

February 14

## **2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10**

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. <sup>6:1</sup> As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. <sup>2</sup> For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. <sup>3</sup> We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. <sup>4</sup> Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; <sup>5</sup> in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; <sup>6</sup> in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; <sup>7</sup> in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; <sup>8</sup> through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; <sup>9</sup> known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

### **Reflection**

In this letter, Paul exhorts the people to be reconciled to God through Jesus and receive the grace that brings forgiveness and salvation. He goes on to remind them of the hardships he has undergone during his ministry and the degree to which he's been misunderstood and mistrusted, concluding that although sorrowful, he constantly rejoices, although poor, he enriches many, and although destitute in worldly terms, he possesses everything - presumably through God's favor.

There is much in this passage for 21st century Christians living in a post-Christian society, such as ours. We often need to be reminded that at its heart, Christianity is about being reconciled to God through the gift of grace in Jesus' sacrificial death. It is a simple idea that anyone can grasp, and is offered freely, with no clear compulsion to do anything other than accept the gift. Yet in doing that, we become aware that we are called to reject the sin that would separate us from God, while acting to help humanity and to reconcile the world to God, even in small ways, every day.

Paul's ministry is clearly notable for its influence and sacrifice, but most people's faith walks are less spectacular, although just as blessed. I made my first stumbling steps towards Christian faith in my teens, continued to grow slowly in my twenties, and have remained committed – although struggling at times – to my faith through the years. But with greater maturity and the wisdom of hindsight, I now see a more clear trajectory. It appears to me that God saw purpose in my seemingly insignificant life years ago and has continued to faithfully sustain and encourage me every day. Now, in my later years, that belief helps to spur me to serve God and my fellow human, as best I can.

### **Prayer**

Father, we understand that we're not all called to be great leaders in your church, yet we know that we can all do our part in reconciling people to you in Jesus. Help us to understand our responsibility to reach out to help our fellow human and in so doing to witness to your great gift of grace to us. This day, please help us to find opportunities to show your love in the world and the strength to do so. In Jesus' name, Amen.

—Guy Roberts  
(Reflection from 2017 Lenten Season)

February 15

### **Genesis 9: 8-17**

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ... I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ... I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. ... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

### **Reflection**

One of the best things about Bible study is that you often see something new in passages you’ve read many times. This happened to me with this passage. Earlier in Genesis we are told that God has given humans dominion over the animals. That I knew. But in this passage God has made a covenant with the animals and with the earth. That had escaped my notice in prior readings—I knew there was a covenant with humankind—but I had missed the animal/earth part. A covenant is a commitment—God is committing to take care of us, the animals, the earth. And as with all things, our faithful obedience enables God’s will to be done. No wonder the Presbyterian Church (USA) recently added “caring for God’s creation” as one of the commitments a church member makes.

The other thing that stuck out to me on this reading was the word “remember.” Apparently, God was afraid he might forget the covenant—so he made a sort of mnemonic aid for himself. On our part, we need to remember God and remember the covenant. What are our mnemonic aids for this? Going to church regularly. Reading the Bible. Praying. I have found it is easy to get lost in routine and forget. But since I have built something into my life that is a regular practice, when I forget, I have something to remind me.

### **Prayer**

God of humanity, of the animals, of the earth, we are thankful for your creation, for our lives, for the beauty of it all. You remember us. Help us to always remember you in all that we do in every single day. Amen.

—Sara Coe

February 16

**Psalm 25: 1-10**

**1** In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

**2** I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

**3** No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.

**4** Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths.

**5** Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

**6** Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.

**7** Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

**8** Good and upright is the LORD; therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways.

**9** He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

**10** All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

**Reflection**

I think a lot of people (myself included) turn to prayer and God mostly in time of need or challenge. It seems easy and natural to pray and call on God's help when times are tough. However, as the psalm states, we have much to gain when we always put our trust in the Lord. We could benefit from His guidance and direction, even when we believe that we are currently on the right path.

**Prayer**

Lord, help me to remember that I should always put my trust in you, in good times and bad. Help me to remember that I always can learn from you, and you can guide me on my daily path.

—Brian Hoshaw

February 17

### **1 Peter 3: 18-22**

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. <sup>19</sup> After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— <sup>20</sup> to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, <sup>21</sup> and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

### **Reflection**

This passage on redemption discusses how God finds a way out for the 'imprisoned spirits'. There are two ways to read the last part of verse 20—that they were saved **by** the water of baptism, or that they were saved and found a way **through** the floodwaters that swallowed the world. The looming condemnation of the flood that happened so long ago that we have a specific word for it ("antediluvian", meaning 'before the flood') makes it even more impressive that Christ's sacrifice ages later was able to save the souls that perished. Our baptisms affirmed this promise for today's times, regardless of what floodwaters—real or symbolic—lap at our shores now.

The power of Christ's sacrifice is marvelous news to take in as we reflect on Peter's words here. The mercy of God granted to us, sealed by the vows we make during baptism, often emerges in times of distress when we need salvation the most. Even when things look impossible—when one is imprisoned and condemned to be entombed by the sea, there is a way out through Christ. Let us pray.

### **Prayer**

Humbling God, we give thanks to you as the Lenten season marks the progression towards the day of the Lamb is sacrificed. We vocalize also the thanks of the imprisoned spirits thought to be impossible to save. But through you, redemption is possible. In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

—Rui Zhong

February 18

**Mark 1: 9-15**

Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth in the province of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (10) As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. (11) And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you." (12) At once the Spirit made him go into the desert. (13) where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals were there also but angels came and helped him. (14) After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God. (15) "The right time has come," he said, "and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

**Reflection**

I find that I often have a liturgical song dancing around in my head. Sometimes it pops up from my distant past, and sometimes a song from the Sunday worship service sticks with me all week. Since reading this passage about Jesus being baptized, affirmed by the Holy Spirit, tempted for 40 days in the desert, and beginning to preach, *Godspell* has been playing in my head. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" "Turn back, O man. Foreswear your foolish ways."

For me these songs really do capture the essence of Lent. It is a time to prepare for the miraculous gift of Easter and to imagine how the Good News can be reflected in my life. I often feel, in the craziness of being launched through each day and collapsing at the end of it, like I am being pulled in too many directions. Lent is a time for me to try to slow down and reflect on my "foolish ways" and ponder the parables and Christ's teachings and examine my priorities. Do I make enough time for God in my life? How much is enough? Back to *Godspell* for some possible answers, "All good gifts around us are sent from Heaven above," and "What gifts have we to offer but a humble thankful heart?"

**Prayer** (which is also inspired by *Godspell*)

Dear Lord, please help me to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, every day.

—Gail Dufek

February 19

### **Romans 8:28-39**

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Reflection**

At first glance at this passage I was lost in the weeds. Paul never used less than 8 words for one thought! There seem to be a lot of complicated topics happening in these 12 short verses—a lot of logic to follow. But the more time I spent with these words, the more my spirits were raised by them: This is all GOOD NEWS!

This is like a mini essay—the thesis is in the first sentence: "All things work together for good to those who love God." That's it. Love God and all things will work together for good.

Then we have some complicated logic to follow that, as I read it, boils down to the following: God has called us, justified us, and glorified us. Not only is he on our side but his Son also intercedes on our behalf.

Then we get a reality check: Bad things will happen—tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness (homelessness in some translations), peril, and threat of death.

BUT, "we are more than conquerors" to overcome these things through God! One of my very favorite verses, John 16:33, reminds us that "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world!"

Then we get our fabulous conclusion: Therefore, we can have JOY: No Circumstance, No Time, No Person, No Heavenly Being, No Where, No Thing will keep us away from "Him who loved us."

Take Heart, then. God is working things for the good of those whom he has called, those he loves, for us.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly God who loves us, thank you. Thank you for always being on our side. Thank you for your intercession in our lives and for never letting Anything separate us from your Love. Even when we feel we have walked away from you, thank you for never leaving our side.

