regret, and worry grow increasingly louder, and there doesn't seem to be anything you can do to stop the spiral of negativity.

Sometimes these late-night thoughts still plague me, and I often disrupt them by mindlessly scrolling through social media or reading a novel on my kindle app (which sometimes works). But 20 years ago, smartphones didn't exist, nor wi-fi for that matter, so on one particular sleepless night, plagued by thoughts of self-doubt and shame, I turned to my Bible, flipping

through the pages, opening towards the middle. I landed on Psalm 118, and started reading... *Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his love endures forever...* and then again, *His love endures forever*, God's love endures forever, Their love endures forever, Her love endures forever.

On that dark night, the Holy Spirit met me in my weakness, vulnerability and shame, and reminded me that God's love defeats the enemies around me and the enemies within me. Despite the trials of the psalmist, despite the trials of the reader (me), God's love is steadfast; it endures, it overcomes, it supersedes, it covers, it protects, it provides, it saves.

Scripture has historical context but it can also minister to us personally, in the here and now. That's why scripture is often referred to as the living word of God. Twenty years ago, Psalm 118 was a living word that touched me to the core and has never left me. It's a word of truth I know I can turn to, whenever lies about myself try creeping in. I can remind myself that the love of God endures forever.

As you experience set-backs, pain or loneliness, when words of destruction try to harm you, I pray that you are able to recall those *living words* that hit you at the core and remind you that you are a beloved child of God and God's love endures forever.

Respond

Do you have key bible verses that you turn to in times of trouble or despair? What *living words* or truths do you recall when you need to be reminded of your identity as a child of God?

Take some time to write down the scripture verses or personal stories that remind you that you are beloved.

Rest

Take a few moments to practice a breath prayer using Psalm 118:1. Breathe in and out, with the first part of your prayer coming to mind on the inward breath and the latter half connecting with the outward breath. Continue your prayer for a set period of time or until you feel you have reached a sense of inner stillness as you dwell in the presence of God.

Give thanks to the LORD,
for he is good;
God's love endures forever.
Give thanks to the LORD,
for he is good;
God's love endures forever.

Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe out



About the Author

Julia Styles lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She is a wife, a mom of two littles (2 & 5), and a step-mom of two young adults (18 & 20). She is passionate about connecting with other moms in her neighborhood and amplifying the voices of women in Christian spaces. In her free time she edits *Prayerful Reflections*, co-chairs the Federation of Christian Ministries annual conference, and provides spiritual direction and coaching for clergy, seminary students and those re-examining their faith. You can book a free intro session at www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com

A Call to Imagination

A Lent Reflection for Saturday, March 23 by Pastor Sara Fisher

Lectionary reading for 03/23/2024: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Selected passage for reflection: Jeremiah 33:10-16

Read

Jeremiah 33:10-16 *NIV*

“This is what the LORD says: ‘You say about this place, “It is a desolate waste, without people or animals.” Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither people nor animals, there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying,

“Give thanks to the LORD Almighty,
for the LORD is good;
his love endures forever.”

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,’ says the LORD.

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In this place, desolate and without people or animals—in all its towns there will again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah, flocks will again pass under the hand of the one who counts them,’ says the LORD.

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

“‘In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.
In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.
This is the name by which it[a] will be called:
The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

Reflect

As I sit down to write this reflection I can hear my two and four year old kids running through the hallways-- dressed as superheroes, tackling some imagery situation with great enthusiasm. Their imaginations run wild, and for hours at a time. I’m amazed at the worlds my four year old

creates in his brain as he builds legos, sets pillow fort traps for made up creatures, or sees animals in the clouds. In my best moments I'm drawn into his imagination, allowing myself to play along for a bit. But most of the time I'm too busy to get caught up, and move on quickly to my next task.

When's the last time you got lost in imagination for imagination's sake? That you stopped to play, or to wonder, or stare at the clouds looking for whatever fun shapes appear?

As adults we often lose our ability to wonder and imagine. Or perhaps we have just devalued these tools as so inefficient and childish that we've forgotten that God actually calls us to them. Imagination and hope are closely tied. When we fill our days with only what's productive and efficient, we so often miss the hints of God's greater reality in our midst. Again and again in Scripture God calls his people to imagine the world differently than what lies in front of them.

You say about this place...but I (the Lord) say...

You say it is desolate and destroyed, but I say it will flourish and sheep will graze under the hand of their shepherd. Where there is silence, there will be sounds of laughter, joy and worship. Where there is danger, there will be safety, and a savior.

I wonder what hearing these words from Jeremiah must have been like. To some it seemed like foolish ramblings, hopeful nonsense. But to others, maybe just a few-- these words sparked the warm joy of "what if" in their hearts. What if God is really at work here? What if what we see in front of us won't last forever? What if peace is possible? What if God really is sending a savior? What if God has really been listening all this time?

To believe this promise takes imagination and wonder. What if...?

It is in this kind of imagination and wonder that the hope of God takes root within us: When we see the promises of God playing out before us, when we really consider if His words might be true-- despite how unlikely they look in the moment.

