

2017 Lenten Devotions

Written by Students of
Union Presbyterian Seminary



Available online at

www.upsemdevotions.wordpress.com



Friends and Family of Union Presbyterian Seminary,

It is with great joy that I share with you Union Presbyterian Seminary's fourth seasonal devotion! This project began as a simple suggestion early in the fall of 2015 as a special addition to our "Congregational Corner". Only hours after we announced our first Advent devotion, hundreds of alumni and friends of Union had subscribed to the devotion via email and shared it with their own friends and family. Each day, we journeyed through Advent, side by side, reflecting with Union alumni in many different stages of ministry. We gathered again during Lent, reflecting weekly with Union trustees and current students as we wove our way to the Cross and joined together once more this past Advent to read reflections from Union Presbyterian Seminary faculty and staff.

During this Lenten season, I invite you to join our students in devotion.

Each scripture selection has been selected from the [PC\(USA\) Book of Daily Prayer](#). You are encouraged to follow along with both the devotion and this daily prayer practice as we once again embark on the journey to the tomb, where we will rejoice in Christ's rising with one another.

As we embark on this journey, please be sure to both subscribe to the online devotion via email AND download the PC(USA) Daily Prayer "App" in your mobile app store (or use your "little red book"!).

Instructions for Subscribing to "Seasonal Devotions":

- 1) Go to www.upsemdevotions.wordpress.com
- 2) Under "Follow Blog via Email", enter your preferred email address
- 3) Check your email each morning during Advent! Devotions will go "Live" at 8am each day and will automatically be sent to all subscribers.

Instructions for downloading the Daily Prayer app:

- 1) Open your app store on your mobile device and search for "PCUSA Daily Prayer"
- 2) Purchase the app! Note: This app cost \$2.99.
- 3) Open the app! It will automatically open to the correct day and time (morning, afternoon, evening)- each devotion will note the time of day during which the scripture is used.

We pray that this devotion will serve as a beautiful resource for you during your own Lenten journey, and that it will help each of you reconnect with your Union friends and family in a new way.

Grace, Peace, and Joy,

Rev. Jordan B. Davis (M. Div. '14)
Church Relations Officer

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2017

12 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 of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

*“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.”*

⁷ Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸ If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children.

⁹ Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

¹⁴ Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12: 1-14 (NRSV)



We have all attended school of some sort in our lives. We have all had to learn to study, to work hard for what we want, and to accomplish goals. Rarely, do we do this on our own. Rarely, do we do this without teachers, mentors, friends, family, or pastors. We usually work hard with a community. Rarely, do we accomplish tasks, goals, on our first try without hardship. We fall, we slip, and

we mess up. Sometimes, we end up with a bloody nose and bruised knees. The mess-ups aren't always small, they're not always big, but they exist. They exist to show us what we are doing wrong, how we can do things better, and that we can try again.

In these moments of setting goals and working hard for them, we learn. We learn to endure the pain, the struggle, the self-doubt, and the failures. We, alongside, our people, our communities, pick ourselves back up and we try again until we succeed.

Happy Ash Wednesday, not many people say that. Ash Wednesday is the start of our season of Lent. It is the exact opposite of Advent where we are waiting with joyful anticipation for the Christ child to be born. In Lent, we are waiting with solemn anticipation for that same Christ child to die. We are waiting in this time, recognizing our failures and our sins. We are in this season where we repent, and we try harder to be better. This season is about healing and reconciliation.

We heal, we do better, with the help of our community. Hebrews 12 says it well “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”. We are not alone in any of this. We are surrounded.

God of Grace and Mercy,

*We come today with ourselves laid bare before you
We come with our sins, our failures, our self doubt
We come with hope in another chance
We come surrounded by our communities, our cloud of witnesses
We come waiting
We come waiting for healing, for reconciliation.*

Lord, stand by us, teach us, surround us.

Amen.

Rebecca Cummings
Final Year, M. Div.

Following graduation, Becca hopes to serve in parish ministry.



Monday, March 6

*My soul languishes for your salvation;
I hope in your word.
My eyes fail with watching for your promise;
I ask, "When will you comfort me?"
For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke;
yet I have not forgotten your statutes.*

Psalm 119: 81-83 (NRSV)



Psalm 119 holds rank as the longest psalm in the Bible. Throughout the psalm, the Psalmist spells out in various ways the refreshing and delightful qualities of submitting to God's instruction. In this extended prayer, the Psalmist makes certain that his or her obedience to God's instruction is made plain. As the longest psalm, it is difficult for our increasingly distracted minds to absorb the repeated variations on this theme. As a result, many contemporary Bible reading plans split the psalm into two, three, sometimes four different sections spread out across the week. In my opinion, this renders the psalm less affective.

In trying times, our more desperate prayers hover between anxiety and hope. Striving to make sense of our place in the cosmos, words and phrases get repeated over and over. Imagine, if you will, these words being prayed by an inmate on death row, or a young mother facing eviction with no family and no place to turn, or the many Syrian refugees who have witnessed the unraveling of their lives into dismal chaos. This is far from an exercise in exploiting the tragedies of others to make our daily Bible reading more compelling since the Psalmist speaks of his own desperation.

The Psalmist writes that his soul languishes waiting for God's salvation. The Hebrew word for "soul" should be understood as referring to the very core of a person's existence, the very fiber of one's being, not some spiritual substance, as is commonly understood. Understood this way, the Psalmist speaks of how worn out he is within the very core of his being. His eyes have strained and grown dim with watching for God's promise. The very fiber of his being has shriveled like a wine skin in the smoke. And yet, the Psalmist has not forgotten the goodness of God's character as revealed through God's promises.

When we begin to question God's presence or activity in our lives, our faith calls us to attend to the things God has entrusted us to do whether or not our prayers are answered in the way we desire. Sometimes when we find ourselves too burdened by the extent of our longings, too prayed out, or too exhausted with coming before God, we can look to others to bear our burdens prayerfully until we regain our own strength of spirit. A believing community shoulders hope when circumstances seem hopeless. A believing community speaks boldly into despair and longing and suggests that things do not have to remain as they are in the presence of a holy, imaginative God. For this reason, Psalm 119 is not an individual's prayer, but a communal prayer.

*Lord God, we are hungry for your counsel. Don't ever deprive us of truth. Help us to see you acting in those who surround us.
Guide us down the road of your commandments. Amen.*

Christopher Speaks
First Level, M. Div.