—Jocelyn Callister

**Psalm 70**

To the leader. Of David, for the memorial offering.

<sup>1</sup> Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.

O LORD, make haste to help me!

<sup>2</sup> Let those be put to shame and confusion

who seek my life.

Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor

who desire to hurt me.

<sup>3</sup> Let those who say, 'Aha, Aha!'

turn back because of their shame.

<sup>4</sup> Let all who seek you

rejoice and be glad in you.

Let those who love your salvation

say evermore, 'God is great!'

<sup>5</sup> But I am poor and needy;

hasten to me, O God!

You are my help and my deliverer;

O LORD, do not delay!

**Reflection**

I can certainly relate to David's prayer for help. When I am frightened, hurt, or angry, I plead with God for rescue from that situation. I may ask that anyone who wants to hurt me be turned back.

But that prayer centers only on ME, forgetting that I belong to God. The psalmist reminds me that I am weak and helpless. God is my help and my salvation.

**Prayer**

Eternal God,

Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts,

To direct and rule us according to your will,

To comfort us in all our afflictions,

To defend us from all error,

And to lead us into all truth;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.\*

Amen.

\* Adapted from Book of Common Worship Common Prayer

February 21

**Isaiah 43:1-4 New International Version (NIV)**

43 But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, Jacob,  
he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;  
I give Egypt for your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in your stead.

<sup>4</sup>Since you are precious and honored in my sight,  
and because I love you,  
I will give people in exchange for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.

**Reflection**

It is often difficult to link the Old Testament to the New and understand its relevance to current, modern day life. But this passage from Isaiah is clear. As God speaks to the people of Israel, understanding and acknowledging the hardships they have endured, he proclaims his promise that, no matter what, he will always be with them. He expresses his deep love for each and every one of them and commits to their protection. As Christians, we can walk through this life with confidence knowing we are not alone. Through God’s love, promised in Isaiah and powerfully demonstrated through the death and resurrection of his only son, Jesus Christ, we can handle even the greatest of adversities, i.e., the loss of a loved one to physical or mental health issues, a job, our home, even our daily disappointments in our own shortcomings. God promises to always walk with us and to love us unconditionally through grace and forgiveness.

**Prayer**

Father, we thank you for your great promise, not to free us from life’s adversities, but to always be with us to love us and give us strength and courage for the living of these days. Amen.

—Barbara Greenan



February 22

**Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16**

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. 2 Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." 3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

15 God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. 16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

**Reflection**

I, like Abraham, would fall facedown if I found out that at 90 years old, I was to become a new parent. As a woman almost out of her child-bearing years, I am wondering what must Sarah have thought! Raising children is hard and requires a lot of work, energy, and a sense of humor. Sarah then had the added pressure of making sure she was doing a great job because she was the mother of nations. But God blessed Sarah with a miracle and she rejoiced in Isaac's birth and in raising him. She embraced God's miracle and continued to show her faith in God's promise. Thank you, Sarah for embracing motherhood even when it was unexpected.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the miracle of birth at any age. Help me to be the best parent I can be. Teach me your wisdom so that I can pass it along to our future generations. Guide me so that I am following your path and not my own, and grant me patience, gratitude, and laughter to raise our children in your ways. In your name we pray. Amen.

—Heather Karakashian

**Psalm 22:23-31**

Praise him, you servants of the Lord! Honor him, you descendants of Jacob! Worship him, you people of Israel! He does not neglect the poor or ignore their suffering; he does not turn away from them, but answers when they call for help.

In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done; in the presence of those who worship you I will offer the sacrifices I promised. The poor will eat as much as they want; those who come to the Lord will praise him. May they prosper forever!

All nations will remember the Lord. From every part of the world they will turn to him; all races will worship him. The Lord is King, and he rules the nations. All proud people will bow down to him; all mortals will bow down before him. Future generations will serve him; they will speak of the Lord to the coming generations. People not yet born will be told, "The Lord saved his people."

**Reflection**

This passage offers the typical puzzle of Psalms of shifting voice and tense and mood, from ringing phrases to tender poetry to complaints about evil enemies. The first couple verses here seem to be an exhortation and then a description of God's mercy to the poor. But then it changes to future tense, perhaps as a description of the Kingdom of God when it comes "on earth as it is in heaven."

Anyway, the clear theme of the passage is praise, something that we are called to do and hopefully motivated to do without prompting. As I pray, usually in wakeful times in the middle of the night, I often use the ACTS pattern: A for Adoration, C for Confession, T for Thanksgiving, and S for Supplication. I like this format because it forces me to begin with adoration or praise. It is very tempting to plunge ahead to supplication, or asking for things, even if I do ask for things for other people. Thanksgiving is also appealing, listing things that I am grateful for. Heck, even confession has some meat to it as I think about my shortcomings.

But praise does not come easy. What do you say after you say, "I praise you, I adore you"? This psalm offers some ideas for praise, like why we would praise God: Let everyone praise the Lord. He is merciful to the poor and answers those who pray to him. We are part of a great multitude who praise him, the proud and the humble. The generations of believers stretches forward without end. And the final ringing line: People not yet born will learn about God.

**Prayer**

God, help us to feel praise in our hearts and to express that fully, spontaneously, and without reservation. Let the adoration bubble up in our lives and fill us with joy as we think of all that you do for us. Amen.

—Gina Vitale

February 24

### **Romans 4: 13-25**

<sup>13</sup> For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup> If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup> For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ...

<sup>22</sup> Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

### **Reflection**

It helps if I remember that the Apostle Paul is writing to the early church in Rome which is awash in controversy as it argues about its requirements for acceptance into membership as both Jews and Gentiles press their “exclusive” claims as followers of Jesus. But Paul asserts to the Jews in the group that this cannot be an issue, citing God’s call to faithful Abraham to be the “father of all” long before he was actually circumcised. Yet by the same token, Gentiles are linked to Abraham’s great model of faith which has been lived faithfully down through the centuries by many prophets and leaders, men and women, culminating in the Jesus whom the early church members are now claiming as their Lord and Savior.

It also helps for me to understand that Paul is not really writing to an individual but to a whole community of gathered worshippers of the God of mercy, love, and healing revealed to them in the life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This community therefore becomes a living witness to the God whom Jesus embodied and goes back even to the faithful Abraham, to the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Paul, creative scholar and spiritual leader of his time, as usual has given the early church as well as the churches of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries beyond his time a great deal to contemplate—sometimes to be challenged by—not only to sustain us but also to lead us into new understandings and actions. Even Saint Mark, the PCUSA, and our global interfaith communities who each in their own way “belong to the God of grace”!

### **Prayer**

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:13

—Louise Winfield

**Mark 8: 31-38**

<sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

**Reflection**

Whatever your heart clings to, whatever power grips your heart with dread; that is thy god, says Martin Luther. Mark records in eight verses the head-on collision between Jesus and Peter (and reflexively every one of us) on the power that holds us in its grasp. In a foregoing verse, Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the one with the power of God. But then Jesus insists that he must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the powerful in the world and be killed. That cannot be, thinks Peter, taking Jesus aside. A melting Messiah! Shut up Jesus. For heaven's sake. The Messiah cannot be powerless before the rulers of the world that hold us in their grip.

Turning toward his disciples, Jesus rebukes Peter. You are wrongheaded. You have confused God's power with Satanic, destructive power.

Jesus lays out the path set by the Power of Self-Expending Love, an identity that does not break, whatever the assault by the powers that would break it. Evil is real but not ultimate. Threaten the Son of Man with abuse, humiliation, and death? He already humbles and expends himself daily. The threats against this identity no longer work. Ultimately, the demonic will be left muttering to itself. Follow the Savior. His identity is unbreakable. Attend to this new identity. It is yours, not by possession but by participation. "...those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake...will save it." Such is the good news ahead for Peter and for all of us enmeshed in the old world and its ways.

