

Prayerful Reflections

A Lent and Easter Devotional



Edited by Julia Styles

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An Introduction to Prayerful Reflections: A Lent and Easter Devotional

By Julia Styles

Ash Wednesday and Lent starts on February 17, 2021, and I am looking forward to it. Perhaps it's a strange personality quirk (or my Enneagram 7 enthusiastic outlook on life) but I have always enjoyed Lent. Ash Wednesday and Lent were days I experienced as unique from the rest of the year, like a communal diet or exercise regimen I participated in with other Christians. I loved getting ashes smudged on my forehead and seeing others with the same mark and feeling a warm sense of solidarity. I'm not a very disciplined person, so Lent was always an opportunity to strip away excess in my life, alongside others, like a team effort. Looking back, I think I saw it as a bit of "sacrificial fun" before Easter.

One of my friends recently noted that this entire past year has felt like Lent, and not in a fun way like I had framed it, but in a difficult and exhausting way. What she said rang true: for 300+ days we have been giving things up. Whether willingly or by mandate, we have given up the things we most cherish—fun, friends, personal liberties, peace and quiet, hugs, handshakes, church services, sporting events, coffee shops...the list is endless.

Since March of 2020, it is as if we have been living through a continual season of fasting and sacrificing. The type of sacrifices we have made were not made merely as a spiritual practice done out of religious devotion, but for the purpose of collective safety and health. And for that reason, our sacrifices not being solely for ourselves, but for others, makes those sacrifices more sacred than we realize.

During Lent, we sacrifice to prepare ourselves for baptism—for new life with Christ; our desire is to strip away the distractions that keep us from focusing on Christ. Perhaps this year, we have experienced a longer time of preparation—a whole year of fasting rather than 40 days. With so much stripped away, perhaps we are more ready than ever to fix our eyes on Christ, and commune with fellow believers in prayer to experience the life in abundance that Jesus promised in John 10:10.

One of the ways I best connect with God is through prayerfully **reading** scripture: **reflecting** on its meaning, **responding** with action, and **resting** in God's presence. This rhythm of **Read, Reflect, Respond and Rest** is a form of *Lectio Divina*, or sacred reading/listening, an ancient Christian practice that invites you to notice what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you through scripture.

Lectio Divina can be done individually or with others. During this time of solitude and social-distancing, I want to remember God's promises alongside other Christians, specifically other women and non-binary folks who love God and hear from the Holy Spirit. As a result, I reached out to friends I have met along my spiritual journey—from seminary, church, mission work and spiritual direction.

Over 50 women responded to the call by writing a reflection on the scripture passage that resonated with them from the lectionary (church calendar). The writers participating in this Lent Devotional are from varying Christian denominations, some are pastors or spiritual directors and others hold jobs outside of the Church. The women and transgender persons involved are from all over the globe, of different ethnicities, races, sexual-orientations and gender identities, political persuasions and theological positions, yet we all hold one thing in common—our willingness to hear from the Holy Spirit and reflect on the Divine Mystery.

I am now extending the invitation to you. I invite you to join us on this Lenten journey of holy listening, meeting God in the scripture—reading, reflecting, responding and resting in God’s presence through our version of *Lectio Divina*. Please join us each day from Ash Wednesday (February 17, 2021) through Easter (April 4, 2021) and then each Sunday through Pentecost (May 23, 2021) for a scripture reflection and prayer written by a fellow sibling in Christ. You can follow along with us by reading this PDF version of the Lent Devotional, or by following the daily blog posts at www.spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com.

We have endured a long and weary season of sacrifice. My prayer is that this Lent and Easter devotional will help all of us connect with God in a way that brings new life, and that the sacrifices we made for one another will bear fruit, not just in our communities but also in our souls.

A note about the photography: most of the sunrise photos in this devotional are by Mary Rodriguez Photography. You can see one of her beautiful sunrises each day of Lent on the spiritualdirectionwithjulia.com blog. The vineyard photo was taken by Julia Styles, the Sunrise Photo on Amanda Svejda’s devotional was taken by Amanda, and the Journal photo was taken by Sheli Sloterbeek. Author photos were provided by each author.

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A Reflection for Ash Wednesday

By Julia Styles

Lectionary reading for 2/17/2021: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-2

Selected passage for reflection: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (The Message)

Read

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

1-2 Blow the ram's horn trumpet in Zion!

Trumpet the alarm on my holy mountain!

Shake the country up

God's Judgment's on its way—the Day's almost here!

A black day! A Doomsday!

Clouds with no silver lining

Like dawn light moving over the mountains,
a huge army is coming.

There's never been anything like it
and never will be again.

12 But there's also this, it's not too late—

God's personal Message!

“Come back to me and really mean it!

Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!

13-14 Change your life, not just your clothes.

Come back to God, your God.

And here's why: God is kind and merciful

He takes a deep breath, puts up with a lot,

This most patient God, extravagant in love,
always ready to cancel catastrophe.

Who knows? Maybe he'll do it now

maybe he'll turn around and show pity

Maybe, when all's said and done,

there'll be blessings full and robust for your
God!

15-17 Blow the ram's horn trumpet in Zion!

Declare a day of repentance, a holy fast day.

Call a public meeting.

Get everyone there. Consecrate the
congregation.

Make sure the elders come,

but bring in the children, too, even the nursing
babies,

Even men and women on their honeymoon—

interrupt them and get them there.

Between Sanctuary entrance and altar,

let the priests, God's servants, weep tears of
repentance.