The words the prophet Jeremiah spoke here come true. God once again protects his people who have been scattered, providing safety and security. But this physical security isn't the height of God's promise-- as we know that security ebbs and flows throughout history. God's promise here is for something so much greater--a righteous branch from the house of David-- the Lord, our righteous savior is on His way.

The promise Jeremiah speaks of then is the same for us now-- God has sent his Son, Jesus-- the only righteous Savior-- and in Him all the sad things of life will come untrue. He is the one who longs to rescue us from whatever dead and desolate realities we find ourselves in. He is the one who offers life overflowing; the good shepherd who guides and watches over us, the

lamb of God who lays down his own life for ours. We have a righteous savior, who meets us where we are today and invites us into his family. What if it's true?

Respond

Take 5 minutes today to slow down and make space in your mind to imagine with God. What promises of God do you long to see come true? What would it look like in your life and in the world if they did. Allow your mind to wonder and ask God to show you how to faithfully follow Him today.

Rest

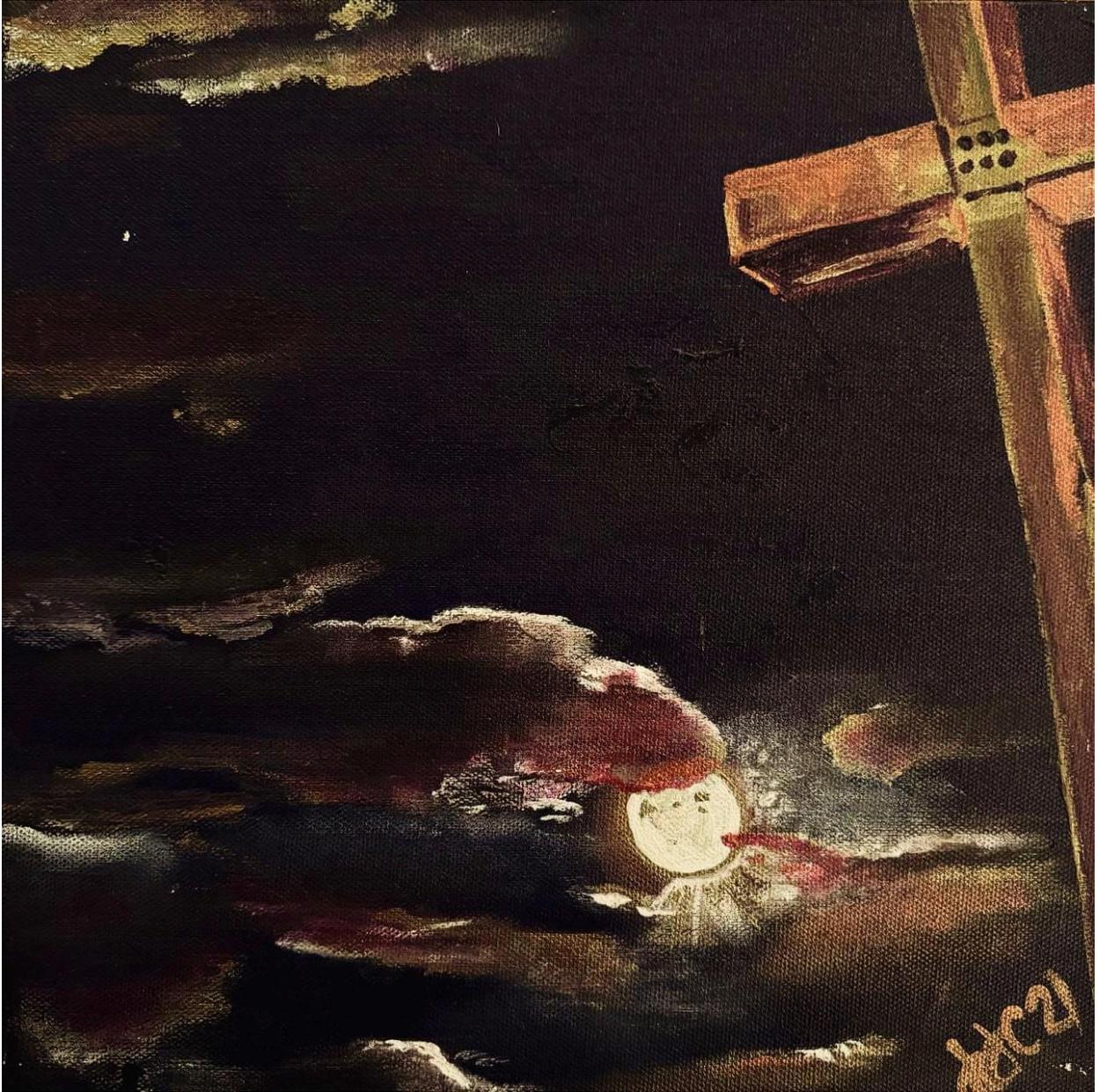
Lord, make space in my busy life and heart to imagine with you today. Remind me of your truth and your promises, and give me the courage to believe them, no matter how unlikely they seem today.

About the Author



Sara Fisher is a wife, mother and Family Pastor from Northern California. She loves coffee, lazy days at home with the fam and being out in nature. She experiences deep joy seeing kids + teenagers (and all people) live into their specific calling God has given them, and walking alongside them in the process.