**Prayer**

God, your Son Jesus Christ bore the cross for our salvation  
and was raised from the dead for the redemption of the world.  
Give us the courage to take up our cross and follow him,  
that through his grace we may accept the cost of faithful discipleship  
and receive the joy of everlasting life with Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. Amen.

-- *From Feasting on the Word Worship Companion: Liturgies for Year B, Volume 1*

**Mark 9:2-9 (Good News Translation)**

<sup>2</sup>Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain, where they were alone. As they looked on, a change came over Jesus, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became shining white—whiter than anyone in the world could wash them. <sup>4</sup>Then the three disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Peter spoke up and said to Jesus, “Teacher, how good it is that we are here! We will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup>He and the others were so frightened that he did not know what to say. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud appeared and covered them with its shadow, and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my own dear Son—listen to him!” <sup>8</sup>They took a quick look around but did not see anyone else; only Jesus was with them. <sup>9</sup>As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has risen from death.”

**Reflection**

Even though I don’t always want to be, I’m an “up and at ‘em” kind of gal. My internal clock usually goes off around 5 am, and I’m pouring my first cup of coffee by 5:45. I enjoy the quiet and peace of these early moments, before the hustle and bustle of family and work takes over. It’s often where I encounter the little treasures of my day. Like looking out on the back deck and seeing a magnificent flaming red cardinal perched on the railing. Or hearing the low “hoo hoo hoo” of the resident owl. Or my favorite – seeing how the sun pushes up waves of coral, deep rose, indigo, and light purple as it inches its way to the horizon. It is in this stillness that I feel like I am straddling two worlds – my own human existence and the masterpiece of God’s heaven. It is these moments that give a little boost to my faith, as if God is sending personal messages just to me, saying “I am real. I am here.”

I imagine that this was a little bit of what Jesus had in mind when he took Peter, James, and John to the top of the mountain. Jesus loved his disciples dearly, and he knew they were confused and worried about what his stories of his coming death and resurrection. The disciples only know the human Jesus at this point, and I’m sure there were still little tiny specks of doubt buried deep inside that made them wonder if He was indeed going to be okay. Yet as He is “transfigured” before them, standing with Moses and Elijah, Jesus gives them undeniable proof of his glory and deity. He’s saying “Look, I’ve got this. Believe me.” This glimpse of grandeur gives their faith the surge it needs to continue on their journey with Jesus, and more importantly, to continue on after He is gone, sharing the Good News.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, we know how crazy and hectic life is. It sometimes makes it difficult to see the messages you are sending us. Help us to slow down, be still, listen, and see. Amen.

—Barbara Welsh

## February 27

### Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:6-7

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. ...

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you";

6 as he says also in another place,

"You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

### Reflection

I take great comfort in the affirmation that Jesus was fully human and fully God. If he were only human I would consider him a great example like many other examples of great humans in history. Yet knowing that he was also fully God who experienced everything that I, like all humans, experience means something far more important. It means that I can come to God honestly with my sin, my fear, my anxiety, and all else that is troubling me with the confidence that God knows my condition because in Jesus Christ, God has experienced the depths of human experience. That gives me courage to pray for forgiveness and grace, as well as strength to be faithful. When I am tempted to do what is displeasing to God and self-destructive, I remember that I am not alone; Jesus has suffered in like manner yet did not falter.

The scripture also tells us that Jesus is a High Priest. A priest prays for the people, interceding on their behalf before God. Here again, scripture is clear that Jesus is our high Priest who knows everything we experience because he has experienced it himself. He prays for us that we may learn the same faithful obedience to God that he displayed in his life. Jesus is more than an example. He is the living God in human flesh who loves deeply enough to experience everything that I experience solely for the reason that I might live a God-centered life. What wondrous love is this! This line from the hymn - *Come Thou Fount* - expresses my heart's song: *"O to grace how great debtor daily I'm constrained to be; let that grace now like a fetter daily bind my heart to thee."*

### Prayer

Loving God, I thank you for becoming one with us in Jesus Christ, entering intimately into human experience and suffering every temptation known to humanity yet without falling into sin. Grant that I may never cease daily depending upon you for grace and mercy in time of need. Tune my heart to sing your grace and find in you an ever-present help in time of need.

Amen.

—Roy Howard

February 28

**Psalm 36:5-10 New International Version (NIV)**

**5** Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.

**6** Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.

**7** How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

**8** They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.

**9** For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

**10** Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart.

**Reflection**

The Lord encompasses everything and everyone in our world. Those who accept him into their hearts will be filled with light, life, love, and faith.

**Prayer**

Lord - we thank you for this day we have been given and we pray to embrace the next. May you grant peace to the restless and comfort to the broken. Please be with those who have lost their loved ones; may they find hope in the future. Thank you for creating the beautiful world we live in and pray that all of your people will spread positivity in a world of division. In your name we pray, Amen.

—Jessi Austin

**Exodus 20: 1-17**

20 And God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup> “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before<sup>[a]</sup> me.

<sup>4</sup> “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

**Reflection**

In our 4th & 5th grade Sunday school class, we are regularly reminded about the Ten Commandments. We have a poster on the wall, we’ve played games to memorize the Commandments. We know that our parents’ favorite one is “Honor your mother and father, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you.” We’ve had many discussions to help us understand the story of the prophet, Moses, who received the Ten Commandments from God and brought them to the people.

But, the most important thing that we’ve learned is that Jesus said that the most important Commandments are, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To us, this means always being willing to be a friend to someone who needs a friend (like Jesus always did), trying to be kind to all (including our siblings), loving God, and loving others (including our family).

We know that we can’t always be perfect like Jesus was, but we can always look to Jesus’ life and example of how we should treat others & love ourselves.

**Prayer**

Dear God,

You have told us your commandments on how to live. Please help us to live our lives the way you have taught us to do. Thank you for giving us a place to learn about you here at Saint Mark. We pray for guidance and understanding. In your name we pray, Amen.

### Psalm 19

<sup>1</sup>The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup>Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

<sup>4</sup>yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

<sup>5</sup>which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,

and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

<sup>6</sup>Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

<sup>7</sup>The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;

the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
making wise the simple;

<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;

<sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever;

the ordinances of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.

<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;

sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.

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

### Reflection

"The heavens are telling the story of God..."  
Because they were created by God to do God's will  
They don't "tell the story" with words or sound,  
just by their very being.

"The law of the Lord is perfect..."

Really?

How many times a day do I have to revisit this?

My human arrogance fools me into doing things my way, going on instinct,

pulling up my boot-straps, and making a deeper, smellier mess of things.

If it's good enough for the heavens, the sun,  
Why isn't God's way the only for this God-created human?

Why can't I remember who is God and who is not?

"Write deeply in my heart, What I am and what Thou art."\*

### Prayer

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

—Katry Harris

\*=This is the last line of old hymn #6 from the dark red 1955 Hymnbook, "Heaven and Earth, and Sea and Air," based on Psalm 19.

March 3

### **1 Corinthians 1: 18-25**

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

<sup>19</sup> For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

### **Reflection**

During our year-long journey through the Covenant Bible Study, we read several chapters from books of the Bible each day for five days. On the sixth day, we reread a particular set of verses from our weekly assignment. It was intended as a Covenant Meditation. It was a chance to use our imagination and deepen our ability to listen for what was revealed in scripture. This is what I tried to do before writing my reflection.

While doing that, I kept coming back to the last verse of the scripture, especially the first part, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.” Many think we know so much. We have accumulated knowledge about the universe, about the natural world, and about our human mind and body. We have accumulated goods and pleasurable experiences. For many that is the way of the world. But God calls us to a different world; the way of life that Jesus preached during his ministry. To love one another, to care for the widow and orphan, to share your belongings with others, to care for the sick and imprisoned, to stand with the foreigner, to worship together. This would be foolishness for many, but it is our path to a fulfilling and joyful life.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord,

I’m grateful for this season of contemplation. I pray that sharing our thoughts and prayers will enrich us and draw our community closer. Guide us on the way together.