Before seminary, Christopher worked as a Financial Analyst for Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Continuing Medical Education. His call to ordained ministry has been in the making for many years. After graduation, he plans to pursue a Th.M. (most likely in Old Testament theology) before going where God needs him.

Wednesday, March 8

¹² Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that none of you have an evil, unfaithful heart that abandons the living God. ¹³ Instead, encourage each other every day, as long as it's called "today," so that none of you become insensitive to God because of sin's deception. ¹⁴ We are partners with Christ, but only if we hold on to the confidence we had in the beginning until the end.

¹⁵ When it says,

Today, if you hear his voice, don't have stubborn hearts
as they did in the rebellion.

¹⁶ Who was it who rebelled when they heard his voice? Wasn't it all of those who were brought out of Egypt by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was God angry for forty years? Wasn't it with the ones who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸ And against whom did he swear that they would never enter his rest, if not against the ones who were disobedient? ¹⁹ We see that they couldn't enter because of their lack of faith.

Hebrews 3: 12-19 (CEB)



I often think of Lent as a time of slumber and turning inward. The season starts to shift, but winter is still upon us with its grey skies and dark, chilly mornings...the kind of mornings that are perfectly suited to the contemplative prayer practice that I've journeyed with throughout the Lenten season. I'm not sure about you, but fasting during Lent has never satisfied my spiritual hunger. Instead, most Lenten seasons, I try to explore a different spiritual practice- centering prayer, Lectio Divina, journaling, yoga. Through these practices, I try to engage the Divine and deepen my relationship with Christ. Those chilly, grey winter mornings are often the perfect time for me to engage in these practices, still my wandering mind, turn my heart to God in prayer, and look ahead to awakening on Easter morning.

However, today's text does not provide for an opportunity to still one's mind, or to wake up slowly in contemplative prayer... it's all about a change of pace with action and urgency. For the writer of Hebrews, today is the day.

Today is the day to encourage one's sisters and brothers in Christ. Perhaps this means that you'll care for a friend or family member in need, or be present to someone who may be lonely? Or maybe today, you will pray for your church family, the Church at large and the world.

Today is the day to turn away from sin and towards Christ. Will you confess your faults and failings and seek Christ's healing and restorative forgiveness?

Today is the day, to listen for Christ's call amidst all the chaos. Can you look for Christ's presence in the news headlines or in the calm of the storm? Can you respond to Christ's call of discipleship?

Indeed, today is not a day for slumber, but a day for action! The writer brings in words from the 95th Psalm, and together these texts speak of an urgency to embody one's faith and deepen one's relationship with God. And isn't this what our Lenten journeys are all about? Rather than a time of slumber, we've actively journeyed towards the living God through these past few weeks. We've sought to draw nearer to God, and in so doing, to have our perspectives toward the world and our actions within it shaped by our faith. Indeed, we have become partners with Christ to live lives of love in a world that so desperately needs to be awakened from its slumber of brokenness. So, friends, wake up! What are going to do today?

Creator and creating God, turn our hearts toward you. Enable us to encourage and care for one another, and remind us that we do not journey alone. Today is the day that you have created and call us to live into. Guide us to partner with you and live lives of love in a fractured and broken world. To you, Three in One, we pray. Amen.

Rosy Robson
Middle Level, M. Div./ M.A.C.E.

Rosy is passionate about creating spaces where people can come together and build relationships, whether that's worshipping together in a pew or over a basket of tacos at a local eatery. Rosy feels called to parish ministry and is looking forward to discerning how bonds between church and community can be forged and strengthened.

Monday, March 13

¹¹The LORD asked me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

I said, “A branch of an almond tree.”

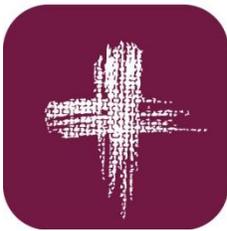
¹²The LORD then said, “You are right, for I’m watching over my word until it is fulfilled.” ¹³The LORD asked me again, “What do you see?”

I said, “A pot boiling over from the north.”

¹⁴The LORD said to me, “Trouble will erupt from the north against the people of this land.”

¹⁵I’m calling for all the tribes of great nations from the north, says the LORD, and they will set up their rulers by the entrances of Jerusalem, on its walls, and in every city of Judah. ¹⁶I will declare my judgment against them for doing evil: for abandoning me, worshipping other gods, and trusting in the works of their hands. ¹⁷But you must prepare for battle and be ready to utter every word I command you. Don’t be frightened before them, or I will frighten you before them. ¹⁸Today I have made you an armed city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the entire land—the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and all its people. ¹⁹They will attack you, but they won’t defeat you, because I am with you and will rescue you, declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 1: 11-19 (CEB)



Every day like Jeremiah, we see not only the move of God but how much humanity has fallen.

Our greatest challenge in seeing these sights is our response when God speaks. For instead of giving God an honest response, we try to come up with an answer that we feel would please God and at the same time confirm our narrow view of what God can and will do.

Too many times we look through our rose-colored lens of theology, tradition and culture and fail to see the hand of God in the simple things of life. If when we looked at a branch, we called it for what it is, instead of trying to make it something else. God could say to us, we are correct. And like Jeremiah we would be assured by God that he is watching over us.

The same holds true for the second question. For we cannot ignore the pots we encounter every day or say these pots don’t even exist. For everywhere we turn, not only in the north, but also the east, the south and the west, pots are boiling over.

There are pots that should concern us everywhere we turn. The pots of poverty and lack of opportunity in our inner cities, the pot of greed and excess in our financial and political centers of power, the pot of terrorism on just about every continent, the pots of distrust between many nations, the pots of racism that may sit outside our doors or maybe inside our very doors.

These pots exist and like Jeremiah as men and women of God we must not only admit they exist. We must do our part in removing the greed, the hate and the fear, provide by others and sometimes ourselves, that is causing these pots to boil out of control.

Just as Jeremiah was given an opportunity, we are being given that same opportunity. For many this is not the first time we have heard the Good News that we serve a God who continues to give a chance to accept his call and become like a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze wall.

Those attributes are not attributes of power, they are attributes of strength. Strength to fight the many battles we face in this thing call life and the battle between even sin and death.

As we prepare for Calvary's Cross and the Empty Tomb, let us take on those attributes knowing that while being a Christian does not remove pain and suffering from our lives, we can live with the assurance that sin and death cannot prevail because the promise of deliverance has already been paid for.