Let them intercede: “Have mercy, God, on your
people!

Don't abandon your heritage to contempt.

Don't let the pagans take over and rule them

and sneer, ‘And so where is this God of
theirs?’”

Reflect

I am not the best at changing my bad habits. Even when I think I have conquered a demon, I find that months later, it rears its ugly head in a new way. This is a repeated pattern, but it doesn't stop me from trying to improve...

I have often approached Lent as an opportunity for self-improvement. I resolved to be good for God; to read more, pray more, eat less, or buy less. I was determined to change from the outside-in, no matter how difficult. I figured if I do the work myself, then I will be more pleasing in God's eyes. I often pictured a God that sounded like my own inner critic, "Hurry up, let's go, do it better, what's taking so long!" The God in my head was a task-master, with little patience or compassion. I wonder if the Israelites thought similarly. Feeling forsaken, they imagined God saying, "This is what you deserve. You created this mess; you're on your own!"

The prophet Joel rebuked the Israelites, "It's not too late—God's personal Message!—'Come back to me and really mean it! Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!' Change your life, not just your clothes. Come back to God, your God. And here's why: God is kind and merciful. He takes a deep breath, puts up with a lot, this most patient God, extravagant in love, always ready to cancel catastrophe" (Joel 2:12-13, *The Message*).

Whether we are in the middle of a catastrophe, or have simply grown lukewarm in our desire to follow God, God asks us to return to her, not so she can punish us, but because this most patient God, extravagant in love, is always ready to cancel catastrophe, to seek what's best for us, just like a parent with their child.

When I read this passage from Joel, I was drawn to the phrase, "this most patient God." The word patience has been really important to me this past year. As a mom, I have felt the need to be patient with my toddler and also with myself. A friend recently remarked, "Patience is choosing to move at the speed of the one you love." This phrase helped me to picture God as a mother with her toddler, slowly walking down the street, stopping to notice sticks and pebbles, knowing that the destination is just one part of the journey.

God, in all her tenderness and extravagant love, is patient with me, and moves beside me as I learn to walk in her ways. I have a God that is kind and merciful, that takes a deep breath and puts up with a lot. Not only does God "have all day," but she has all of eternity. Unlike the impatient critic in my head, God is patient, and puts up with my stubbornness, thick-headedness, procrastination, and bad habits, so there is no reason to hide who I am from God; instead I can walk with freedom, curiosity and compassion for myself and for others.

Joel's call to the Israelites is not just for individuals, but for the entire community. In verses 15-17, Joel pleads that the Israelites stop what they are doing and intercede on behalf of one another, "Have mercy, God, on your people!" Joel's communal call to the Israelites, is the same for us today, "Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins." We are in the midst of some major catastrophes right now—a global

pandemic, an economic recession, climate change, blatant racism and political vitriol, not to mention the catastrophes within our own households. Just like the Israelites, Christians have set aside a day—Ash Wednesday— to fast and pray, and call out to God for mercy. “Who knows? Maybe he’ll do it now, maybe he’ll turn around and show pity. Maybe, when all’s said and done, there’ll be blessings full and robust for your God!” (Joel 2:14)

Respond

During Ash Wednesday, as the priest or deacon implements ashes, you often hear, “Repent and believe in the Good News.” Today is an opportunity to repent—to change your mind of how you see yourself and others, and reconnect with your patient, compassionate and kind God. Do whatever is necessary to reconcile with God—fast, weep, confess your short-comings, admit your hurts and pains—lay it all out there. Your holy Parent, extravagant in love will be there, and is quick to cancel catastrophe.

Rest

God we acknowledge that you “take a deep breath, and put up with a lot.”

Most patient God, extravagant in love, help us to take deep breaths as well.

Help us to exhale our own impatience and condemnation, and inhale your kindness and mercy. (Take as many deep breaths as you need to feel at peace.)

Amen.



About the Author

Julia Styles is a Spiritual Director and Diversity & Inclusion Consultant living in Atlanta, Georgia. Julia has a Masters in Christian Ministry and Certificate in Spiritual Direction from North Park Theological Seminary, and a Masters in International Public Affairs from the University of Wisconsin. With over 20 years of ministry experience in cross-cultural environments, Julia is passionate about creating welcoming spaces for people to authentically pursue their calling. Most days you can find Julia at one of the beautiful parks in Atlanta with her husband, Derek, and son, Jakob.

A Reflection for Thursday 2/18

By Erika C. Burt

Lectionary reading for 2/18/2021: Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:1-14; 1 John 1:3-1

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 25:1-10 (NKJV)

Read

Psalm 25:1-10

1 To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, I trust in You;

Let me not be ashamed;

Let not my enemies triumph over me.

3 Indeed, let no one who waits on You be ashamed;

Let those be ashamed who deal treacherously without cause.

4 Show me Your ways, O Lord;

Teach me Your paths.

5 Lead me in Your truth and teach me,

For You are the God of my salvation;

On You I wait all the day.

6 Remember, O Lord, Your tender mercies and

Your loving kindnesses,

For they are from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions;

According to Your mercy remember me,

For Your goodness' sake, O Lord.

8 Good and upright is the Lord;

Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.

9 The humble He guides in justice,

And the humble He teaches His way.

10 All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth,
To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.

Reflect

Have you ever just needed a good cry? Most people will answer this question with a resounding “Yes!”. Most of us know how it feels to have our emotions tied up in knots or even bottled up...struggling to break free because of some deep pain. A good cry, or crying out, can sometimes soothe us in the moment, but Psalm 25 shows us Who can bring us more than temporary relief.