In Jesus’ name we pray,

Amen.

—Nancy Shea

March 4

### **John 2: 13-22**

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Then the Jews said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

### **Reflection**

The temple is a symbol of God's presence and location. Though it was located in Jerusalem, in the Old Testament the Ark of the Covenant (God's presence) often moved around with the people. Now, for Christians, Jesus redefines that presence.

One of the larger theological themes in John's Gospel is "where is God?" And, subsequently we are invited to recognize God in Jesus. Jesus isn't worried about the location of God; the question is whether or not we recognize who Jesus is and who God is in Jesus.

In this passage Jesus not only upends tables but also upends traditional beliefs about where God can be found in the world.

In his Message translation of the Bible, Eugene Peterson says in John 1, "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." In Jesus God has come to earth and dwelt among us, stated powerfully as Peterson said, "moved into the neighborhood." This was a completely new paradigm of who God is, what God does, and where God can be found in the world.

Where do you recognize God? Where might God be unexpectedly showing up in your life or in your neighborhood? How do you seek God out?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, you are all around us. In Christ you came to earth to be with us, to walk among us, to share in our joys and in our sorrows. Yet too often we do not recognize your presence in our lives. Help us to be aware and awake to what you are doing in our lives, in our neighborhood, and in the world. Amen.

— Shelby Etheridge Harasty

### **Psalm 23**

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup>he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil; for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

### **Reflection**

God takes care of us and provides us with everything we need because He loves us. God is always with us and we need to seek Him and be close to Him just as sheep are close to their shepherd.

Children trust us by holding our hands when they cross the street, so they don't get hurt. We hold their hands in a crowd so they don't get lost. When we hold their hands, we are guiding them and giving them protection. God is always holding our hands, guiding us and protecting us, too.

We need to trust where God will lead us. He "leads us in right paths," helping us to live the lives He has meant for us—as witnesses to His love, to do good, and help others as God helps us.

God also is our sanctuary. Even if we lose our way and wander off, He will seek us, just as the shepherd searches for and brings back his lost sheep.

God leads us to the overflowing good things He provides for us. God even loves us so much, that He has made a place for us to live with Him forever.

God's incredible love will always be there to take care of us in all ways. Nothing can separate us from God; He is our Savior.

To receive God's guidance, it is important that we seek Him always, just as He seeks us. We should stay connected with God through prayer and ask God to guide us in all that we do, so it is pleasing to Him, and to give thanks to God for all that He has given.

### **Prayer**

Dear God,

We give You thanks and praise for your everlasting love. Thank You for all that you have provided for us. Help us to stay connected to You in all the minutes of each day, feeling Your presence, so that Your goodness and love will teach us to do the same for others.

Amen.

March 6

**Mark 1: 14-20**

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

<sup>16</sup> As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>18</sup> And immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>19</sup> As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. <sup>20</sup> Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

**Reflection**



**Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for people like Simon and for Andrew who follow you. Please help me to quickly follow you too. Amen.

—Elizabeth (grade 6) and Grace (grade 3) Lai

March 7

### **Mark 1:21-28 (Revised Standard Version)**

<sup>21</sup> And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

### **Reflection**

To me, the reference to "unclean spirit" in this passage and other passages which reference "demons" are Biblical code words for "mental illness." One in five adult Americans (43.8 million) experience mental illness in a given year.\* People are not mentally ill alone. Family, friends, and co-workers are dramatically affected. Let's do the math: assume each ill adult has five family members, friends, and co-workers who are impacted by that ill person.  $5 \times 43,800,000 = 219,000,000$ .  $219,000,000$  family and friends +  $43,800,000$  ill adults =  $262,800,000$  divided by  $323,100,000^{**} = 81.3\%$ . **81.3%** of adult Americans are affected by mental illness each day of the year, every year. I am one of those 81.3% and have been for years.

The man with the "unclean spirit" in the passage above, and his family and friends, were truly blessed. He was cured of mental illness with one rebuke from Jesus, in one fell swoop. Imagine—life goes back to "normal" just like that! In real life, mental illness ebbs and flows, but rarely goes away forever. Sometimes when things are quiet and seem "normal," you forget. And then the inevitable "incident" arrives and you are awash with all the old feelings of anger, hopelessness, and despair. The burdens born by those around the ill person come back and you struggle once again. What to do, or not do?; what to say, or not say?; "walking on eggshells" so the situation doesn't deteriorate further; and blaming the ill person because it gets so exhausting and tiresome—always being the "healthy one." And finally you remember to pray because that is often the only thing you can "do." Pray and wait for the brain research they are doing now to someday be able to "cast out the unclean spirit."

### **Prayer**

Please help me, oh God, to pray without ceasing when my loved one lashes out, or goes silent; when I become tired and weak; and when I don't know what to do or say. Help my loved one and hold me up until I am strong once more. And please hurry along those scientists doing the amazing brain research. Thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

—Beth Irons

\*National Alliance on Mental Illness, [www.NAMI.org](http://www.NAMI.org)

\*\* The US population as of 2016 was 323,100,000. US Census Bureau

March 8

### **Numbers 21: 4-9. The Bronze Snake**

4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

### **Reflection**

The Israelites' prayers had been answered. God delivered them from servitude in Egypt and promised they would be brought to a prosperous new land they could call their own. Initially, the people were full of confidence and had faith in God's plan, but as the years passed and their hardships mounted, they started to lose hope that God would keep his promise. The Israelites' complaints grew ever louder, and they poured out their frustrations on their leader, Moses, and even on God, whom they'd once trusted. It's easy for me to imagine that God finally had enough and decided to use poisonous snakes to teach his people a lesson. And it seems that this time, they got the message. The Israelites admitted their sinfulness and begged Moses to pray to God for their forgiveness. God remained faithful to his promise and showed mercy to His people by telling Moses how they could be saved.

This story illustrates God's awesome power and his faithfulness and mercy toward his chosen people. However, I admit I am somewhat puzzled by His method. Perhaps the bronze snake was meant to be a reminder of the Israelites' punishment for not trusting in God's plan and of God's mercy toward them, but would the people remember that it was God, and not the bronze idol (or the man who constructed it) that had saved them? The modern symbol of medicine, adapted from ancient Greek mythology, portrays a snake (or two) and a stick. We too must remember that it is through God's power and mercy that we will be healed.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for your constant love and mercy for us, and help us always have confidence in your plans. Amen.

—Becky Johnson

**Psalm 107**

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever.  
<sup>2</sup>Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble  
<sup>3</sup>and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

<sup>17</sup>Some were sick through their sinful ways,  
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;  
<sup>18</sup>they loathed any kind of food,  
and they drew near to the gates of death.  
<sup>19</sup>Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress;  
<sup>20</sup>he sent out his word and healed them,  
and delivered them from destruction.  
<sup>21</sup>Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
<sup>22</sup>And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,  
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

**Reflection**

The Psalm begins with a wonderfully simple, yet powerful reminder of our duty to be grateful to God. All people are bound to express thanks to God for his enduring love. We need to be witnesses to that love which redeems us. Our sins can make us forget that duty and make us both literally and figuratively “sick”, as stated in verse 17. Other translations start this as “Some became fools”. Indeed, our foolish ways lead us to neglect our gratitude to God. We need to recognize when this happens and cry to the Lord to save us. We need to be faithful witnesses to God’s love and “tell of his deeds with songs of joy.”

**Prayer**

Dear Lord,

Jacob said that we are not worthy of the least bit of all the steadfast love and faithfulness that you have shown us. Yet, you do love us and always will. We give thanks to you for always loving us despite our sinful and foolish ways and continuing to allow us always to come back to you after we forget your love for us.