So, if we come under attack because we have accepted the call, a call that is not just verbal, but a commitment to stand and a commitment to act. We must act against those pots and not only say what they said for is wrong but to do everything in our power to make sure they have no power. We can be assured that even though our efforts may not succeed, we will not be defeated because God is not only with us. He will rescue us in our time of danger.

Almighty God, we live in a world filled with choices and we admit that too many times we do not make the right choice, even though we have answered your call. We pray prayers that we think you want to hear. Prayers that excuse our actions, instead of praying genuine prayers because you already know our situation.

Give us 20/20 spiritual sight. Un-stop our spiritual ears so that we might not only hear you but also the ones we are called to serve.

Please speak and give us not only the encouragement we need but a better understanding of the plans you have for us to serve others.

Let us gain strength from this journey to Calvary.

This prayer we pray in the name of Jesus. AMEN

Leonard Edloe
Th.M., Theology and Ethics

Leonard is a Th.M. student studying Theology and Ethics under Dr. Cannon. Because of her leave of absence, I will be studying until December of this year. After completion of his studies, Leonard plans to continue serving as Pastor of New Hope Fellowship in Hartfield, Virginia. He also plans to continue teaching Christian Ethics at the John Leland Theological Center.

Wednesday, March 15

¹⁹ Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father^a does, the Son does likewise. ²⁰ The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. ²¹ Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. ²² The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

²⁵ “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; ²⁷ and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

John 5:19-29 (NRSV)



Have you ever caught yourself doing something that you don't normally do after seeing other others doing it? Or do catch yourself repeating phrases your friends frequently say? I am sure you know what it's like to see someone else yawn and fight back your own urge to stretch your jaw.

While working at a Presbyterian camp I learned the incredible power of imitation. I watched as campers imitated their counselors' attitudes about whatever activity they were performing. If the counselor was excited to go swimming, the campers were too. If the campers saw their counselors upset about an activity, the campers would mirror their counselors' lack of enthusiasm.

We are creatures of imitation. We do what we see others do around us. Even in our creativity we mimic what we have seen before. Even when we try to be totally original we do it because we saw something else original and want that same thing that we saw, originality.

John 5 tells an amazing story of healing. On a day when no one was supposed to do anything, Jesus encounters a man laying down ill. Jesus tells him to rise up, take his mat, and go. When the man miraculously is able to walk again after 38 years of illness, others complain that Jesus worked when he wasn't supposed to. Jesus' response is brilliant; he says, “My father is working at this moment, I too am working.” Then he goes on to speak the words in our text for this devotion.

Jesus has a beautiful way of reframing the hostility toward what he is doing. Instead of taking all the credit for the healing and boasting of his power, Jesus points the attention back to the creator God. You would think that after witnessing a miracle, it makes more sense to praise God than to attack the healer, but Jesus has to remind us of that here.

Jesus explains, “The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever that one does, the Son does likewise.” Clearly this isn't Jesus catching a contagious yawn, but it does remind me of how campers look to their counselors to follow their example.

Jesus doesn't simply follow the example out of a subconscious social contagion; Jesus does it with the purpose of life. Just as Jesus told the man to rise up and go, he also says “the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.” Jesus follows the example of the Father in giving life. Raising us up from our sicknesses and out of the dead areas of our life.

When we see God at work in the world giving life to others, it's contagious. How awesome would it be to have a holy infection, where we see God at work in the world and we can't help but jump into the action, partnering with God in the work that leads to real lasting life here and now.

So where do you see God working in the world around you? Where do you see God breaking into the dead areas of this world and raising it up to new life? And most importantly, are you going to hear the call, get infected, and jump in, finding new life for yourself?

*Creator God,
You formed us with ability for imitation.
Show us what you are doing;
Infect us with actions that follow your example.
Speak to us out of your love;
Renew us by the sound of your voice.
Raise us up out of our apathy and fear;
Resurrect us real and lasting life,
So that we join you in work that leads to stirring up pools of life.
And in everything that we do, all glory and honor are yours,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.*

Nate Taylor
Final Level, M. Div.

After graduating this June, Nate will move to join his wife at Holmes Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center in Holmes, NY where she serves as the Summer Camp and Youth Programs Director. Nate hopes to find an opportunity for non-ordained ministry in Christian education in the Hudson River Valley, New York City, or Long Island Presbyteries, focusing on sharing this contagious and wonderful faith with others through creative outlets.

Monday, March 20

¹⁴ About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. ¹⁵ The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" ¹⁶ Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. ¹⁷ Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. ¹⁸ Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.

¹⁹ "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?" ²⁰ The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" ²¹ Jesus answered them, "I performed one work, and all of you are astonished. ²² Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), and you circumcise a man on the sabbath. ²³ If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath? ²⁴ Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

²⁵ Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? ²⁶ And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? ²⁷ Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." ²⁸ Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. ²⁹ I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." ³⁰ Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. ³¹ Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

³² The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him. ³³ Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. ³⁴ You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." ³⁵ The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? ³⁶ What does he mean by saying, 'You will search for me and you will not find me' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"

John 7:14-36 (NRSV)



In today's passage, Jesus begins preaching in the Temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot. The beginning of chapter 7 records a dispute between Jesus and his followers about attending the festival, and John 7:10 indicates that Jesus attended "not publicly, but as it were in secret." All the more reason then that those who hear him are "astonished" with his preaching ability, asking "How does this man have such learning?" In the midst of his teaching, Jesus speaks in a way that apparently reveals his identity to the crowds, inspiring further shock, as some listening to Jesus are apparently aware of a plot in the works to end his life. His continuing preaching inspires expressions of both faith and doubt: "many in the crowd believed in him," but others reject any idea that he might be the Messiah.

As we move through Lent in 2017, over two thousand years later, Jesus' words continue to speak powerfully to us. Jesus reveals the core reality of our relationship to him as understood by the author of the Gospel of John when he says, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own."

Theologian Brian Gerrish reminds us that the core assertion of Christianity is a simple one: that we encounter God in the person of Jesus Christ. In the end, while we may disagree about the nature of the incarnation or hold varying theories of the atonement, we are held together by a common relationship with a man of love who did not come on his own but was "sent" to proclaim truth to a world so often beset by darkness.

The Word that “was God” (John 1:1) is still present among us and our very existence is defined by relationship with that Word. We are nourished in this relationship as we hear the Gospel preached. We gather with the family of all those also in this relationship as we come again and again to share a simple sacramental meal of bread and cup around the altar or table.