In Psalm 25 David is crying out. He is desperate to receive help, forgiveness, and guidance. While the specific reason for his lamenting is not known, we do know that David made more than a few mistakes in his lifetime that could have brought him to his knees. In fact, it is highly likely that his moral failings and sins are the foundations of his grief and even the sources of his enemies' taunts.

Perhaps the background for David's crying out is a leadership decision he made while on the run from King Saul. David and his men were away from their camp trying to make alliances in their fight against King Saul and the Israelites and left their camp unprotected. As a result, another enemy invaded and torched the camp and kidnapped David's family and the family of all the men who were with him. His men, typically loyal, spoke of stoning him and declared the tragedy to be his fault (1 Samuel 30). Maybe the reason for his grief is his own memories of how he violated Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed in battle (2 Samuel 11). Or it could possibly be the shame he felt from having his first-born son,

Absalom, plot to lead a rebellion against him to usurp his throne (2 Samuel 15). David had plenty of reasons to be in distress and had plenty of reasons to cry out to the Lord.

Like David, we all have situations in our lives that cause us to feel overwhelmed, afraid, hurt, confused, and frankly, just emotionally exhausted. Our personal sins or the consequences to our own lapses in judgment may be the cause, or the pain others bring may be the reason, but whatever the context we can certainly relate to David's anguish. Thankfully, through Psalm 25: 1-10 David shows us what to do with all of it. He lifts his soul, crying out for guidance and asking God to remember him and recall his loving kindness towards him. Even in his pain David hopes in the character of God. He trusts that God's mercy and lovingkindness will not fail him, and in our times of despair we can do the same. We can cry out, or call out, to God from a place of hope and trust in God's goodness towards us and His unfailing love.

David also recalls the truth that God's forgiveness and justice will not fail either. This humbles David as he seeks forgiveness and direction. David declares that he will wait on God trusting that He will ultimately restore him and deal justly with David's enemies. When we have fallen short of God's grace and feel ashamed and confused, we can also recall to our minds the truth that God is forgiving, just, and able to restore.... completely.

Respond

Take a few minutes to recall the situations that are causing you despair, anxiety, or confusion. Pray Psalm 25: 1-10 aloud.

Listen to the song Hear My Cry by Fred Hammond.

Rest

Lord, thank You for hearing our cries, offering your forgiveness, and continuously pouring out Your love on us. Thank You for reminding us that You are in control and have our backs in all situations. Help us to take it one day at a time and to trust in Your daily care. Amen.



About the Author

Erika is an Education Innovation & Research Project Manager who develops and implements large scale organizational projects helping to advance educational equity and access for underrepresented student populations. Erika is a PhD student with research interests in educational leadership, equity and access in post-secondary education, and policy creation. She holds two master's degrees, a MDiv & a MAT in education, and is a published author with works in theological journals and magazines. Erika is also a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion workshop presenter and speaker. She is from the south side of Chicago, Illinois and is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

A Reflection for Friday 2/19

By Jessie Best Chambers

Lectionary reading for 2/19/2021: Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Selected passage for reflection: 2 Timothy 4:1-5 (NIV)

Read

2 Timothy 4:1-5

I'm giving you this commission in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is coming to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearance and his kingdom.² Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction.³ There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered.⁴ They will turn their back on the truth and turn to myths.⁵ But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the good news, and carry out your service fully.

Reflect

Honestly, scriptures about God's judgment have never been my favorite. I don't find them particularly encouraging or heart warming. And so often we see them used to wound or accuse others, rather than as a tool to reflect on the ways we may have missed the mark.

But over the last several years I've watched Christians all over the country defend racism and sexism, deny the truth about the pandemic, and ignore the very real pain of others out of a need to be right or to stay in power. Literally turning away from the truth and embracing myths because the truth isn't what they want to hear. It has been exhausting and heartbreaking. And for many of us, I know it's been hard not to just walk away from it all.

So that has got me thinking. When the time comes, how will God judge us? What is the measuring stick that will be used to judge the living and the dead? I believe that when the time comes, the ultimate measure of our faithfulness will be the fruit of our lives.

When I was younger, I used to worry about all the ways I didn't quite fit in the church. Not republican enough, not extroverted enough, too feminist, too curious, too uncertain. But the more I study theology and the Bible, the more I realize how little we actually know. Because God is infinite and eternal, God is bigger than my capacity to understand and explain. And that's a good thing. A god small enough to need me to explain and defend him, is not a God I want to put all my hope in.

I know that every day I am being judged by other people. I also know that one day I will be judged by the only one who matters. And when I stand before that judge – the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace – I'm not worried about whether or not my understanding of baptism or the Eucharist or how to interpret a specific passage of scripture is the "right" one. I believe I will be

judged by how hard I tried to love God and to love my neighbor. What will matter most will be the fruit of my life. Did my words and actions help cultivate love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Did I put others first? Did I seek wisdom and truth? Did I strive towards justice and healing?

Whenever my time comes, I don't want to be remembered for being right most of the time or winning most of my arguments. I want to be remembered for being honest, kind, and generous; for loving God and others with my whole heart. That is our work. That is the duty of our ministry. May we strive to do it well.

Respond

Get a pen and paper and make a list of all the ways that others have made you feel judged or told you you're not good enough. Now tear that list up and throw it out - it's garbage. Take a deep breath in and out and ask God to show you the ways that you can cultivate more good fruit in your life.