Forgive us and let us be grateful and joyful witnesses to your love.

Amen.

March 10

### **Ephesians 2:1-10**

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

### **Reflection**

When I was just a kid my dad told me that if he died knowing I was a success he would consider his life a success. I was too young to think to ask him to define what he meant by success, but in our family, where money always seemed to be a worry, I assumed it had something to do with having and doing "a good job." Whatever it meant, I decided then and there I would work as hard as I could to achieve "success" because it was important to my dad.

It's been decades since that conversation, but my commitment to what I now recognize as worldly success has not wavered. I work hard, driven by the fear of disappointing my dad or others (teachers, bosses, other moms, even some of you reading this now) who I think might somehow determine whether I am this thing I promised myself I'd be.

The words of scripture above bring a person like me to my knees. All the pushing and grinding and trying in the world will ever change the fact that through no effort of my own, God offers me the gift of grace. There's an incredible freedom in knowing that I can't work harder for bonus grace and that God's grace remains even when I disappoint, distracted by the world's measure of success.

### **Prayer**

God, you made us for good works. Help us to do your work, not out of obligation or fear of what others may think or say of us, but because in doing your work we will come alive and know you better. Amen.

—Jennifer Carr

March 11

### **John 3:14-21**

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.

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."

### **Reflection**

In John 3:14-21, Jesus speaks of God sending the Son of Man to earth not to judge humanity, but as a Savior. Jesus also says that those who believe in him will find eternal life. In discussing this passage together, our interpretation of the eternal life Jesus speaks of is a communion with God that can allow us to find the light and truth within ourselves. In my own experience, I have found that communion with God manifests itself most powerfully during perhaps the darkest period of my life.

In November 2014, I was a single mother with one child in college and one about to enter college. I also was in a very difficult work situation working long hours on a project responsible for leading a team charged with training physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers on a new Electronic Health Record (EHR). The implementation of the EHR was wrapping up, and all of a sudden I had to choose between taking another role in the organization for which I had worked for 15 years or taking a severance package. Either way I would be leaving a team of 150 people that I had worked with for over 2.5 years, some of whom I had worked with for almost 15 years and who had become like family. It was a very difficult decision, but I decided that the right choice for me and the team would be to leave the organization. This was a very scary moment for a super security conscious person such as myself who had two children to put through college; a mortgage; and many other responsibilities, including helping to care for a frail, elderly parent.

My job search lasted a little more than nine months and spanned two coasts. During that time, the normal me would have been paralyzed with fear. It was at that time, however, that my faith in God was the strongest. Somehow, I knew with unwavering faith that God was looking out for me and that my children and I would be okay. That faith in God gave me the strength to find joy and lightness in connecting with so many people who helped to light my way toward a better future despite other challenges that arose during that period, including the death of a beloved family member, the sale of the home in which I raised my two children, and a cross-country move.

Despite the difficulties of that period, I am grateful for that time and the opportunity to have felt God's presence with me at my very core. Having complete trust in God, I found myself relieved of the worries which otherwise would have impeded my way and energized to create a new life. That life led me to a new job; Tom, my wonderful new husband, who brings me more joy than I knew possible; a deeper relationship with my two daughters, and whole new extended family, including the people here at Saint Mark.

### **Prayer**

Jesus, help me realize that I don't need to wait to ask for your help... or companionship. Amen.

—Tom and Brigitte Peterson

**Psalm 139: 1-12**

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?

<sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

<sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

<sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

<sup>11</sup>If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"

<sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

**Reflection**

The key word in Psalm 139 is "know." God knows us inside and out and through and through. This knowledge can be wonderful and frightening at the same time. It follows that those of us who believe this cannot hide from God. This too is a little frightening.

I love the thought that God is with us in the "dark" and the "light." In my life, and I'm sure in yours, there have been times when everything seems to be going wrong and we feel vulnerable and powerless. It is in these times that our faith and the Holy Spirit kick in to help us over the rough places. God is with us! When things are going right, it is tempting for me to put God on the back burner. These are the times when I need to remind myself to thank God for these joyful "light" and bright times and for how fortunate I am to be alive, with a loving family, good church friends, and my Ingleside family.

Remember the words of the hymn:

"You are before me, Lord, you are behind, and over me you have spread out your hand;  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too high to grasp, too great to understand."

**Prayer**

O God, there is no place I can go where you aren't already there. Thank you.

March 13

### **1 Corinthians 15: 1-11**

15 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

### **Reflection**

I read Paul's letter as though he was writing to me, telling me the Gospel has been handed on to me as Paul had it handed on to him. Paul tells me the many eyewitnesses who saw Christ after His resurrection show it wasn't an imagined apparition of one or two believers but the actual experience of many.

Then Paul tells me about God's grace, mentioning it three times;

“But by the grace of God, I am what I am.”

“His grace toward me has not been in vain.”

“...it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

He credits God's grace as the actual source of our faith, although the eyewitnesses to the historical fact of Jesus resurrection—good news not fake news—are not to be ignored. We believe, as Martin Luther says in his preface to Romans in the New Testament:

*Faith is a divine work in us which changes us to be born anew of God. Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace...*

What does this mean for me? Since by grace I believe the eyewitnesses to the truth of Christ's resurrection, I need not rely on the strength of my own convictions to believe Christ is my Lord and Savior. I can rely on God's grace. No small comfort in these times when the truth and those who hold to truth are held in such contempt.

On February 4, many of us watched the Philadelphia Eagles defeat New England in the Super Bowl. In the post-game interviews, Coach Pederson of the Eagles, Nick Foles the quarterback, and Zack Ernst the tight end who caught the winning touchdown all mentioned their faith in God and Jesus Christ in their remarks. It struck me as something they felt they needed to do—out of gratitude for what they believe God has done for them. While I believe God doesn't care who wins the Super Bowl, and didn't intervene in the outcome, it's not a leap to think their faith in God was part of the confidence with which they played.

I know for me, whatever confidence with which I live my life comes from the faith that thru the grace of God I am able to believe.

### **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for giving me the gift of faith to live my life without fear and anxiety about my future, which thru your grace, I am able to overcome. Help me to rely on your grace rather than on my own strength as I seek to follow Jesus in how I live my life. Amen.

—Dick Pavlin

March 14

### **Jeremiah 31:31-34 The Message (MSG)**

31-32 “That’s right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won’t be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master.” God’s Decree.

33-34 “This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I’ll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I’ll forget they ever sinned!” God’s Decree.

### **Reflection**

As we read through this verse, it began a conversation of forgiveness, as well as what life will be like once it is time for this new covenant. The forgiveness we receive from the Lord is the basis of our faith, which is personified in Christ. God shows this forgiveness beautifully in his promise of the new covenant with the people of Israel. Regardless that the first covenant was broken, God forgave his people with this new promise. What a reminder of the grace we have in the Lord, that he is always ready to forgive our past and aim toward the future with a clean slate.

With the new covenant, we are told of a time where we will all know God firsthand. This is amazing. Think about things you know instinctively: how to breath, how to chew, how to blink. It seems like this is what we are headed toward. God in our heart and in our mind in a way that just is. We will know God fully and by nature. There will be no more searching, we will have found.

Until we are there, we keep seeking him and learning his word. We keep teaching others the good news and aiming to live our lives according to his law—loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for the promise of your forgiveness and this covenant. Forgive us when we are distracted from you. As we wait for the time to come where we know you fully, keep our hearts focused on you. Push us in the right direction and show us the way when we fall. Help us to serve others as we serve you. In your name we pray, Amen.

—Carey and Paul Lavalley

March 15

### **Psalm 51, Verses 1-12: Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 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. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

### **Reflection**

When I left home for college, I stopped going to church. While I did do my fair share of yoga and meditation during this time, in terms of religion, I was basically in a spiritual wilderness for about fifteen years.