Holy Week



Hope, Even in Darkness by Julie Jane Capel, 2021

Who is Jesus?

An Lenten Reflection for Palm Sunday, March 24 by Melanie Myatt

Lectionary reading for 3/24/2024: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 • Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 11.1-11

Read

Mark 11.1-11 NLT

1 As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. **2** “Go into that village over there,” he told them. “As soon as you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. **3** If anyone asks, ‘What are you doing?’ just say, ‘The Lord needs it and will return it soon.’”

4 The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside the front door. **5** As they were untying it, some bystanders demanded, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” **6** They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted to take it. **7** Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it.

8 Many in the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields. **9** Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting,

“Praise God

Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!

10 Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David!

Praise God in highest heaven!”

11 So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples.

Reflect

This is a pretty big day for Jesus, but not for the reason that most people were thinking.

Imagine, for example, the thoughts and emotions of the two disciples sent to gather the donkey. What if they were actually kind of hoping someone would object to their taking the donkey? If someone tried to stop them, they would have an opportunity to share the news that must have been bubbling up inside of them. Just imagine their feeling of self-importance and authority as they say, “The Lord needs it.”

From the time they started following Jesus, the disciples have been waiting for that moment when Jesus will be crowned the true and rightful King of the Jews. Surely this is the moment for his royal reception in Jerusalem. Surely this is their time to share in the glory due to Jesus.

Jesus had just told them whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to everyone else (Mark 10.44). Would running this errand for Jesus count as putting themselves in a sacrificial position? Maybe when Jesus takes his place of honor in Jerusalem their errand will be remembered, and they will be upheld as true servants of the glorious and majestic King!

Of course, we read this passage with an eye to the ending we know is coming. How can we join in the celebration of the crowds or even consider the anticipation of the disciples when we know the devastating events that are imminently approaching? Even if we wave our palm branches in celebration now, we know the great cost that will be counted again at the end of this week.

We know what the disciples didn't: that Jesus is entering Jerusalem to become the King of Kings but only through his death. Jesus didn't enter Jerusalem to overcome the Roman authorities; he came into Jerusalem to conquer sin, the Adversary, and death.

Respond

We can resemble the fickle crowds: waving our palm branches on Sunday, and heading back to life as usual on Monday. What would it look like to live on Monday as someone who has welcomed and celebrated the King of Kings? How might our priorities for the week be realigned if we consider that the King of Kings has a vested interest in the choices we make? Take some time to consider what the claim of Jesus as King means for you this week.

Rest

The amazing thing about having Jesus as our King is that he isn't like the kings of this world who want to conscript people for service, or, worse, slavery. Jesus as King offers us rest, peace, and wholeness. Today, take five deep breaths. As you inhale, say, "Jesus my King." As you exhale, say, "I rest in you."



About the Author

Melanie currently works as a chaplain at a retirement community in Glenview, Illinois. She is also a spiritual director, writer, mom of four, and crackerjack time-waster. If you like her writing, you can also find her on [Substack](#).

The Only Thing Necessary

A Lent Reflection for Holy Monday, March 25 by Anna Wagner

Lectionary reading for 3/25/24: Isaiah 42:1-9 • Psalm 36:5-11 • Hebrews 9:11-15 • John 12:1-11
Selected passage for reflection: John 12:1-11

Read

John 12:1-11 NIV

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2** Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3** Then Mary took about a pint^[a] of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5** "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.^[b]" **6** He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8** You will always have the poor among you,^[c] but you will not always have me."

9 Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **10** So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, **11** for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

Reflect

The woman anointing Jesus in this extravagant way is identified as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus who was raised from the dead a chapter earlier, as well as the sister of Martha who had eagerly served Jesus when he came as a dinner guest to their house which is retold in Luke 10. It's the same woman who had sat at Jesus' feet and listened and learned from him, instead of doing what a woman should: help her sister cook and set the table. Yet, Jesus' evaluation is surprising and contrary to the customs of the times: He says that this, what Mary is doing, is good. It's *the only thing necessary*.

This is the woman entering Simon the leper's house. She is not interested in doing what is necessary anymore, if that was ever her concern. It's not about fulfilling requirements for her.

No, she longs for her love to be seen and known, to let it overflow. To be extravagant. She is a lover who loves, not merely a servant who obeys.

I imagine Mary soundlessly sneaking into Simon the leper's house on bare feet, carefully making sure no one can see or hear her. After all, she was not invited, yet she arrives in the middle of dinner, as the guests are laying down by the table eating. She is an interruption, a nuisance. A woman. I imagine her focused on one thing, and one thing only, in spite of this: To show her beloved that she loves, and that she loves abundantly.