Rest

God, thank you that I am lovingly and wonderfully created in your image. Give me the wisdom and the strength to recognize your truth, even when it makes me uncomfortable. Give me the grace to let go of the unnecessary burden of the judgments of others. And grant me the patience to dedicate the rest of my days cultivating good fruit. Amen.



About the Author

Jessie Best Chambers lives and works in Richmond, Virginia. Originally from North Carolina, she did her undergraduate work at Appalachian State University before receiving a master's degree in Theological Studies from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. Jessie loves the outdoors, the Old Testament, and puns.

A Reflection for Saturday 2/20

By Rev. Julie Jane Capel

Lectionary reading for 2/20/2021: Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-13

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 25:1-10 (NIV)

Read

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.

Reflect

Ways. My mother is incredibly loyal to her GPS app and I cannot even read the noun without hearing the voice over. You know the one. “Turn left at the corner.” “Go straight for the next 173 miles.” “Make a U-Turn.”

Psalm 25 has the repeated refrain: the ways of the Lord, rebellious ways, and his ways. What I appreciate about the GPS metaphor for God’s instruction is the combination of freedom, reaction and correction.

When a person begins the journey, she often gets to choose from multiple green options to arrive at the destination spot. Ten extra minutes to drive beside the lake? Worth it. Preference for stop lights over freeway stop and go? You do you.

It is theologically easier for me to handle “the bad things in life” and not blame God if there were many ways an event could turn out. However, no matter the outcome, it does not mean God does not care or is not involved.

For we all know, how the GPS will reroute if something has gone wrong on our end or even in the world around us. The GPS will give us new ways that avoid the ten car pileup or will adjust for an unintended

early turn. As Romans 8:28 reminds us: We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In my personal life, if George Floyd had not been murdered in 2020 I would have never helped found Urban Reformers. I could not have predicted that the non-profit “Gospel-centered collision of justice fighters” full of total strangers would become my Covid-bubble. But God. I strongly do not think God intended to have George Floyd executed, and yet, I do think God is using the tragedy for the redemption of the world.

Psalm 25:8 in The Message: "God is fair and just; He corrects the misdirected, sends them in the right direction." At times we absolutely need a 180 correction and even in that, God does so in a loving way. Psalm 25 notes that when we are sinners and rebellious still the Lord remembers us and will instruct us. Have hope, for you will never get so lost the Lord will not be able to find you. God is worthy to put your trust in.

Respond

As a response through the form of worship through music listen to the song Way Maker by Nigerian gospel singer-songwriter Sinach.

Rest

Creator and Sustainer – we want to be people who respond by celebrating our freedom, who are grateful for your responsiveness to the unexpected and are quick to receive your correction. Show us your ways, Lord, teach us your paths. Guide us in you truths and teach us. Amen.



About the Author

In 2021 Rev. Julie Jane Capel is launching her career as a painter. Her lifetime work: Isaiah 58, the 30 paintings are currently touring. Her exegetical brushstrokes represent scenes of joy, repentance, and revolution derived from her exegetical work. #jjcpaintings
Capel is the Spiritual Formation Coordinator and founding member of Urban Reformers. Prior she had been a lead pastor in Chicago and a hospital trauma chaplain.

A Reflection for Sunday 2/21

By Rev. Claudia Aguilar R.

Lectionary reading for 2/21/2021: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-2; Mark 1:9-15

Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 9:8-17, Common English Bible (CEB)

Read

Genesis 9:8-17

8 God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, 10 and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. 11 I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

12 God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. 13 I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. 16 The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every living being of all the earth’s creatures.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I have set up between me and all creatures on earth.”

Reflect

I love rainbows. I have always loved them and I am privileged enough to live in the high desert, where double rainbows are not rare. I remember teaching children about the ark and the animals and Noah and the rainbow. But this story is anything but cute. There is mass destruction of all life inflicted by God. When I read the story and learned the gravity of this event, I had a hard time reconciling it with my faith in “God is love.” How could God be so mean? It would have been easy to say: “let’s ditch this mean, angry Old Testament God and choose happy Jesus.” But that is the easy way out and it won’t take us far or deep (also, Jesus was not a happy camper all the time). If we want to go far and deep, we need to wrestle with God, the way Jacob wrestled with God.

Maybe love is not an eternal hug and never hurting each other (which is fairly impossible, in my view). Maybe love is exactly what happens in this passage: God hurts life on Earth, repents, hangs God’s bow, and changes. This particular translation uses the word bow instead of rainbow, which is closer to the Hebrew term qeshet. God hanging the bow means God choosing to drop God’s weapons, making Godself vulnerable.

God is showing true repentance. Interestingly, God doesn't ask for forgiveness but offers a complete change of paths, which is exactly what repentance is. God is showing us how complex love is. It doesn't mean we are not going to hurt each other; it means we will acknowledge what we have done, drop our weapons (become vulnerable), and change our ways. That is what Lent is all about. And in this time in history, we need this kind of Lent more than ever.

Respond

I invite you to reflect on these questions as an individual and as a society. Take a deep breath after reading each question, write down your answers, pray about them. Act on them.

What are some hurts you have inflicted and need to acknowledge? What does it mean to hang our bows? What concrete actions are we taking to show our repentance?