Once I became a parent, I decided I needed to find a place to give my daughter the same kind of spiritual grounding and religious traditions I had during my childhood. Becoming a parent not only helped me find my church again, it also gave me insight into the nature of God and changed my perception of Him.

For me, these verses from Psalm 51 exemplify how perfectly God loves us. God is truly like a benevolent parent, whose Love is unconditional, everlasting, absolute: Love with a capital L! The kind of Love that can heal your broken spirit, cleanse your heart with forgiveness, comfort you, give you hope for the future (for what is the purpose of having a child if not to make a promise for the future?). That kind of Love is tougher than nails and more pure than snow.

God's Love is, in a certain sense, a lot like maternal love: it is life-changing and awe-inspiring. He knit us in our mothers' wombs. He is nearer to us than our own hearts. He knows our darkest secrets and our sins, and loves us anyways. Just like a child learning to walk, we stumble, fall, and fail, and He is there to catch us, hold us, love us. Even as we stumble, fall, and fail, over and over again, God's grace is always there to sustain us.

The beauty of the nature of God (just like parenting) is that every day is a chance for a do-over. Every day is a chance for us - these flawed, fallible, imperfect human beings - to do right by Him. Every day is a chance to strive toward becoming more like God's only Son: to be kinder, more patient, more loving, more charitable. We are all God's children.

### **Prayer**

Holy Father, God of unconditional love, Protector of my life, create in me a clean heart. Guide me as a parent would a child. Forgive me for my transgressions. Forgive me for turning away from You. Give me wisdom to do right in Your eyes. Give me courage to live Your truth each day.

—Elodie Domenge

**Psalm 119: 9-16**

<sup>9</sup> How can young people keep their way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

<sup>10</sup> With my whole heart I seek you;

do not let me stray from your commandments.

<sup>11</sup> I treasure your word in my heart,

so that I may not sin against you.

<sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O LORD;

teach me your statutes.

<sup>13</sup> With my lips I declare

all the ordinances of your mouth.

<sup>14</sup> I delight in the way of your decrees

as much as in all riches.

<sup>15</sup> I will meditate on your precepts,

and fix my eyes on your ways.

<sup>16</sup> I will delight in your statutes;

I will not forget your word.

**Reflection**

My grandfather once told me, “Acting with integrity means doing the right thing when no one else is looking.” It’s a very simple statement and it “rings true,” but how does it inform my actions? If I’m alone, who is there to show me the righteous way?

I believe our Psalmist wrestled with this question and his answer reflects a profound understanding of our relationship with God.

After acknowledging that our natural state leans toward sin, the Psalmist makes the observation that we can avoid sin by obeying God. It’s “simple,” right? But here’s the insight: Our Psalmist knows that integrity doesn’t work in a situational way. God does not come down and say, “Don’t put your thumb on that scale.” or “Better increase your church pledge this year.” or “Don’t make assumptions about your neighbor’s value to society.”

Rather, we discern God’s will in any situation because we have spent a lifetime “learning His statutes”; “declaring His ordinances”; “enjoying His decrees”; “meditating on His precepts.” It’s hard work. It’s never done. But it’s the most important and the most delightful thing we can be doing. It enables us to act with integrity.

**Prayer**

Gracious Lord, thank you for your willingness to share with this sinner your statutes, your precepts, your ordinances, your decrees. Grant me the energy and single-mindedness to seek out opportunities to incorporate your will into my life. Amen.

—Tom Hudson

March 17

**Isaiah 40: 21-31**

<sup>21</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations  
of the earth?

<sup>22</sup> It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

<sup>23</sup> who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

<sup>24</sup> Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

<sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?

The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.

<sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.

<sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;

<sup>31</sup> but those who wait for the Lord shall renew  
their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

**Reflection**



**Prayer**

Dear God, you are pretty great.

—Elizabeth Carr (kindergarten)

**John 12:20-33**

20: Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to the 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 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, "The 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 from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

33: He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

**Reflection**

In this passage, Jesus is preparing for his death, and reflecting upon the grace and love that will be bestowed upon God's followers as a result. I am struck by the confidence of Jesus, even as his death draws near. He is at peace with his fate, knowing the Father's plan to save others in His name. This is reflected in the parallel he draws to the kernel of wheat; he says, "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." What a comforting thought, that death can actually bring life, and in abundance. Through the single death of Jesus an infinite number of lives have and will be saved.

The passage about the kernel also makes me think about God's presence in our everyday lives, and how it can be felt and multiplied through people, events, and nature. We are but one kernel, but can choose to spread seeds of love (and receive seeds of love!), acknowledge them as such, and therefore expand God's love. The challenge, of course, is choosing to see it. Look for God today: He could be in the face of the kind woman in the grocery store line, the man who picks up your dropped glove, or the baby who has the giggles. There are seeds of good spread all around. Let us look for them and remember our Savior who has given us this extraordinary life.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the ultimate sacrifice you have given us, your Son, so that we might all be saved. Help us to carry on that beautiful gift by spreading seeds of kindness and warmth, so that your love might expand to all the corners of this earth. We ask that you help us keep our eyes open to your love and light. Amen.

**Isaiah 50: 4-9a**

4 The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

5 The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;  
I have not been rebellious,  
I have not turned away.

6 I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from mocking and spitting.

7 Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,  
and I know I will not be put to shame.

8 He who vindicates me is near.  
Who then will bring charges against me?  
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?  
Let him confront me!

9 It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.  
Who will condemn me?  
They will all wear out like a garment;  
the moths will eat them up.

**Reflection**

This passage demonstrates the potential suffering that can come with faith and asserts that we must grin and bear it because faith is eternal, while the sources of our suffering are not, and the faithful will be rewarded in the end. Walking the path of the faithful has always been difficult, and modern society offers no shortage of challenges or sources of suffering. These circumstances will change. It is important to have faith in the Lord, as He will see us through our most difficult times.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord,

Please grant me grace as I go through the challenges of life. Help me to navigate through these challenges and emerge from them as a better person in your eyes.

Amen.

**Psalm 116**

1 I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;  
he heard my cry for mercy.

2 Because he turned his ear to me,  
I will call on him as long as I live.

...

12 What shall I return to the Lord  
for all his goodness to me?

13 I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord.

14 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all his people.

15 Precious in the sight of the Lord  
is the death of his faithful servants.

16 Truly I am your servant, Lord;  
I serve you just as my mother did;  
you have freed me from my chains.

17 I will sacrifice a thank offering to you  
and call on the name of the Lord.

18 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all his people,

19 in the courts of the house of the Lord—  
in your midst, Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord.

**Reflection**

In the Great Recession of 2009, my family was hit particularly hard. I was looking for work for almost three years before finding a position in Washington, DC. Those of us who have gone through a long stretch of adversity understand that every day is difficult. Every day you have to get out of bed and “get up for the game,” never knowing when or if the adversity will end. I can relate to David’s opening verses, “I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.” Being unemployed for such a long period of time was certainly a wilderness experience for me. As difficult as it was, it honed my sense of gratitude. We all have bad days, but I rarely complain about my life any more. Instead, I’ve embraced gratitude as the proper and appropriate attitude and response to God’s love.

We all have some measure of adversity in our lives. God, in his mercy, turns his ear to us. In this season of Lent, and all throughout the year, it is right and that we should give our thanks and praise.

**Prayer**

Lord, thank you. I don't say that enough. It's easy for me to focus on my disappointments and troubles. Help me to see past my disappointments and to be grateful to You for all the good things in my life. Amen.

—Mike Lutz

March 21

### **Ephesians 1: 15-23**

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

### **Reflection**

These verses in Ephesians inspired us to read the entire book of Ephesians. It is so rich with adoring love of God as expressed by Apostle Paul and the feelings about the church of Ephesus. It provides inspiring guidance to church goers and believers—to be wise, dynamic, and constantly remind ourselves that with privileges go family responsibility. We are further challenged to embrace truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation as more than words. Learn how to apply them, you'll need them throughout life. We are challenged to also be a church showered with goodness and marked with the Holy Spirit.