But as with the crowd in Jerusalem, the choice of how to respond is ours. Grace is offered. Love’s feast is ready. The table has been set. But only we can determine how we will react. Will we be like the “many in the crowd” who responded in faith? If so, Jesus promises us that we will be witnesses to the glory of God.

The choice is simple, but not easy, because as Jesus points out, it demands that we truly “resolve to do the will of God.” This means that we embrace different values – not the values of a world that all too often elevates materialism, greed, and self-absorption, but the values of a different world, the kingdom of God that is possible but remains ever just over the horizon. Here on earth, the kingdom will always be coming, never fully here, because there is a struggle between light and darkness, as the author of John understood so clearly. Love and hate battle with each other. Inclusivity and intolerance compete not only in our society but deep within our own hearts. Justice and injustice struggle in the public sphere, in our business relations, and in our daily lives. This Lent, how will we respond?

God of love,

you sent your only son Jesus Christ into the world to bring a message of justice, peace, and truth. Help us understand the choice that lies before us this Lent, to respond to your grace and love or to remain mired in the darkness, to heed the sound of your voice, or to remain buried in the silence of sin. As individuals and as a society.

grant us the gift of repentance and the courage to believe that your kingdom is still coming into this world, so that we may love and serve you wherever our lives may lead us.

We ask all this in your holy name,

Amen

Matthew White
Middle Level, M.Div.

Matthew's home parish is St. David's Episcopal Church in Chesterfield. After graduating, Matthew hopes to pursue a CPE residency and a full-time career in hospital or hospice chaplaincy.

Wednesday, March 22

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.² We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory.³ But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance,⁴ endurance produces character, and character produces hope.⁵ This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people.⁷ It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person.⁸ But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.⁹ So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him.¹⁰ If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life?¹¹ And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

Romans 5: 1-11 (CEB)



When I read this scripture for today, my first thoughts were about boasting and how strange that word is. I tried to remember the last time I used it, but I came up with nothing. I would likely cringe if someone chose to use that word to describe me fearing people thought I was self-centered or bragging too much. I often associate boasting with someone bragging about themselves in an annoying way. However, Paul seems to have a different connotation of what it mean to boast. Commentators even suggest that when Paul says “boasting in God,” it means the same as saying trusting in God. What if we read this passage using the word trust instead of boast?

We talk about trusting in God so much that I wonder if it has lost its meaning. It's not easy to trust in God, especially if you're a planner. We want to know exactly what is going to happen, when it is going to happen, and why it is happening. Often when we trust in God, we give up being able to know exactly what will happen, but when we trust in God, we can take comfort in knowing that God is guiding us exactly as God wishes giving us endurance, character and hope.

Some may see this time of Lent as a time of suffering. The world around us seems to be in a state of constant suffering. The nation is divided over many issues that not only matter to us but that will have implications on a global scale likely causing suffering in the lives of many. What are we to do in a world marked with suffering along every turn? Paul tells us to boast or trust in God throughout our suffering, for this suffering produces endurance, while endurance builds character, and character brings hope. Trusting in God brings a sense of hope. In the wilderness of Lent, I think we could all use some more hope. When the world seems so hopeless, we must remember to trust God while we are suffering. We remember that Christ died for the ungodly, and God continues to love us as we are still sinners. While we are in the wilderness wondering which way to go and feeling like we are worthless, we must remember that God still loves us despite our constant shortcomings and failures. We continually forget to boast in the goodness God gives us, yet we are quick to point out when we think God has failed us. If we could trust in God and live like God calls us to, I wonder that the world would look like?

*Loving and gracious God, You are truly amazing.
Continue to help us boast and trust in you in when we are suffering and while we are enduring. Remind us again of your proven
love for us so that we may do our best to glorify you. Amen*

Annie Franklin
Middle Level, M.Div./M.A.C.E.

Annie Franklin is originally from Morganton, NC and currently serves as a youth intern at First Presbyterian Church in Richmond. She is excited about exploring areas of youth ministry especially in a camp or conference setting.

Monday, March 27

Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? 2 Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress.

4 In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. 5 While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. 6 But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

7 What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived 10 and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Romans 7: 1-12 (NRSV)



Do you remember the first time you were allowed to do something on your own without your parents? How about when you finally moved out of your parent's house and were considered an adult for the first time? If you were like me, you enjoyed this newfound freedom and experimented with bending the rules until your parents realized something had changed.

As we grow older, the relationship we have with our parents evolves into something different than what we experienced in our childhood. The rules our parents expected us to follow no longer apply. Staying up all night, cold pizza for breakfast, and dirty laundry stacked to the rafters are no longer parental issues that require consequences. We are now in charge of our own destiny, taking responsibility for each misstep we make along the way.

The chance for a new relationship with our parents is an opportunity to confide in them, and seek their wisdom. The rules that were once followed provide a framework for our emerging independence and relationship with our parents. There is a mutual trust between each other that strengthens over time.

This new, exciting relationship that develops is similar to our relationship with God. In the scripture reading for today, Paul uses a marriage metaphor to describe our relationship with God. A married woman is bound to the law of her husband until his death. Similarly, we are bound to the law and Christ until his death. We, like the widow, are free from obligation to the law because of Christ's death and resurrection.

This law that Paul is referring to is the Torah, the law of the Israelites. But why is he referring to the Torah? Paul is addressing a Christian community composed mostly of converted Jews. Because they no longer live under the letter of the Mosaic Law, they may be tempted to reject it outright, considering the law to be a sin. But it isn't! They cannot cut off the branch on which they are sitting, or rather the trunk of the tree of which they are branches [11:17–24]. Paul's main point is that human nature, not the law, is the cause of sin. The law provides a framework to help us form a relationship with God.

Paul reminds us through this illustration of marriage that the Spirit gives us new life in Christ. Because Christ died for our sins, God has renewed the covenant in Christ and the Torah is no longer required to create and sustain Israel as God's people. We are a new people, whose heart will be transformed through the Spirit and bear fruit. Much like the relationship we cultivate with our parents throughout our adulthood, we are invited into new relationship with God through Christ. This is a beautiful gift that we must cherish. Thanks be to God.

God of patience and compassion, cause our lives to bear good fruit so that others may taste and see your goodness and grace through Christ our Lord. Help us to strengthen our relationship with our neighbors and with you during this season of Lent, so that we may be instruments of your peace in a troubled world. Amen.

Heather Woodworth Brannon
First Level, M.Div.

Before following her call to seminary, Heather spent several years teaching music in Raleigh, North Carolina. She currently serves in STEP Richmond and Kairos Torch Prison Ministry. Heather is excited to serve in a congregational setting after seminary.