No one asked her to come to anoint Jesus, and no one asked her to use perfume that expensive. The money could almost certainly have been spent in more practical ways. It may have provided hundreds of meals for the poor, maybe could have helped build a house for a family in need. But kingdom mathematics don't work like that. What is beautiful is not always what is practical. What is beautiful, and what Jesus sees in this woman, is a heart that holds nothing back. Not even something as valuable as this perfume. It may have been her entire retirement fund, a future secured. Jesus didn't ask her to give him that either. What Mary did came as an offering from her own heart and on her own initiative and Jesus honored that. He is not hung up on what is the most practical, or on what it means for Mary to obey God and fulfill God's requirements. What Jesus sees is someone who loves and because her heart is full of that, she wants to give the Beloved all she has. In that desire she cannot help but go above and beyond any minimum requirement, because it's not about what's "enough" anymore. It's not about the arbitrary lines we have drawn between what is sufficient and what's not. It's about the Beloved. And that's what makes her act so beautiful.

Respond

It can be hard to read a story like this and not think that our response ought to be as similar to this woman's as possible. But if we do, we have already strayed from what the story is meant to show us. It is not about what things should look like or the minimum threshold for proving our love. Our goal is not to outdo her either. In searching for a formula of what or how to give of ourselves or defining the boundary of "beyond the necessary," we miss something. We miss what Mary knew in the depths of her heart and what Jesus was so grateful for: that Love is more beautiful than all of that.

Rest

Lord, we pray not that you show us how to give, and what, but we ask that you show us more of who you are. As we respond to that with our love, may you receive us for what we are, and may we know that our gifts are not valued based on what use they make or how much love they show. They are merely received as the love we want to offer you.



About the Author

Anna Wagner hails from Sweden and works as a Swedish and English teacher for immigrants in Malmö, Sweden. That's where she now lives with her American husband and two kids.

Finding Hope and Strength in the Psalms

A Lent Reflection for Holy Tuesday, March 26 by Tamara Ravello

Lectionary reading for 3/26/24: Isaiah 49:1-7 • Psalm 71:1-14 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • John 12:20-36

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 71:1-14

Read

Psalm 71, 1-16 The Message

1-3 I run for dear life to God,
I'll never live to regret it.
Do what you do so well:
get me out of this mess and up on my feet.
Put your ear to the ground and listen,
give me space for salvation.
Be a guest room where I can retreat;
you said your door was always open!
You're my salvation—my vast, granite fortress.

4-7 My God, free me from the grip of Wicked,
from the clutch of Bad and Bully.
You keep me going when times are tough—
my bedrock, God, since my childhood.
I've hung on you from the day of my birth,
the day you took me from the cradle;
I'll never run out of praise.
Many gasp in alarm when they see me,
but you take me in stride.

8-11 Just as each day brims with your beauty,

my mouth brims with praise.
But don't turn me out to pasture when I'm old
or put me on the shelf when I can't pull my weight.
My enemies are talking behind my back,
watching for their chance to knife me.
The gossip is: "God has abandoned him.
Pounce on him now; no one will help him."

12-16 God, don't just watch from the sidelines.
Come on! Run to my side!
My accusers—make them lose face.
Those out to get me—make them look like idiots, while I stretch out, reaching for you,
and daily add praise to praise.
I'll write the book on your righteousness,
talk up your salvation all the day long,
never run out of good things to write or say.
I come in the power of the Lord God,
I post signs marking his right-of-way.

Reflect

As Holy Tuesday unfolds, we find ourselves immersed in a journey of reflection, prayer, and spiritual contemplation surrounding Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. It is a time that reminds us to seek solace, renewal, and hope intentionally in the midst of life's complexities. More likely than not, most of us know and can attest to the certainty that life is full of ins, then there come

the outs; it's up and sometimes down, and we will see highs, and, at the same time, lows, and none of us are exempt. Understanding this truth, let us enlighten our hearts and minds to the words of Psalm 71:1-14, drawing hope and comfort from its timeless wisdom.

The chapter starts with a heartfelt plea from the psalmist David, saying: *"In You, O Lord, I put my trust; Let me never be put to shame."* The message version says the same thing this way: *I run for dear life to God, and I'll never live to regret it. Do what you do so well: get me out of this mess and up on my feet.* What David's declaration embodies here for us is the vulnerability and resilience of the human spirit when God is at the forefront of our life. Let's expound a bit more, but before we do, if you don't get anything else from this reflection, be encouraged to understand this upfront: with God, you win! It doesn't matter how the situation presents itself at this moment; you have the victory!

But, can I tell you what the challenge is, though we know you already have the victory? The challenge is that we, as humans, can be very stubborn. Too often, we try to do it on our own, figure it out on our own, or handle it on our own without God, and when it gets too tough, it is then that we turn to the Lord. We make it much more complicated than it should be, and we don't have to do it this way. Turning to God should be our first option and not a last resort. We have a God who is always present and ready for us to come; all we must do is acknowledge and ask. David models for us in this scripture that there is no shame or guilt in going to God. In fact, he demonstrates for us that we should always run to God for *dear life*, and the shame comes when we don't go to God. Can you think about a situation maybe on a job, or with a child, partner, friend, or in church, or something like a poor financial decision that possibly could have had a positive or different outcome had you engaged God first? Maybe had David gone to God first, the story about him and Bathsheba would have looked different. Her name probably would not have been BATH-Sheba; get it (BATH)? Okay, on the corny jokes, let me get back on track with our reflection for today.