Are we headed in that direction? It is up to each one of us to do our part.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord,

We pray for our members, our pastors Roy and Shelby, our young people and all others who choose us as their church home. We pray that we provide a loving response to those in need and give us strength in spreading God's word. Amen.

—Betty and Jerry Lowrie

March 22

**Acts 3: 1-10**

3 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. 2 Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. 4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” 5 So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

6 Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. 9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

**Reflection**

The passage represents, to us, that faith in God has the power to change. A person may have emotional obstacles in their life to being the person they want to be. Or perhaps there are obstacles for a person to find joy or appreciation for someone in their daily life. This passage teaches us that these obstacles are surmountable and can be overcome. You can be the person you want to be or have the relationship you want to have. Belief in God has the power to change you, improve you, and give you strength when you are emotionally crippled.

**Prayer**

God, hear our yearning to live in faith, to be true followers of your way, to be the person we know we can be. Diminish those obstacles we see as so insurmountable so that we can realize our potential. Amen.

—Alison Dewey and Brian Hooker  
(Reflection from 2017 Lenten Season)

March 23

### **1 Corinthians 11: 23-26**

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; <sup>24</sup> and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." <sup>25</sup> In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

### **Reflection**

In the Presbyterian Church, we are required to practice two sacraments: Baptism and Communion. A sacrament is a "a visible sign of an inward grace, especially one of the solemn Christian rites considered to have been instituted by Jesus Christ to symbolize or confer grace." Because Jesus asked this of us, we follow His word.

In Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians, he is instructing the new Christian community how to practice the sacrament of Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. People were randomly feasting and drinking in church on the Lord's day, and having feasts without any reverence or thankfulness for Christ's words and sacrifice for us. Oh, those Corinthians! What were they thinking? They needed a reminder from Paul.

But what are we thinking when we partake in the sacrament of Holy Communion? When I take communion, am I trying to take that time to remember Christ's broken body and spilled blood, for my salvation? He asked me to, it's the least I can do. I try to do this, and teach my children to remember and be thankful. This is our story, retold again and again so we do not forget. No matter how many twists and turns my spiritual path takes me, this is the least I can do in communion with the congregation, in the presence of God. I would submit that the sacraments are both solemn, and in a way joyful as well.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, help me remember the events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Help me remember to always give thanks, the way You taught us to at that table so long ago. Amen.

—Jane Karakashian

March 24

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**

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

**Reflection**

I love the way this psalm is cradled by the same phrase at the beginning and at the end: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." It seems to me that pretty much says it all. God's love (sometimes translated as mercy) is steadfast; it is always there, whether we recognize it or not. He loves us and has given us Jesus to show us the way. He invites us to join in the "festal procession." What more can we ask? What more do we owe in return? These are the questions that live in my heart.

**Prayer**

Dear God,

Grant that we may keep our hearts open to you as we go about our daily lives. Keep us ever appreciative of your mercy. Guide us as we attempt to follow in Jesus' footsteps by sharing your love with all. Amen.

—Vicky Wood

March 25

### **Mark 1: 1-11**

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the desert. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

### **Reflection**

Watching the Grammys tonight, I think about the hidden subtext of this message. In this day and time, John the Baptist was a celebrity. Everyone knew him and wanted to be baptized by him. However, he did not let this popularity go to his head. He wasn't taking selfies or becoming rich off his fame. Instead he provides an example for us to follow. One of which, I feel, was God's true intention. He lives a simple life and reminds the people that he is nothing in comparison to the Lord who is to come. His simplicity and humility reminds us that no one is greater than the other. That we should strive to live simple lives focused on serving the Lord not ourselves.

"A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." - C.S. Lewis

### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for the path you laid before us. Help us to keep our eyes on the sky. Remind us daily to have kind hearts that appreciate the simple joys in life. Amen.

—Stacia Fleisher

March 26

**John 12:1-11**

1 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 pinta 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."

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, 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.

**Reflection**

God's presence

Perceived

Honored with action from the heart

Say Yes!

to the River

of His presence

Yes!



**Prayer**

Gracious loving God, thank you for seeing us as your beloved. We put our hands in your big hand, and adventure with you. Amen.

—Arthur, Iris, and Li-Jen,  
*hand in hand*

**Isaiah 49: 1-7**

49 Listen to me, you islands;  
hear this, you distant nations:  
Before I was born the Lord called me;  
from my mother's womb he has spoken my  
name.  
2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me into a polished arrow  
and concealed me in his quiver.  
3 He said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."  
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;  
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.  
Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand,  
and my reward is with my God."  
5 And now the Lord says—  
he who formed me in the womb to be his  
servant  
to bring Jacob back to him

and gather Israel to himself,  
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord  
and my God has been my strength—  
6 he says:  
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant  
to restore the tribes of Jacob  
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.  
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the  
earth."  
7 This is what the Lord says—  
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—  
to him who was despised and abhorred by the  
nation,  
to the servant of rulers:  
"Kings will see you and stand up,  
princes will see and bow down,  
because of the Lord, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

**Reflection**

In these verses Isaiah and God's followers find themselves in chains away from their lands once again defeated and enslaved. In response to this Isaiah is made strong with the realization that God has him in his hands and always has. No matter where they are and under what circumstances they find themselves they still belong to God who will save and protect them.

What a blessing it is to know that we belong to God and he will protect and strengthen us when we need it most. We are called to use that knowledge to encourage others. In addition, when we find ourselves in challenging and difficult circumstances we are reminded of the strength of Isaiah and many others in the Bible who overcame much worse with the help of a gracious and glorious God!

**Prayer**

Most Gracious and glorious Lord, we thank you for the fortification you bestow upon us during times of trial. We find peace in the knowledge that you will always support and strengthen us when we need it most. Today and every day we praise you for your abounding love, forgiveness, and strength. Amen.

—Amie and John Gribbins

March 28

### **Hebrews 12:1-3a**

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand at the throne of God. 3 Consider him, who endured such hostility against himself from sinners...

### **Reflection**

I am always touched and grateful when I think about the “great cloud of witnesses.” These were the relatives and friends I grew up with. They were simple people who didn’t talk or write that much about their faith. They just lived it! Because of those people I was baptized. I have Christ, who was the great perfecter of the faith I am to live. I have Christ who is my guide!

When I exercise I often listen to podcasts of the NPR program “On Being.” Recently I heard the poet Mary Carr being interviewed. Mary grew up in a very troubled home and considered herself an agnostic for the first thirty-some years of her life until she was baptized Catholic in midlife. What she likes about the Catholic Church was that there was a body on the cross. She said you’re not going to look at that body and say what does he know about suffering! Even though the Protestants have always said we don’t have that icon because we believe in a living Christ who came off the cross, I could see her point.

### **Prayer**

Dear God,

We give thanks for Christ’s sacrifice and that “great cloud of witnesses,” who have gone before us. Help us to trust what Christ said and lay aside the sins that weigh us down so we have that deep joy in our lives.

—June Colilla

March 29

### **John 13:1-17, 31-35**

And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, <sup>5</sup>took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. <sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."<sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."<sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

<sup>12</sup> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"<sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.<sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ...<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

### **Reflection**

Foot washing is not in my comfort zone, but after thinking about this passage I realize that it must mean more than just literally the act of foot washing. Could it be a symbol for something else that Jesus was trying to tell his disciples and us? The act itself is one of humility that Jesus performed even when his disciples didn't want it. He shows himself as a servant leader, lowering himself to do the task of servants. He says that the disciples should follow his example and do the same. Does this mean we should serve others and love others just as Christ did? Yes, of course. He shows us one way in which we can serve others. We all serve others in different ways, some are comfortable with foot washing and others are not. The way we serve should not matter as long as we love others as Jesus showed us through his example. He tells us this in the final two verses that we should love one another just as he has loved us.