Wednesday, March 29

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²'Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?' says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Jeremiah 18:1-11 (NRSV)



Jeremiah was called to convey so many upsetting, unsettling messages God's people. The world in turmoil, and eventually God's people are overthrown and many are exiled from their land. In the midst of such turmoil, God offered some measure of hope. This same message speaks to God's peoples in other times, even our own. There are consequences for wrong, even evil actions but there is a chance for redemption. This message of warning and reconciliation spoke to God's people in one time of fear, violence, and persecution. What might this message have to say to us today, in our world which for many is filled with fear, violence, and persecution? For me, the message of hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation speaks out of the text.

And what a message of hope it is during this time of Lent! Just like this clay in the potter's hand, we get a re-do, a new chance, the opportunity to start all over in our efforts! The clay remains the clay, with all the same qualities, but is re-shaped into something new.

Is this not what we are hoping for in Lent? We have entered Lent in a reflective head-space; a place where we long for justice and recognize our flaws, sins, and failures. Lent is a time where we work to reconnect with God and make important choices in how our relationship with God will affect our lives.

Here, in the words of God spoken through Jeremiah, we have all for which we have hoped. We are offered forgiveness; but more than that, we are offered the chance to be re-shaped into useful, purposeful parts of God's work in the world. Right now, our world needs such a message of hope, forgiveness, usefulness, and purpose. May we have the courage to hear it and be changed by it.

Forgiving and constantly-loving God,

We thank you for your word to your people in all times of the chance for forgiveness and reconciliation with you. Help us to use this re-do, this new chance, to share your transformative work with the world. In your name we pray, Amen.

Elizabeth Nix
Final Level M. Div

Elizabeth's passion is working with children and education in the church. She hopes to find a position where she is able to work with the Christian education in the church with children.



Monday, April 3

¹The LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. This was after King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem King Jeconiah son of Jeboiakim of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the artisans, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon. ² One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³ And the LORD said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I said, “Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁵ Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶ I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. ⁷ I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

⁸ But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt. ⁹ I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth—a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. ¹⁰ And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they are utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their ancestors.

Jeremiah 24:1-10 (NRSV)



It's a good feeling to be on top. You just got promoted at work; you got a raise. The election came out the way you wanted it to. Your sports team won. All the time you put in doing what you thought was right paid off and you ended up on top of your game. But what about the people on the other side? What about all the work they put in for the same job, the same raise, or for their candidate? Does losing make them less?

At some point, we all come to a place in our lives where we wonder “what am I doing and how did I get here?” It doesn't always need to be a life-changing event that causes these questions, although, sometimes the smallest things can have the longest, most life altering impact. We might not be able to identify how we started asking ourselves these questions, but when we get stuck there, it can feel like forever until we get out. It can happen to us at anytime, or any place in our journey, and as Christians, we are not immune from these thoughts. Anything can be a triggering event for this kind of thought: a job loss, a fight with your partner, a speeding ticket, or a bad grade. It all adds up and sometimes, just sometimes, we feel like Alexander and his “horrible, no good, very bad day”.

That's how I think the remnant feels. Jeremiah has just called them “Bad Figs, So bad they cannot be eaten.” What's a fig to do, if not be eaten? What is its purpose? You can see all the figs around you, and they are having a great day. They are good figs, sweet and delicious, able to be eaten and provide happiness to the people around them. But the bad figs? They get the sword. They drag everyone down. Maybe Alexander was right. This is a horrible, no good, very bad day.

It's pretty easy to get caught up in that kind of thinking; the kind of thinking that says that you deserve all the bad things that you see happening. But on the other side, when you are winning, the opposite is easy to get caught up in as well; the kind of thinking that says that your opponent is not good and deserves all the bad things they get. They are bad figs after all.

Its important to remember that we all have bad days. We are not always on the winning side. Quite often, we are the remnant. It took an act of God to stop us from all getting the sword.

*God of Grace
To whom no beginning is unknown, and no word left unsaid.
Open our ears
that we might hear your words in each other
Open our eyes
that we might see your spirit in each other
Open our mouths
that we might speak your love to each other
Open our hearts
That we may be vessels of your grace, and messengers of your peace;
through our lord, Jesus the Christ*

Matthew Messenger
Final Year - Masters of Divinity

Following graduation, Matthew hopes to work with teenagers, college students, and families.

Wednesday, April 5

*Praise the LORD!
Because it is good to sing praise to our God!
Because it is a pleasure to make beautiful praise!*
²*The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem,
gathering up Israel's exiles.*
³*God heals the brokenhearted
and bandages their wounds.*
⁴*God counts the stars by number,
giving each one a name.*
⁵*Our Lord is great and so strong!
God's knowledge can't be grasped!*
⁶*The LORD helps the poor,
but throws the wicked down on the dirt!*

⁷*Sing to the LORD with thanks;
sing praises to our God with a lyre!*
⁸*God covers the skies with clouds;
God makes rain for the earth;
God makes the mountains sprout green grass.*
⁹*God gives food to the animals—
even to the baby ravens when they cry out.*
¹⁰*God doesn't prize the strength of a horse;
God doesn't treasure the legs of a runner.*
¹¹*No. The LORD treasures the people
who honor him,
the people who wait for his faithful love.*

Psalm 147:1-11 (CEB)



When UPSem students begin to exegete a text, our training tells us to search for patterns and repetition. Repeated words or phrases give emphasis and directs us to what is important. Psalm 147 certainly offers much by way of repetition: praise, gives, makes, Jerusalem, etc. Each of these words could spark an entire sermon. But the singularity of one word *also* suggests importance. Among the unique words in Psalm 147, I was drawn to one verb: hope.

Hope, the verb, is an action, ongoing. It's easy read through hope, the noun, and hope, the verb, without appreciating a distinction. The difference is nuanced, but crucial. Psalm 147 tells us to hope (v.) in God's love continuously, tirelessly, and through all. You can "have" the kind of hope (n.) in God that you can pack away neatly in a dresser drawer, only to remove it when you choose, but that's not what we are called to do. We aren't called to just hold on to it, we are called to use it.

Hope is a powerful tool. Hope in the face of incredible odds can be a game changer. Hope is what inspires people to buy a Mega Millions lottery ticket. Hope is what compels Aaron Rodgers to throw Hail Mary passes in the final seconds of football games. Hope is what powered the Rogue One team to steal the Death Star plans, resulting in its eventual destruction.