The psalmist goes on in the passage to proclaim a steadfast trust in the Lord, affirming, "Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go." This unwavering faith and confidence in God's unfailing love serves as an anchor for our own spirits, assuring us that we are never alone in our struggles. Even as our surrounding world appears uncertain and stormy, we find reassurance in the unchanging nature of God's love and willingness to be there for us.

Then, in the latter verses of the psalm, the psalmist reflects on a lifetime of experiences, recounting God's faithfulness and providence in the face of trials. This retrospective perspective invites us to recognize and celebrate the ways in which God has been our constant companion, sustaining us through every season of life. It is a testament to the enduring power of our hope in Christ, even amid life's complicated circumstances. It is a reminder that if God did it once, God can do it for you again, so hold onto your hope.

As we meditate on Psalm 71:1-14, may we find encouragement in the enduring truth that God is our refuge and strength, a present help in times of trouble. May we draw hope from the assurance that our tears are not in vain, for we serve a faithful and compassionate God who

hears and responds to our deepest needs. Let us hold fast to this hope, knowing that the promise of redemption and new life through Christ's sacrifice sustains us through it all and leads us to a future of renewed hope and joy if we only turn to God. May this reflection offer comfort, strength, and renewed hope as we continue our journey through Holy Week and embrace the promise of Easter's dawn.

Respond

As you reflect on today's devotional whatever you are carrying run to God for *dear life!* Choose to surrender it, the person, and / or the situation to God while holding the truth that you are not in this alone. The Lord is with you!

Rest

Dear God,

As we reflect on today's devotional, we come before you with open hearts. In moments of doubt and burden, we run to you for dear life, seeking refuge in your unwavering love. We choose to surrender all that weighs heavy on our souls, knowing that we are not alone. With faith in our hearts, we hold onto the truth that you walk beside us, offering comfort and strength through every circumstance. Thank you for your constant presence and boundless grace.

Amen.

About the Author



Tamara F. Ravelo's roots are the Quechuan Indigenous Nation (pronounced Kwuh-tsan), where she proudly represents her Indigenous culture. Her grandmother Denise Dugan was an Indigenous boarding school survivor. Hence, Tamara, family members, and her community constantly encounter its generational challenges. Because of this, Tamara often says she is the hope of her ancestor's prayers. In turn, she endeavors to impart that hope to others wherever she goes.

Tamara has an earned master's in business (MBA), is a Yale University MDiv graduate and acquired her accredited diploma for congregational ministry from Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. By day she serves as Chief Operating Minister for celebrity healer Iyanla Vanzant and Companies. Then, through the Evangelical Covenant Church ordaining ecclesiastical body she is endorsed for public ministry.

Tamara loves prayer and creating spaces for others to heal; however, that may come. In her other life, she is a business administration guru and communications strategienius, specializing in marketing, branding, graphic design, web, publications, and other forms of media. Tamara doesn't do it alone, she is wonderfully loved and supported by her husband, the esquire Michael Ravelo and her daughter Stephanie.

Fix Your Eyes on Jesus

A Lent Reflection for Holy Wednesday, March 27 by Eileen Lundy

Lectionary reading for 03/27/2024: Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 70 • Hebrews 12:1-3 • John 13:21-32

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 12:1-3

Read

Hebrews 12:1-3 *NIV*

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Reflect

There are many things that pass before our eyes each day. There are things that catch our attention that our eyes linger on, things that we only give a passing glance and things that we turn our eyes away from.

There are also things on which we fix our eyes. It is not a matter of if we will fix our eyes on something, but rather what we will fix our eyes on. We fix our eyes on the things we value. Things that we choose to guide and direct our lives. We are all running a race toward something, toward an ultimate goal that we are seeking.

The author of Hebrews offers us an ultimate goal, inviting us to throw off anything that might hinder, entangle and trip us as we run toward this goal. We are invited to run the race set before us with our eyes fixed on Jesus. Fix or fixed is a verb. An action that we take. It requires intention and is a choice we make. Fixing our eyes begins with looking away from all that distracts us and focusing our eyes instead on Jesus. We look to Jesus and we keep looking to Jesus. We intentionally direct our eyes to look steadily and unwaveringly at Jesus, our ultimate goal.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live with our eyes fixed on Jesus and to follow his example. Jesus embraces the cross, scorning its shame and via the cross triumphs over sin and death. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross.

Walking the way of the cross is not something we do on our own, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. In the preceding chapter, Hebrews 11, the author has listed name after

name of heroes of faith in the Old Testament. These are the great cloud of witnesses that surround us along with many, many more who have joined them over the centuries.

It is from their examples of faith in difficult, disorienting, and confusing situations that we can be encouraged and follow in their footsteps. We throw off anything that will hinder us or trip us up as we run the race that is set before us. And then we run with our eyes fixed on Jesus, just as that crowd of witnesses who have gone before have done.

Respond

A way we can grow in fixing our eyes on Jesus is becoming aware of where or on what we naturally fix our eyes. Choosing to fix our eyes on Jesus means we must look away from something else. We can begin by developing the habit of prayerfully reflecting on where or what we actually are fixing our eyes as we go about our daily life.

Today, take some time in reflection and prayer to review your day. Ask yourself questions such as “What did I fix my eyes on today? Where did I look when I was afraid or discouraged?” “Was I looking to Jesus? Or was I looking to something else?” Talk with Jesus about your answers and listen to what he might have to say to you. Ask Jesus to help you fix your eyes on him.