### **Prayer**

Help us, Lord, to strengthen our relationship with you by being servants to your people. We need your help. We live in a sinful, confusing world, many times unsure of our role or our next steps. It is difficult to love and serve others. As we journey with you show us your way for each of us. Amen.

—Ellie Hagner

### John 19:14-30

<sup>14</sup> It was about noon on the Preparation Day for the Passover. Pilate said to the Jewish leaders, "Here's your king."

<sup>15</sup> The Jewish leaders cried out, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

Pilate responded, "What? Do you want me to crucify your king?"

"We have no king except the emperor," the chief priests answered.<sup>16</sup> Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The soldiers took Jesus prisoner. <sup>17</sup> Carrying his cross by himself, he went out to a place called Skull Place (in Aramaic, *Golgotha*). <sup>18</sup> That's where they crucified him—and two others with him, one on each side and Jesus in the middle. <sup>19</sup> Pilate had a public notice written and posted on the cross. It read "Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews." <sup>20</sup> Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city and it was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Jewish chief priests complained to Pilate, "Don't write, 'The king of the Jews' but 'This man said, 'I am the king of the Jews.''"

<sup>22</sup> Pilate answered, "What I've written, I've written."

<sup>23</sup> When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and his sandals, and divided them into four shares, one for each soldier. His shirt was seamless, woven as one piece from the top to the bottom. <sup>24</sup> They said to each other, "Let's not tear it. Let's cast lots to see who will get it." This was to fulfill the scripture,

*They divided my clothes among themselves,  
and they cast lots for my clothing.*

That's what the soldiers did.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

<sup>28</sup> After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup> A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. <sup>30</sup> When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed." Bowing his head, he gave up his life.

### Reflection

"So, what do you think is more important, Christmas or Easter?"

A group of us were sitting on a small dock on a lake during a church camping trip. The afternoon sun was warm and dragonflies were zigzagging over the water. The question came from a high school sophomore that Karl and I had taught a few years earlier when he was in middle school. What was it that he really wanted to know? Was he wrestling with his faith? He knew both the Christmas and Easter narratives very well. He was in church nearly every Sunday. He participated in Sunday School and youth group. For him and the rest of the youth at our church in Raleigh, confirmation classes met for two *years*. I needed to give this young man a careful answer so I waited a moment to let his question sink in before I replied. I said Christmas introduces us to the person of Jesus in a very real way. The savior of the world comes to us, finally, and unexpectedly, as an infant. But Easter is the event which shows Jesus was more than a really smart guy who spent time with a lot of outsiders and did a lot of good. Jesus is the savior of our world. Without Jesus' painful and humiliating death and resurrection, Jesus remains a really smart and good guy, but he's not our savior. In essence, Christmas serves as the promise God made to redeem the world. This truth came in the form of a person. But through Jesus' death

on the cross and resurrection, we see that that God's promise is kept. The student thought about this for a minute and then agreed, saying, I see it now. I think I get it. I was relieved.

We can't get to Easter without going through Good Friday. The account of Jesus' death in the gospel of John is particularly vivid: recounting Pilate's spineless indecision, the notice on the cross in three languages, and Jesus' mother who sees what is happening to her son. So much detail in these verses tell us what an unimaginable event the crucifixion must have been. Here we see nearly all of the darkest parts of humanity on display. There is Pilate, letting himself be pushed into doing something he does not want to do so the Emperor can think he is a loyal and effective governor. We have the religious leaders whipped into a frenzy of rage out of fear of this challenge to their authority. The soldiers, indifferent to it all, are gambling at the foot of the cross. Mary and the disciple watch in horror, wondering how it all came to end like this.

If we're honest with ourselves, we've probably been in all of these roles in our own lives, in ways great and small. God, in Jesus, has felt all these things too, but instead of succumbing, Jesus takes up the cross to redeem the world—Pilate, the religious leaders, the soldiers, Mary and the disciples, and even us. That first Good Friday it took three days before the meaning became clear on the first Easter morning. In our lives, the time between our personal Good Friday and Easter dawn may stretch far longer, but Easter always comes. The testimony of the Gospels and the examples of the saints who went before us lead the way. No matter what we've done, no matter how shaky or even absent our faith in the time between, God does not condemn us. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, "Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us." There is the Good News indeed.

### **Prayer**

God of every time and place, when we survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of Glory died, we see from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love which flow, mingled, down. Did ever such love and sorrow meet? Love so amazing, so divine, demands our soul, our lives, our all. Amen.

—Rachel and Karl Kaufmann

## **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 ...

### **Reflection**

Matthew 27 is the story of the crucifixion. In the original version of the Nicene Creed (325 AD) it was summarized briefly, "He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven." By 381 AD Christian leaders recognized the need to be more explicit, expanding the Creed to read, "he was crucified for us ... we look for the resurrection of the dead." A large part of Christian theology hangs on that message.

So, why didn't Matthew's story of the crucifixion move directly from death to resurrection? How do these additional verses about Joseph and the women after his death add to the story? And where were the Apostles?

I believe both Joseph and the women are there to help us relate to the crucifixion as the death of someone who was truly human and who will be missed by family and friends. If we think of Jesus as simply a divine spirit who spent a few hours in apparent pain with the fore-knowledge of ascension to heaven, the significance of God's sacrifice is undercut. The absence of the Apostles at the tomb is a reminder that faith can be driven out by fear.

Many of us will experience more than a few hours or a few days of pain before our own deaths. Many of us will have doubts about eternal life until we touch the face of God. We need to feel the pain of the crucifixion to recognize the sacrifice made on our behalf and we need to feel forgiven if we are to hope for eternal life.

### **Prayer**

Lord, we are only human. We fear death, both those of others as well as our own. We fear the separation from loved ones. We fear the potential for intolerable pain. We fear the loss of control. We fear the unknown. We find elliptical ways to even talk about death and our own demise. Yet in the Lenten season we are forced to look at it squarely and acknowledge a human body hanging on a cross and accept the guilt for having put him there. Don't allow us to fall into the example of the Apostles and lose faith in the very hours when we need it most. Help us to remember day by day your sacrifice, your forgiveness. Give us the strength to overcome our fears and keep moving forward to the promise of eternal life. Amen.

—Richard Ridge

April 1

### **Mark 16: 1-8**

16 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

### **Reflection**

In this passage, our family noticed several amazing things...

Jen was interested in the fact that three women went at dawn to anoint the body of Jesus with spices, having NO idea who would move the huge stone away from the entrance of the tomb. What faith!! When they arrived, the "very large stone" (too heavy for a person to move) was miraculously rolled away. Was it because of their faith?? Oh Lord, that I might have that kind of faith in all circumstances...

Max and Eli found it interesting that a man in a white robe (Was it a ghost? Maybe an angel??) was sitting in the tomb and said to the women, "Do not be afraid! Jesus has been raised!" This is the greatest miracle of all time and the key to our salvation. The man in the white robe then said, "Go to Galilee, where you will find Jesus, just as He told you." Jesus knew what would happen after His death and resurrection ~ He even told His friends. And, He knows what will happen in our lives, and wants what's best for us... even more than we do. That's why we are told, "Be NOT afraid."

Teddy was struck by the fact that "the women told no one, because they were afraid." Why do WE fear sharing the Living Christ? It's so easy to talk to people at church about Jesus, so why can't we share the Good News with those outside of our church more readily? It is GOOD news after all! Speaking the name of Jesus is so easy on Sundays, but why does it just seem to fall out of our vocabulary during the week. Isn't He important to us ALL the time??

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, help us to have strong faith in You, in all circumstances. Help us to "be not afraid," because You love us and want what's best for us. And, help us to not forget the name of Jesus during the week. In Jesus' name, Amen.

—Jen, Teddy, Max (grade 7), and Eli (grade 2) Ferguson