Hope can accomplish many things, but hope in the steadfast love of the Lord does so much more. It unlocks the delight of the God who created everything — from the expanse of the universe to the smallest grain of sand. Who would have thought that we could delight a God like that with just a little hope?

The funny thing about hope in Psalm 147 is that we really should do more than hope. We should trust. We are told that the Lord "heals the brokenhearted," "lifts up the humble," and feeds the earth; creation itself is a testament to the Lord. We have eyes to see God's work, we have seen what God can do, yet we often question what God *will* do. God does a lot of things that we don't understand, which causes us to doubt, question, and fear. But that's okay, because hope exists within all three. We don't have to trust; all God requires of us is hope. Hoping for the best. Hoping God will show up and show love.

Hope is important during Lent because, despite the fact that we know how the story starts, we still don't know how it ends. The story still hasn't ended. We must continue to hope through the Lenten season and after. Temptation is not the end. Death is not the end. Resurrection is not the end. But they are each stepping stones along the way, containing just enough hope to carry us, comfort us, challenge us, and ultimately to remind us to place our faith in God — the original author of all of our stories.

Lord, help us to see your continuous work — each new blade of grass on the ground and every star numbered in the sky. Help us to transition from hope, the noun, to hope, the verb, and help us to hope continuously in you. Amen.

Alexa Allmann
Final Level M.A.C.E

Following seminary, Alexa hopes to serve God by working with children either through a C.E. position in a church or as a teacher in a Christian school. She is inspired and ignited by the light and creativity of children and I hope to continue to encourage them to ask questions about the world, God, and “the way things are.”

Monday, April 10

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— ⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3: 1-14 (NRSV)



Lent can be a time to reconsider our lives, a time to set aside those things that distract us and focus on our relationship with God, a time to let the Holy Spirit move within us so we might hear God’s call on our lives this day. As we enter Holy Week and Lent comes to an end, what have you set aside in an effort to renew your connection with God and Christ’s church?

Paul writes to the Philippians in part to encourage them to assess their lives. He reminds them that whatever “gains” they have –wealth, honor, and status, perhaps – are nothing compared to the value of Jesus Christ. These earthly things might give us confidence in the flesh, Paul notes, but don’t help us know Christ. In fact, Paul might even argue that those things we value in our societies *prevent* us from knowing Christ, from identifying so closely with Jesus that we might understand our future is in Christ rather than our own achievements.

This year, instead of giving something up for Lent, I have made an intentional decision to say “yes,” and another intentional decision to say “no.” I’ve decided to focus on my relationship with God by saying yes to a new spiritual practice: a daily devotion. I’m using *Seeking God’s Face*, an iteration of the daily office that helps me pray the scriptures. Each day, the book provides an opening prayer, psalm, scripture, prayer guides, and various opportunities for quiet and meditation. While I won’t pretend I’ve done it every single day of Lent, I have done it most days – or, rather, nights – and find myself grateful for the moments stolen away in God’s presence.

This is why I've also intentionally said "no" this Lent. When I realized what a struggle it was to find the time to be with God and to take care of myself, I knew I couldn't add anything else to my already-full plate. While I've tried my best to live into every commitment I've already made, this Lenten season, I haven't added any more. While this doesn't mean I suddenly have copious amounts of free time, it *does* mean I've given myself permission to prioritize my relationship with God – and my own self-care.

So, this year, I've used Lent to practice intentionality. But no practice is mastered in 40 days. God willing, these commitments I've made will last far beyond Easter Sunday. I still plan on practicing the daily office, and I should keep practicing saying "no" when my inclination is to say "yes" to every new opportunity that comes my way. Lent is the perfect time to practice setting aside those things that distract us from God. Now, as Paul says, we must "strain forward to what lies ahead," pressing on "toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

What have you set aside during Lent? What might you take with you as you press on towards what's ahead, towards knowing Christ?

Gracious God,

It is so easy to forget your all-encompassing call on our lives. We get caught up working, learning, volunteering, living. People need us, and we can't let them down. But in the meantime, we've let you down. Help us focus on our relationship with you so that we might better know you. Be with us now and beyond Lent as we continually prioritize you in our lives, reminding us that earthly priorities are not necessarily priorities of your kingdom.

It is in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Linda Kurtz
Middle Level, M. Div./M.A.C.E.

Linda Kurtz is from Burke, VA, and is the communications specialist for NEXT Church. She currently serves as moderator for the 2016-2017 Richmond Student Government Assembly. Upon graduating in 2019, Linda is looking to serve in an ordained parish ministry context with a focus on young adults/college ministry.

Wednesday, April 12

²⁷ “Now I am deeply troubled. What should I say? ‘Father, save me from this time’? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

²⁹ The crowd standing there heard and said, “It’s thunder.” Others said, “An angel spoke to him.”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “This voice wasn’t for my benefit but for yours. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment of this world. Now this world’s ruler will be thrown out. ³² When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.” (³³ He said this to show how he was going to die.)

³⁴ The crowd responded, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Human One must be lifted up? Who is this Human One?”

³⁵ Jesus replied, “The light is with you for only a little while. Walk while you have the light so that darkness doesn’t overtake you. Those who walk in the darkness don’t know where they are going. ³⁶ As long as you have the light, believe in the light so that you might become people whose lives are determined by the light.” After Jesus said these things, he went away and hid from them.

John 12: 27-36 (CEB)



Have you ever been “left in the dark”? No, not in the literal sense of being left in a room where the lights had once been on and were turned off. I’m talking more in the figurative sense of not being privy to all the information of a certain situation or lacking awareness of something going on around you. How does it feel? Maybe you’ve felt offended that someone did not think to clue you in with all the details? Maybe you’ve felt relief because awareness comes with responsibilities? Do you prefer to be clued in? Are you okay with being left in the dark? Take a few moments to reflect on how you would feel if you were left in the dark.

When I was younger, I often felt as though I was being left in the dark. I would be “dismissed” to the kids table while the adults talked about more serious matters in the other room. Sometimes my parents would share information with me on a “need to know basis”, and I now realize that they were doing it for my protection and safety. But as a child full of curiosity, I always fought back with the dreaded (and repetitive!) question, “WHY?”. Being left in the dark filled me with uncertainty and worry, and I just wanted to know their reasoning for withholding information from me.