Rest

Jesus, I turn my eyes away from all that glitters and distracts. I turn my eyes to you and rest in your goodness, love and grace. I fix my eyes on you, Jesus, and run the race you have set before me. Amen



About the Author

Eileen Lundy lives in Omaha, Nebraska. She is a nurse with Nebraska Cancer Specialists and a bi-vocational pastor serving at Community Covenant Church. She has a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, a Master of Arts in Spiritual Formation and a Certificate in Spiritual Direction. She is married to Steve, Mom to their three adult children and dreams of being a grandmother someday.

The Ceremonial Meal of the Chosen One

A Lent Reflection for Maundy Thursday, March 28 by Jennifer Andersson

Lectionary reading for 03/28/24: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14 • Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 • 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Read

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 First Nations Version

The Ceremonial Meal of the Chosen One

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (NIV)

Reflect

It was a spring camping trip in 1988 when my closest college friends and I found ourselves on the dunes of southwest Michigan, overlooking the expansive beauty along the great lake. We were having such fun - hearts open - celebrating life and friendship, and taking in the glory of God through the creation that surrounded us. In the midst of it, one of us said, “Hey, we should have Communion together. Right here. Right now.” We were young 20-somethings. We all believed in and had working relationships with the Holy. But we didn’t have credentials. We didn’t have grape juice. We didn’t have bread. What we had in a backpack was a bag of Doritos and a can of Coca Cola. Still, we felt the nudge to share in this Holy ritual; to share in prayer; to say “yes” to the invitation to be vulnerable and grateful; and to do it together. So we did just that, right there - with Doritos and Coca Cola - and each of us communed with one another, and with God, in one of the most memorable Lord’s Supper of my life.

Perhaps the ritual of The Great Thanksgiving is something that holds treasured intimacy with God for you? Perhaps it holds shame from a misplaced sense of judgment? Perhaps it has simply become a rote ritual? Perhaps a measure of each of these is true? I have come to believe that when the Holy speaks, it is invitational. As you consider and hear these oft spoken words, consider them as a fresh invitation. Though they are a prayer addressed to God, remain open to what might be offered to you as well.

This prayer is the second of four ritual actions for the Lord's Supper that are modeled on the actions of Jesus on the night of his last meal with the disciples and on his actions at the table in

Emmaus. The actions are: **take** (preparing the bread and cup); **bless** (giving thanks over the bread and cup); **break** (breaking the single loaf of bread and raising the cup); and **give** (the bread and cup are given to the people). Simply stated, the first part of the prayer **blesse**s God, the second **recalls Jesus**, and the third part **invokes the Holy Spirit**.

Respond

Let us use these words as a prayer and invitation today. Have an edible element and a cup of liquid with you. Breathe In. Breathe Out. When you are ready, move through the words of this sacred ritual, offering them as a prayer to your Creator, and remain open to how you might also be guided in each action:

- **Take** - what are you preparing, or the Spirit is preparing in you, to offer as representation of love to God and to others?
- **Bless** - what do you give thanks for this day, at this time,
- **Break** - what might be “breaking” in you that The One Who Loves You is “breaking open” to offer new life and healing?
- **Give** - what might the Spirit be bringing forth in you in this moment that can be a gift of nourishment for yourself and perhaps for others?

Rest

Gracious Giver of Life, these words you have given us are more than a retelling of a story. May they unite me with You in a new way. May I sense your Spirit within as you guide me. And may I find a unique communion with all your saints - past, present, and future - as we journey with you and with each other. Amen.

About the Author



In her work life, Jennifer finds expression as a spiritual director, retreat leader, pastor, clinical social worker, advocate, and most especially, beloved child of God. In April of 2023, Jennifer opened the “doors” of [Journey Center of Michigan](#) to make space for meeting people where they are on their spiritual journey, especially for those who don’t or can’t find expression in traditional settings. Through it all, she loves to discover and expand her understanding and experience of God through relationship, creation, music, nature, and creative expression.

A Cry from the Cross

A Lent Reflection for Good Friday March 29 by Rev. Christina Burrows

Lectionary reading for 03/29/2024: [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#) • [Psalm 22](#) • [Hebrews 10:16-25](#) or [Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#) • [John 18:1-19:42](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 22

Read

Psalm 22 NIV

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.
(Listen to this musical rendition of the beginning of [Psalm 22](#) by Fernando Ortega.)

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

4 In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried out and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

8 "He trusts in the LORD," they say,
"let the LORD rescue him.

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

9 Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

10 From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

13 Roaring lions that tear their prey
open their mouths wide against me.

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.

15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.

16 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

17 All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

18 They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

19 But you, LORD, do not be far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

20 Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

22 I will declare your name to my people;
in the assembly I will praise you.

23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

24 For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;

he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

25 From you comes the theme of my praise in
the great assembly;
before those who fear you[f] I will fulfill my
vows.

26 The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the LORD will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,

28 for dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.

29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before
him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.

30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.