Rest

Fountain of compassion, we come before you with our hopes and fears, with all the things we have done and all the things we have left undone. We know we have hurt your creation and one another. And we know that you know. And we ask that you lead us to true love, a love that acknowledges past and present hurts, a love humble enough to change our ways, a love like your love. In your precious name, Holy Love, we pray. Amen.



About the Author

Claudia Aguilar Rubalcava is pastor at First Mennonite Church of Denver, Colorado. Being bilingual, bicultural, and binational is part of her call to build bridges among different groups of people. She is a certified yoga instructor and loves music, dogs, cooking, and baking. She is interested in ecumenical and interfaith efforts to bring justice and peace to every being. When not working, she is spending time in her garden with her husband Doug and their dog Bruno. You may follow her on Instagram at [clau.aguilar.rubalcava](https://www.instagram.com/clau.aguilar.rubalcava) or read her rare blog posts at <https://theawkwardswan.blog/>

A Reflection for Monday 2/22

By Rev. Alicia Vela Anderson

Lectionary reading for 2/22/2021: Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 2:1-10 (ESV, *emphasis added*)

Read

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the children of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of humankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Reflect

There have been times in the past year that I have felt the weight of what Paul calls “the prince of power of the air.” The oppression of the way this world works and the powers at play within our society. I’ve felt the weight of sin heavy on my heart when I watch the news and my social media feed. The hostility and blatant disrespect for those who disagree with us mingled together with the hate and superiority of those tucked safely within the majority. On the softer, though still problematic side, I see the ignorance of people of privilege who have spent their lives walking away from these difficult conversations because it made them uneasy. I lament with my whole body the pain caused to our brothers and sisters who feel powerless or like their dignity is being stripped away from them on a daily basis. I cry out from the past trauma being continuously triggered by the news cycle. Everyday it feels like a battle.

And then I remember the transition in Paul’s writing - But God. But God, being rich in mercy and with the great love in which God loves us. God sent Jesus to the earth to show us the way. God gifted us with the Holy Spirit to guide us, comfort us, weep with us. I remember that our God is more powerful than the evil forces at work around us. Our God is more loving than we can handle, more gracious than we can even imagine and this same God has created each of us in unique ways. Each with a story that we embody for the sake of the Gospel - the good news that this grace and mercy is available to all people.

We are God's masterpiece, created to do the good works laid out before us by God. We were created on purpose and for a purpose. Our purpose is to live into the Kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in. The upside down Kingdom that is radically inclusive, that does not tolerate hate, and is diverse by design. We are created to further that Kingdom, each of us in our own circles of influence.

The pieces that make up our identities are not a mystery to God because God created them. God was with us in the broken parts that left scars on our hearts and our bodies. God was there, stitching us together and restoring us just as God promised, giving us the Holy Spirit like a balm for our souls. Nothing surprises God about who we are, and when we live into that identity as Masterpieces of God, no power on earth can stop us. We are the children of God. We sit with Christ because of God's loving kindness for each of us. May we walk into this day remembering the power of the Spirit within us.

Respond

I encourage you to remember your identity today. Write it on your mirror, put it on your phone background, place sticky notes all around your home to remind you when you need it. I also encourage you to spread that love to a sister who needs to hear it- send a message, drop a comment or show up with coffee or chocolate to remind them they are loved by this incredible God.

Rest

Try a breath prayer: Get in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and quiet your mind. Focus on your breathing. As you breathe in, pray, "Creator God," and as you breathe out, pray, "I am yours."



About the Author

Alicia is a Colorado native who found her heart home in Minnesota. She's passionate about helping young people see God at work in their lives and in the world around them. She spends her days pastoring in the local church and teaching 7th grade Bible in the Twin Cities. You can find her at aliciavela.com or on social media as @aliciavelaanderson

A Reflection for Tuesday 2/23

By Jillian Evans

Lectionary reading for 2/23/2021: Psalm 77; Proverbs 30:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 77 (NIV)

Read

Psalm 77

1I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
2When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.
3I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
4You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.
5I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
6I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
7“Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
8Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
9Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”
10Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right
hand.
11I will remember the deeds of the Lord;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
12I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”
13Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
14You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
15With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
16The waters saw you, God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.
17The clouds poured down water,
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.
18Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
19Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
20You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Reflect

Recently I was living through a really bad week. Oh let's be honest, things haven't changed that much since, but I felt the weight of it more that week. I was trying to keep the peace with an octogenarian mother with dementia, living with my college students forced to be home because of the pandemic, living out of boxes because of what seems like never-ending house renovations, and pains flaring up from a rear end car collision a little over a year ago. I was not in a happy place. I walked around with a bad attitude because nothing was happening as I thought it should. It was during this time that a friend reached out to me to ask me to write a Lenten devotion. When I told my husband about this request he laughed and said, “You are not there right now.” That was also my initial reaction but then I thought again and decided that this was exactly what I needed right now. No matter what is going on in my life, I have to make time to remember who God is and who I am in God.

As we look toward the Easter celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, I wonder how many of us are in a place where we are not feeling very celebratory. Maybe you are tired of the suffering going on around you. Perhaps you simply aren't feeling the favor of God in your life. Possibly you have cried out to God and have no more tears left. As Christians, we believe that the joy of the Lord is our strength but sometimes we can still find it difficult to push through. In today's scripture, the psalmist recalls fervently crying out to God and feeling rejected. But eventually he reflects and writes, "Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?" (Psalm 77:13 NIV). In the midst of hardship and trouble, God is still God. Praise Him in advance!

Respond

Visualize for a moment- What would it look like if you walked around with an attitude of victory in the midst of a storm? What would you wear? What would you say? How can your trial change into a testimony about the goodness of God?