Jesus was not immune to the feelings of uncertainty or doubt. He clearly says that his soul was troubled as he prepared for his death. But Jesus was not left in the dark when it came to a reason for his feelings of worry or anxiety. Jesus knew the answer to his own questions of, “Why? Why do I have to die?”. He was ready to glorify the name of his heavenly parent and to save a broken human race. Jesus shed light on his own situation and continues to shed light in our lives today.

When you are left in the dark and consumed by feelings of doubt and worry, be assured that you are not alone. The light of Christ has not deserted you, nor has it been withheld from you. The God of light is beside you and within you. Jesus reminds us, “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” So, children of light, do not let others be left in the dark! Bless others by sharing the light of love, grace, and justice within you so that they might go and do the same. Brighten the world through acts of service, generosity, and hospitality. Empower others to let their light shine, especially when they have been discouraged to do so.

See the light. Believe in the light. Feel the light. Spread the light. Be the light.

Gracious God,

Illuminate our lives with your light that shines through the darkness. Like Jesus, grant us wisdom to know your will, courage to follow it, and grace to do it in a way that blesses others. Amen.

Jayme C. Babczak
First Level, M.Div./M.A.C.E.

Jayme is currently seeking ordination within the United Church of Christ and continuing to discern God's call!

Maundy Thursday
April 13, 2017

*“But now, Lord, you are our father. We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.”*

Isaiah 64:8 (CEB)

(Note: This scripture selection is not from Daily Prayer)



Like many Christians my journey with God has not always been easy. I have had my fair share of bumps and bruises along the way. In the beginning I would view these as setbacks but I quickly discovered that each bump in the road wasn't a setback but an opportunity for me to rely on God and reflect on our relationship.

A number of years ago I decided to mark an item off my bucket list and I took a wheel pottery class at a local museum. I figured it would be fun and relaxing. It was fun but somewhat stressful. First you have to throw the clay correctly to get it to be balanced on the wheel then you have to maintain the proper speed and pressure to get the clay to mold the way you want it to. At first I got frustrated because my creations wouldn't turn out the way I had envisioned in my mind and I had to crush them and start over. But somewhere in the process I began to have a spiritual sense about the project. As I was working on these pieces of clay sometimes it took a number of tries to get each piece the way I envisioned in my head. There was a lot of frustration. And just because I got it "right" on the wheel didn't mean the structure of the piece would withstand firing. The piece could still end up with a crack. But what I realized in this process is that no piece of clay was destroyed for good. If the piece on the wheel needed to be redone you just added some water and re-threw it and started over. If a piece came off the wheel correctly but cracked in firing many times the crack could be fixed and it would be structurally stronger in that spot.

This is how our spiritual journey is with God. God never gives up on us regardless of what path we choose to go down, what decisions we make, what we say or what we do. God is the Potter. God will "re-throw" us and mold us again. God will fix our "cracks" and make us stronger. We can grow from the process of being rebuilt. We are blessed to have an amazing God who forgives us, rebuilds us, and most importantly loves us regardless of what we do. We are not powerful enough to push away God. God loves us too much for that to ever happen. God loved us so much that God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. Jesus was crucified for us so that we would not have to suffer that same fate. So as I go through life's journey with God I will try to remember that any stumbling block, any mistake, any mishap, any "failure" on my part is not a disaster it is an opportunity to renew and restore my relationship with God. And I know that the trials of life are not fun or fair but I will strive to remember that God is in my life always and will always be there to remold me.

Great Potter,

In the midst of the struggles of life when we feel we have done all we can help us remember that we are not alone. Help us remember your great love when we feel unlovable. Guide us in the ways you want us to go. Remold us like the clay we are. In your name we pray. Amen.

Megan Collins

After seminary Megan hopes to be ordained as a Deacon in the United Methodist Church and work in a church setting as a Pastor of Communication, but she remains open to whatever God may have in store for her in the future.



Good Friday
April 14, 2017

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." ³⁷ Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

John 13: 36-38 (NRSV)



Here we are. It is Good Friday. The day we remember our LORD's crucifixion and death. Isaac Watts said in his hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" for us to see the "sorrow and love flow mingled down" from Jesus' head, hands, and feet. Elizabeth Clephane's hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus", she also beckoned us to gaze upon the crucified Savior and confess the wonders of Christ's "redeeming love and [our] unworthiness". James Montgomery went a step further in his text "Go to Dark Gethsemane" where he wrote for us to hear Jesus' final words on the cross: "It is finished! hear him cry".

However, as Good Friday draws near each year, I think about the African American spiritual: "Calvary". It is found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) at number 96. I cannot tell you exactly when I was introduced to this spiritual, but I can tell you that I developed a deeper appreciation for it on Good Friday 2015, which was the last time I sang it.

I had the opportunity that year to sing with two friends of mine at an early morning Good Friday breakfast. The sun had not risen, yet, and I can distinctly remember going into the fellowship hall at another church in town where this event was taking place. There were several candles around the room to give just enough light for those praying and eating in silence while I sang many Passion hymns out of the hymnal with my friends.

Something else I failed to mention to you: I was depressed. 2015 was one of the lowest points in my life and certainly in my ministry as a church musician. I felt empty, abandoned, sad, angry, hurt, and scared. It took a lot of prayer from dear friends and family members, therapy, and a lot of singing to keep me going.

Yes, you read that correctly: A lot of singing. I sang a lot in my grief that year. Particularly, I found solace in many of the African American spirituals, partly because they came out of a time of oppression. "Calvary" was one of several spirituals I latched on to that year.

"Calvary" comes from the aural tradition and is simple to learn. The congregation sings the refrain and the soloist sings the stanzas. The melody is repeated in both sections and since the congregation sings only five words, it can be memorized quickly. We are called by the soloist to think about Jesus. Then, the singer asks the first question: "Don't you hear the hammer ringing?" Another question is then asked to the congregation: "Don't you hear Him calling His Father?" Finally, we are asked the last question: "Don't you hear Him say, 'It is finished'". At the end of every stanza, the soloist states "Surely He died on Calvary" and then the congregation responds "Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Surely He died on Calvary."

The words are so simple, but not simplistic. They force us to remember not only our Savior's suffering, but the suffering we inflict on each other. We confront the horrors of the hammer that not only rang that day, but of the hammer the rings today. We encounter the realization that not only Jesus cried out to His Father and said "It is finished", but also of people whom we have neglected who are crying out for help.