31 They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!

Reflect

Have you ever felt that God has forsaken you? The first two verses of Psalm 22 are a cry of utter despair, expressing this very feeling. And yet, the psalmist still reaches out to God. Of course, this is the verse that Jesus quotes when he is on the cross. When Jesus said those words, the whole of this messianic Psalm would almost certainly have come to mind for the Jews standing around the cross. The Psalm in its entirety is an apt expression of Jesus' own experience at that moment.

As the Psalm opens, the psalmist is wrestling between faith and experience, but progressively moves from despair to praise. God has, he believes, forsaken him. His suffering is dehumanizing. When have you or those around you felt dehumanized in your suffering?

Yet in vv.3-5, in the midst of his suffering, the Psalmist turns to express trust in God the King, who has been Israel's Savior in times past. *But* in vv. 6-8 the Psalmist thinks of himself as a worm, degraded. He feels alienated from God, and dislocated from his community, who mock him, taunt him. *Yet* in vv. 9-11 he reaches out again to God. You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you. You have been my God. Be my Savior!

His struggles are again with those around him, in vv. 12-14. Enemies in the Psalter are often described as animals. Either we fulfill our destiny to become like God, or we become beast-like. Have you ever considered the fact that when people build physical idols, they are often in the form of animals? We become what we behold.

The psalmist continues to pour out his lament with brutal honesty before God. In v.14 – “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.” In vv. 15-18 – “you lay me in the dust of death” like ashes. v.18 – “they divide my garments among them” even while he is still living. It's a desperate set of circumstances, and of course, one that so strikingly describes Jesus on the cross. When we're suffering, do we cry out to God like this? What holds us back?

In vv. 19-21 he turns again to a request and a declaration of trust. *But* you, Lord, are my strength. Come and help me! In v. 26 he declares - God provides, praise him! In v. 27 he echoes God's promise to Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed, moving his vision from himself as an individual to the community. "All the families of the nations will bow down before him." It was *always* God's plan to bring the Gentiles in. The Psalmist proclaims in v. 28, "The Lord Reigns!" He's the king, in the whole community of nations!

In v.29 even the sphere of the dead is not outside the sphere of worship. And in v.30, future generations will be told of God's righteousness. He ends in v.31 with a cry of victory and jubilation echoed by Jesus on the cross – He has done it! It is finished! The lament has become a song of praise that transcends the experience of the Psalmist, transcends history, life, and death, and is eschatological, looking to those yet unborn.

Respond

On this Good Friday, let's spend some time reflecting on the suffering of Jesus on the cross. As we consider our own sufferings, may we find comfort in the fact that Jesus can empathize with even our deepest pain. Let's learn, with the Psalmist, to call out to God and to express our pain with brutal honesty. Let's also learn to declare his praise in the midst of our pain, because we know that one day, because of the cross of Christ, there will be no more pain and that God will make all things new. How else is God inviting you to respond today?

Rest

Heavenly Father, thank you that you loved the world so much that you sent your only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life. Amen.

Choose a song to listen to from this [Good Friday](#) playlist.

About the Author



Rev. Christina Burrows is a Korean-British pastor, spiritual director, adjunct seminary faculty, and co-founder of Jigsaw Coaching, an organization that helps people thrive in intercultural spaces. She loves anything to do with global cultures, the arts, and nature. She lives in Sacramento, CA with her pastor husband and two teen girls.

But God is Still Working

A Lent Reflection for Holy Saturday, March 30 by Jessica deLinde Dyckman

Lectionary reading for 03/29/2024: [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#) • [Psalm 22](#) • [Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9](#) • [John 18:1-19:42](#)

Selected passage for reflection: Matthew 12:40, Matthew 27:57-66

Read

Matthew 12:40 NIV

40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 27:57-66 NIV

The Burial of Jesus

57 As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. **58** Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. **59** Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, **60** and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. **61** Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

The Guard at the Tomb

62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. **63** "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' **64** So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

65 "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." **66** So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Reflect

But God is still working, even in the silence, waiting, and wondering.

On the Silent Saturday after the death of Jesus Christ, His followers had to have wondered what they just witnessed. Their beloved Savior was crucified and dead. Wasn't He supposed to be the Savior of the World? Why didn't He save Himself? How did He let the crucifixion happen? Many questions were left unanswered that day.

But God was at work through the silence. He was fighting sin and death on their (and our!) behalf that quiet and lonely day. *God was there in the silence and He is here today.* God was in the middle of carrying out His rescue plan to reconcile mankind back to Himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The disciples just couldn't see it, and sometimes we can't either.

The wondering, waiting, and silence was not in vain that day and it is not in vain today. On that Silent Saturday, God was working out His good and perfect plan then just as He is doing it now.

The Bible tells us that God works everything out for His good (Romans 8:28) which means nothing is wasted or even lost. God mends, heals, forgives, restores, redeems, and uses everything for His good and glory, and He can use everything in your life too. Nothing is ever too much for God, not even the silence of wonder and disbelief.

If you are having a tough time and are in a season of silence, waiting and wondering, and feel as though God is distant, ask God to break through the silence of your heart. Pray for a new revelation and encouragement through His Word. Open your Bible and ask God to give you a fresh understanding of the Easter story. He is the One promised and He is faithful!