For deeper thought: What did it mean to you when you read "God is still God"? What have you been crying out to God about? What does the Bible say about your situation? Are there any lessons that God is teaching you along the way? Can you think of a time that God brought you through a trying time?

Rest

Dear God,

I come humbly before you in all of my imperfections to honor you Lord God Almighty. O God, You are my God; with deepest longing I will seek You. God, please forgive me where I have wronged and teach me Your ways. As I look forward to the Easter celebration, please help me to remember your faithfulness to me and the gift of Your Son Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.



About the Author

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

A Reflection for Wednesday 2/24

By Aline Defiglia

Lectionary reading for 2/24/2021: Psalm 77; Proverbs 30:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 77 (NIV)

Read

Psalm 77

1I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
2When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.
3I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
4You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.
5I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
6I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
7“Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
8Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
9Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”
10Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his
right hand.
11I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

12I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”
13Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
14You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
15With your mighty arm you redeemed your
people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
16The waters saw you, God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.
17The clouds poured down water,
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.
18Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
19Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
20You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Reflect

This psalm is familiar to my heart. I imagine the author as myself, tossing and turning, unable to sleep, with to-do lists, said and unsaid conversations, worries and philosophical musings all jumbled up in a simultaneously revved up (and exhausted) brain. Who among us has not experienced the agony of “middle of the night” worries, when the night seems so long, and sleep and peace so far away?

At my best, when I can successfully turn my mind from darkness, this middle of the night wakefulness can transform into its own sacred space, just as it did for the writer of this psalm. It is my time. Free from the demands of my roles as wife, mother, professional, daughter, sister, friend, citizen...I can ponder and wonder and dream. I can choose to release my death grip on my desire for control and security. I can remember Who is actually in control and how mysterious and wondrous it is to be a soul in this body, in this world He/She created. I can relax knowing my shepherd is leading me through the mighty waters.

Respond

Next time your “middle of the night” worries overwhelm you, name them as such.
Be gracious and non-judgmental to your own pain. Turn your mind to gratitude.
Be specific about what you are grateful for. Remember the miracles and mighty deeds of our Deliverer.

Rest

Dear Lord, in every situation, guide our hearts and minds to your hope and peace. Amen.



About the Author

Aline is a mental health professional living with her husband and two year old son in Chattanooga, TN. She finds joy in walking in the woods and beside her loved ones and clients, seeking to both grow and root into the beauty of creation. Her path has taken many lovely twists and turns in both geography and professional focus, but always with a heart for the community and a taste for adventure. Find out more at <https://abwellness.life>

A Reflection for Thursday 2/25

By Jenny Hoskins

Lectionary reading for 2/25/2021: Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18; Romans 3:21-31

Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 15: 1-6 NRSV

Read

Genesis 15:1-6

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." 5 He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Reflect

Genesis 15 focuses on the covenant that God establishes with Abram. It is a passage rich with theological significance and forms a foundation for the relationship that God will have with God's people for generations to come. If you've grown up in the church like me, you're sure to have read and studied this passage many times before.

In reading this passage in this season however, the words from verse 5 jumped out at me like never before. God brings Abram outside and has him look towards the heavens.

This section of scripture starts off with God showing up to Abram in a vision. God speaks to Abram, telling him to not be afraid and declaring that Abram's reward will be great and that God is his shield. But immediately Abram starts to harp on his current situation, focusing only on what is immediately known to him – his lack of children – losing sight of the words that God had just spoken to him a moment before. But then God brings Abram outside and speaks truth and promises over him once again.

When my children were small, getting outside was almost always a good answer to whatever was bothering them. Whatever injustice – real or perceived – whatever bad mood, whatever tantrum, whatever frustration – getting out under a big sky had a way of shifting their perspective. That big sky, that holds more stars than can be counted, grounded them in a way that no amount of other redirection or reason ever could.

That same big sky has saved me during this pandemic year. I have always been someone drawn to the outdoors and being in nature has always helped me to be aware of God's presence, but there has been

something unique and deeper to getting outside in this year of living alongside a virus that has upended everything we have ever known. Like a child in need of a little perspective or like Abram lacking the divine imagination for a reality not yet known, I have felt the Spirit calling me to step outside and feel the earth beneath my feet. I have felt Her calling me to step outside and look up and be reminded of Her promises to me. I have felt Her calling me to step outside and breathe deeply and be reminded of Her promises to us.

As I continue to read and learn from indigenous theologians and thinkers throughout the Americas, I am acutely aware of how often we have divorced all understanding of God from our created world in the West. In the midst of everything about our current realities that are caving in on us – isolation, illness, white supremacy, exhaustion, anxiety, job loss, overseeing online schooling, deep political division – I can't help but feel that there is wisdom in letting God take us by the hand and lead us outside once again. Whether it be on a small apartment balcony in an urban center or deep in the wilderness with no one for miles, perhaps what we all need a little more of in the midst of our grief and current reality is to be led out under the stars. To be reminded once again that God is our shield and that God's vision for us – both personally and corporately – is beyond what we can even conceive or imagine.

Respond

Make a plan to spend a few intentional minutes outside today. Take a walk. Sit on a park bench. Breathe deeply and bring awareness to all of your senses. Take stock of those areas of your life which feel like they are caving in on you. Look up and ask God to remind you once again of God's promises to you..

Rest

God of Abram, remind us to rest in your promises, knowing that you are our shield. May we be led out to places that restore our soul and give space for your vision to be revealed. Amen.