*Every time I think about Jesus, surely He died on Calvary.
Don't you hear the hammer ringing? Surely He died on Calvary.
Don't you hear Him calling His Father? Surely He died on Calvary.
Don't you hear Him say, "It is finished?" Surely He died on Calvary.
Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Surely He died on Calvary. Amen.*

T. Wes Moore
Middle Level, M. Div.

After school, T. Wes hopes to be an ordained Presbyterian minister and work in a local congregation.

Holy Saturday
April 15, 2017

²¹ *Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!*
²² *Why do you, like God, pursue me,
never satisfied with my flesh?*
²³ *O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!*
²⁴ *O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!*
²⁵ *For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;*
²⁶ *and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,*
²⁷ *whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*

Job 19: 21-27a (NRSV)



Holy Saturday is the quietest day of Holy Week, if not of the entire church year. In my church, the crosses have all been removed, along with the candlesticks and candles. There are no cushions on the seats in the chancel, no prayer books and no hymnals. The reserved sacrament in the sacristy has been fully consumed following Maundy Thursday services. There are no flowers or vases anywhere. The altar is bare, having been stripped of its linens, cleaned and oiled on Thursday night. It stands with its bare surface and legs exposed. There are no Saturday services. No Glorias. No Alleluias. No proclamations. A profound silence pervades the sanctuary.

Saturday of Holy Week is the day we would like to skip over, preferring to move directly from the grief of Good Friday into the joy of Easter Sunday. But Saturday forces us to face what has happened and take time to absorb the impact. After the anguish of the crucifixion, Saturday is a day of stunned disbelief. It is not a space that we inhabit with comfort. Jesus is gone, and we are bereft. The most complete kind of silence is sometimes referred to as “silent as the grave.” Holy Saturday gives us time in this quality of silence, and an opportunity to confront the grave and our fears.

In 1520, Hans Holbein the younger painted a strikingly realistic painting called “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb.” It depicts a life-sized Jesus lying on the limestone slab of his tomb. We can see his somewhat emaciated body from the side, and his pallid, green-tinged skin. His hands and feet show bruises and the wounds of his crucifixion. His side shows the gash from the centurion’s spear. His eyes and mouth are open as if Holbein is telling us that even in death, Christ is still speaking to us. It is an eerie image. There is no mistaking that Christ is dead, not sleeping. This is true death. Yet something mysterious and miraculous happens on this day, to Jesus as he lies in death, and to us as we pray in contemplation.

The transformation of Holy Saturday is not that of active work. It is a transformation that occurs invisibly, in silence. It is an examination of life and self invited by quietness and rest. It is the transformation of Sabbath. While the church stands silent, our souls do the work of reaching out to God in prayer as we consider our Lord's death, and how it feels to be separated from him. Henri Nouwen said, "This divine silence is the most fruitful silence that the world has ever known. From this, the Word will be spoken again and make all things new." This day of quiet opens us, invites us to be still, and in that stillness, to know our selves and God.

Martin Laird in his book, "Into the Silent Land" also speaks about this stillness.

"The relationship between creature and Creator is such that, by sheer grace, separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word. "

When we have the opportunity, as we do on this Holy Saturday, to still our hearts and minds, confront our fears, and rest in the knowledge and love of God, a transformation occurs within us. We will know, like Job, that although he has died, the truth is that our redeemer lives, and that after our own skin has been destroyed, we, too shall in our flesh see God. We will be prepared to greet Easter morning with joy knowing that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

"O God, Creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen."

--Book of Common Prayer

Kristin Wickersham
Middle Level, M. Div.

Kristin Wickersham is from Richmond, Virginia and is a Postulant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. Her presenting parish is St. James's, Richmond. She is currently serving as the seminarian at St. Andrew's, Richmond. After graduation, Kristin plans to attend Virginia Theological Seminary to obtain a Post-Graduate Diploma in Anglican Studies. God willing and the people consenting, she hopes to be ordained to the priesthood in 2019 and accept a call as a parish priest.

Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

John 20: 19-23 (NRSV)



When was the last time someone was able to come inside of your locked doors? In American culture, when locks have been tampered with and boundaries have been crossed, it is immediate cause for concern and feelings of vulnerability. But, here we have Jesus just coming onto the scene, hands and side agape, speaking “peace” into the room.

Now, I don’t know about you, but the last time someone broke into my locked car, I was not imagining them speaking words of peace to me. I imagined something unnerving and invasive. I imagined someone rummaging through my glove compartment, searching for a few dollars.

Have we ever taken a moment to really think about what it might have felt like for Jesus to show up in the middle of a locked room? It is of no coincidence that the author includes the word “locked”, and it would do us no favor to overlook it.

Here we have a room full of traumatized disciples processing the grief and turmoil of the last few days, locking themselves away from the world. Only to find that Jesus refuses to be locked out and instead reassures them to be at peace while showing his wounds. Jesus enters beyond the locked doors, burglarizing the disciples of their woes in order to reassure them of the nature of God’s divine work in the world. Jesus steals away the focus from his death and shifts it towards the reality of his risen nature. Jesus breaks into their grief and gives them a Spirit; of holiness, of resurrection, of forgiveness.

I wonder what it might be like if we visited feelings of vulnerability when we discuss the nature of Christ’s resurrection. I wonder what it would be like if we were able to name this strange, invasive feeling that accompanies Christ breaking into the world as something unrecognizable, something that no one has ever before seen. What might we be able to learn about Christ if we were to imagine him as the “thief” of normalcy?

There is nothing normal about the person of Jesus Christ. Nothing normal at all about the table-flipping, parable-telling, water-into-wine, miracle maker who defeated death. When God sent Jesus into the world, there was a foundational shift of all things turning from “normal” to wrecked by the Spirit. So on these days, as we celebrate Christ’s resurrection and recall the vulnerability of Good Friday, maybe we might also recall the vulnerability of following Christ, the thief of all things normal.

Gracious God, you came into this world as one of us. You walked, talked and moved as we move. You know our hurts, our joys, our vulnerabilities...and you break through them. You abolish the things that make us feel less worthy. You destroy the walls that keep us from you. You teach us graciousness, forgiveness and reconciliation. May we find ourselves keen to listen and slow to speak, may we find our hands quick to move, and may we find our feet grounded firmly upon the rock of Christ, as your Spirit breaks into our lives again and again. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Heather Jones Butler
Final Level, M.Div.

After graduating from UPSEM, Heather Jones Butler will be returning to South Alabama and continue listening carefully to where the Spirit may be calling her to continued work for the Church in the World. Heather is particularly excited to return home to Alabama where she feels she can minister faithfully to those who first ministered to her.