Easter Sunday is coming! Jesus' followers didn't know it then as we know it now. But resurrection, hope, and life would be what broke the silence and can be what does it now.

"I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said." 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Even when the silence is deafening, God is still at work! Keep the faith. Hold onto the promises of God. Resurrection Sunday is coming!

Respond

Write down Romans 8:28 as a reminder of God's love and faithfulness. Jot it on a 3x5 card or sticky note, or create a graphic for your digital device. Put the note or graphic in a location that you can see every day for the rest of the week - whether that's on your bathroom mirror, next to the coffee pot, or on the background of your mobile device, let it serve as a reminder of God's gracious love and the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." Romans 8:28

If your Scripture reminder serves you well, be encouraged to find a different Bible verse each week to make this practice a regular habit. Filling our hearts and minds with God's Word can give us hope, teach us, and equip us for the work ahead of us (2 Timothy 3:16-17) in this life!

Rest

Dear Lord, we thank you for your faithfulness! We ask that you will encourage us in the seasons of our lives where we are wondering and waiting, and that you would strengthen our hearts when you feel distant or silent. Remind us that you work all things out for your good and glory. Open our eyes to see your love and faithfulness all around us, especially in the waiting. Thank you for your love, faithfulness, mercy, and grace. We love you and thank you, Lord! Amen.

About the Author

Jessica deLinde Dyckman is the founding editor of “*The Courageous & Kind Project*” a digital media project dedicated to empowering women to live out their God-given purpose. She and her husband live in Atlanta, Georgia, with their son and daughter. Jessica is involved in her community with Oak Grove MomCo (Formerly Mothers of Preschoolers), Main Street Christian School, and the Junior League of Atlanta.



Find Jessica on *The Courageous & Kind Project* podcast on any major streaming platform or follow C&K on social media [@TheCourageousandKindProject](https://www.instagram.com/TheCourageousandKindProject) or www.courageousandkind.org.

Beginning again – in this moment

A Reflection for Resurrection Sunday by Rev. Dr. Laura Sumner Truax

Lectionary reading for 03/31/2024: Acts 10:34-43 or Isaiah 25:6-9 • Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 • 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 or Acts 10:34-43 • John 20:1-18.

Selected passage for reflection: John 20:1-18.

Read

[John 20:1-18 NIV](#)

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” John 20:1

Reflect

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...

With these words, the apostle John begins his narrative on the most astonishing story the world has ever heard: Jesus the Christ, the human god-man, is resurrected from the dead. Year after year I preached this profound message of hope and redemption. Death does not have the final word! Hallelujah, we proclaim, Christ has risen!

The early hour, the setting of darkness on the first day of the week, these were background context. Rarely did I focus my study on this opening phrase, and never did I realize that every single gospel narrative finds it important to tell us it was the dawn of the first day of a new week.

This year it occurred to me that I had been missing what was likely an early church understanding; they experienced Resurrection Sunday with the same energy, hope and anticipation we reserve for New Years Day. This was the first day of a brand new slate - teeming with possibilities, unencumbered by previous failures. This was a new reality *unfolding by the minute*. Who could say what might happen next?

The old assumptions of how life went were no longer fixed. Their minds were blown. Their imaginations ignited. Everything had seemingly become new.

There is a little story from the 4th century desert fathers that goes like this: *Abba Moses asked Abba Silvanus, "Can a man lay a new foundation every day?" The old man replied, "If he works hard, he can lay a new foundation at every moment."*

Did you catch that? We lay a new foundation at every moment not in what we promise ourselves we will do tomorrow, but on what we say and do right now. Those familiar with the Twelve-Step Program, already know this fundamental principle: It's not *"I will never drink again."* Rather, *"Today I will not drink."* It is the moment-by-moment reminder of the now.

"Continuously renewed immediacy, not a receding memory of the divine touch, lies at the basis of mature religious living," writes the contemporary Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...a tiny group of unschooled, unremarkable nobodies experienced the power of God. Moment by moment, they laid a new foundation by believing that power was at work in them too.

Christ has risen. And we have too. Believe the good news.
Amen

Respond

Easter Sunday. The first day of a new year. Spend some time reflecting on what foundation God is asking you to lay. How could you practice building your foundation right now? In the present moment? Many have found meditation or contemplative prayer to be a powerful tool in building this awareness. Sitting quietly focusing only on the inhale and exhale of your breath is the beginning. Returning to the conviction that right now is the only moment you actually have.

Rest

Praise to you, Giver of Life. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. As we stand in the shadow of the Risen Christ, we offer you this moment. This moment. This moment.

This moment, we are yours.

This moment, we pray our fears will not hold us back and that our ambitions will not push us forward.

This moment, as we stand close, we feel your power flowing through us.

Hold us in this moment, we pray.

Amen and amen.



About the Author

Laura Sumner Truax is an author, pastor and spiritual director. Her doctoral work examined the spiritual practices of progressive evangelicals who have left their former churches. Laura facilitates an online meditation group at MeditationChapel.org, practices spiritual direction as an adjunct professor at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and teaches through a variety of online and in

person groups including the Olive Tree Community. Follow her [@freerangechristian4](#).