About the Author

Jenny Hoskins is a Serve Globally missionary with the Evangelical Covenant Church, serving and living in Ecuador since 2009. She is happiest at home with a table full of friends and good food. Jenny recently relocated to Nashville with her husband, Chris, and two children for a time of home assignment while Chris begins a doctoral program, and they continue to be involved in the ministries of Serve Globally.

A Reflection for Friday 2/26

by Eileen Lundy

Lectionary reading for 2/26/2021: Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12

Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 16:1-6 (NIV)

Read

Genesis 16:1-6

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

6 "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

Reflect

Sarai, or Sarah is tired of waiting. It has been ten years since God first promised her husband Abram that he would have many children which would become a great nation. Since then, they have moved to a new land and Sarah has been unable to conceive a child. Now God has just repeated his promise to make Abram a great nation a second time. Sarah has had enough of waiting and decides to take matters into her own hands. She tells Abram her plan and he does what she suggests.

Now what Sarah proposes may sound outlandish or shocking to us but in Sarah's world it was not an uncommon way to continue a family line. Sarah offers a legitimate solution to her bareness. After all, how long can a person live on promises alone?

Sarah makes a plan and it works, but the reality of the situation is harder than she expected. Sarah turns on Abram accusing him for her suffering and then mistreats Hagar, a slave with no say in Sarah's plan.

It is easy to be critical of Sarah, but then I think of how hard waiting can be. Waiting with unanswered prayers. Prayers for good things. Waiting on an answer to something that was promised so long ago that it feels like a broken promise. In those times it makes perfect sense to take action, to make something happen. To run ahead of God. In doing this though, not only do we risk missing what God has promised but also hurting others in the process.

Perhaps Sarah (and Abram) offer us a mirror to see ourselves, to see our own tendencies to take action. To trust in our own ability to make something happen or fix a problem rather than seeking what God would have us do. Where might God be calling you to wait? To wait on what has been promised to you?

Respond

Is there a situation or circumstance in your life you are struggling with? Perhaps an unanswered prayer or place of pain?

Place your hands, palms up, in your lap and imagine this situation or circumstance resting in your open hands. Offer an honest prayer to God regarding your feelings and desires regarding what your hands are holding.

Picture God with you, with hands outstretched and open.

When you feel ready, lift your hands up and place what your hands are holding into God's hands and return your hands to your lap.

How are God's hands holding what you have placed in them?

Spend a moment in silence. What do you sense God saying to you?

Rest

God, you invite me to come to you as a child and so I come. I come to you trusting in your goodness as a loving parent who wants only for my good. I come and I rest in your care. Waiting for what you have promised to provide. Amen



About the Author

Eileen Lundy is an oncology nurse, a pastor, and a spiritual director. She is a wife to Steve and a mother to 3 adult children. She lives in Omaha, Nebraska. Eileen has a BSN from Clarkson College, a Masters in Spiritual Formation from Spring Arbor University and a certificate in Spiritual Direction from North Park Seminary. Eileen loves to read and is addicted to buying books.

A Reflection for Saturday 2/27

by Jacqueline Marshall

Lectionary reading for 2/27/2021: Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:7-15; Mark 8:27-30

Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 16:7-15 NIV

Read

Genesis 16:7-15

7 The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. **8** And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered.

9 Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” **10** The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

11 The angel of the Lord also said to her: “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.

12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”

13 She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” **14** That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.

Reflect

There are countless times that I have answered to names that are not my own. I’ve been, “Roberts’ wife,” “Caleb’s mom,” and even “Terri’s daughter.” However, there’s a certain kind of acknowledgement that comes from someone calling me by my name, Jackie. Jacqueline if they’re feeling fancy. It’s similar to the light shown on the face of a waitress or grocery store clerk when you read their name tag and call them by name. It dignifies them and affirms that you see them for who they are not just what they do.

I bet Hagar was caught off guard by the angel. She’s in the middle of the desert where no one should recognize her, let alone know her name. She is found by God mid-run. The angel calls her, “Hagar, slave of Sarai.” and I can only imagine that the title “slave of Sarai” is a check to her pride, a rebuke for her flight, and a reminder of where she ought to be. Hagar acknowledges that she’s had enough and is fleeing from her misery.

The angel of the Lord tells her to go home. In these words, he tells her to repent and go home with a submitted heart; and if she chooses to change the direction of her travel, there will be an inherent promise for her obedience and astounding blessing for generations to come.

She is to name her son Ishmael which means “God will hear.” To be given a name and a promise meant that the Lord had a plan. Ishmael is the first person in the bible that was given a name prior to his birth.

As a woman, I relate to Hagar. I was 2 months pregnant with my first child and the Lord told my husband that his name would be Judah. At 3 months pregnant, I miscarried. I was so upset with God because he revealed to us that it was a boy and gave us his name. At the time I thought, how can a loving God be so cruel? But, man did God have a plan for Judah. The baby that I carried for 14 weeks helped me lean into my faith and grieve with hope. During that time God held me tenderly, met me in my pain, and guided me closer to Him.

Like Hagar, He saw me.

He saw me beyond any title or position that I held and saw me for the broken and fragile girl in need of the affirmation and embrace from a loving Father. The type of gentle love that kisses my forehead, acknowledges my wounds, puts my pain in perspective and offers hope. In this season as we celebrate Lent's reminder of Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert, we are reminded of the benefits of denying ourselves for the greater reward that we are promised through our suffering. Suffer well, sis.

Respond

What has your pain caused you to run away from?

What does it mean to suffer well?

Rest

Lord, help me to SEE the one who sees me. Help me to reflect your character in the midst of uncertainty and hold onto the hope which is given through your son Jesus Christ. I ask you to show me what I need to turn away from and what I need to run towards. Help me to walk more closely with Jesus. To know that I am deeply loved and to share His love with others. Amen.



About the Author

Jacqueline Marshall is a business professional-turned-marketer, passionate about how storytelling and targeted messaging create business-changing content. She is a graduate of North Park University where she earned two bachelor degrees in Business and Nonprofit Management. As an Account Director, she is responsible for managing and coordinating resources needed to successfully service clients, build strategic operational plans, and balance the expectations of clients with the execution of creative work. When she isn't working, you'll find Jacqueline enjoying time with her husband and three children.

A Reflection for Sunday 2/28

By Rev. Dr. Laura Sumner Truax

Lectionary reading for 2/28/2021: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38; Mark 9:2-9

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 8:31-38, *emphasis on vs 34-35* (NIV)

Read

Mark 8:31-38

31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Reflect

It had been a long day of moving. In an effort to save money we had employed our unemployed daughter to pack our things. Meaning, for weeks we had lived with half-empty boxes, rolls of packing tape and mountains of brown paper. I had reached a breaking point when a small disagreement with my husband about how much of the shared closet each of us was “entitled” to have escalated into a shouting match followed by sullen silence.

I was not going to apologize.

How much time do I spend saving my life? Not necessarily my physical life – though I try to drink less alcohol and limit my sugar intake – but saving my professional life? Defending my ego? Protecting my integrity and honor? That’s where Jesus directs me in this teaching. We are told that we cannot save our lives by preserving them and we cannot lose them by giving them up.

Intellectually we know this is true. No gain will be had without pain; new beginnings mean that something ended. Yes, yes. We know that with our head, but it is not our head that needs to know this truth; it’s our heart. Our gut. That cellular something that moves us from self-protection and emotional

guardedness. How can we choose the way of humility in a world that screams self-recognition? How will people know we are special if we don't relentlessly trumpet our credentials? How will people know we are right if we are willing to let things go?

Jesus knew that the act of clinging to our life; life in all its forms –status, honor, ego—would have a chilling effect on our ability to respond to him and to our neighbor. Jesus began this passage in Mark 8:31 by explaining that the respected authorities, the religious institutions, i.e., the legitimate voices of respect and power, would all reject him...and Jesus was okay with that. He would not change his message nor make himself more palatable to the prevailing religious norms in any way simply to save his life. In addition to personal integrity, Jesus was not going to fight back in self-defense and self-protection.

Jesus would go to the cross. I was unwilling to yield a couple of closet drawers.

Respond

What parts of your life are you busy protecting? Where are you being called to surrender your ego or lower your pride so that you can live less guarded? Ask Jesus to show you and give you the courage to follow him.

Rest

Ever creating Spirit of God, we ask you to review our lives and reveal our pockets of resistance. Show us where we defend and protect and refuse your path of vulnerability and love. Give us the courage to live the way of the cross. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Laura Truax is senior pastor of LaSalle Street Church in Chicago and serves on the Seminary Advisory Board at the University of Dubuque. Dr. Truax holds a Master of Divinity degree from Loyola University and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the joint program of North Park Seminary and Fuller Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Undone: When coming apart puts you back together* (2013) and *Love Let Go: Radical Generosity for the real world* (2017) and is part of the Red Letter Christians.

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A Reflection for Monday 3/1

By Leslie Michele

Lectionary reading for 3/1/2021: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 21:1-7; Hebrews 1:8-12

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45 (Living Bible)

Read

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Thank the Lord for all the glorious things he does; proclaim them to the nations. 2 Sing his praises and tell everyone about his miracles. 3 Glory in the Lord; O worshipers of God, rejoice. 4 Search for him and for his strength, and keep on searching! 5-6 Think of the mighty deeds he did for us, his chosen ones—descendants of God’s servant Abraham, and of Jacob. Remember how he destroyed our enemies.

7 He is the Lord our God. His goodness is seen everywhere throughout the land.

8-9 Though a thousand generations pass he never forgets his promise, his covenant with Abraham and Isaac

10-11 and confirmed with Jacob. This is his never-ending treaty with the people of Israel: “I will give you the land of Canaan as your inheritance.”

37 [Then God] brought his people safely out from Egypt, loaded with silver and gold; there were no sick and feeble folk among them then. 38 Egypt was glad when they were gone, for the dread of them was great. 39 He spread out a cloud above them to shield them from the burning sun and gave them a pillar of flame at night to give them light.

40 They asked for meat, and he sent them quail and gave them manna—bread from heaven. 41 He opened up a rock, and water gushed out to form a river through the dry and barren land; 42 for he remembered his sacred promises to Abraham his servant. 43 So he brought his chosen ones singing into the Promised Land. 44 He gave them the lands of the Gentiles, complete with their growing crops; they ate what others planted. 45 This was done to make them faithful and obedient to his laws. Hallelujah!

Reflect

Remember. Tell. Proclaim. Remember. Tell. Proclaim.

Psalm 105 begins with a call to worship- a call to remember. To revel in appreciation for God’s past wondrous works. To bear witness again and again and carry that witness for others to behold. To remember so that we can be infused with strength and sturdiness as we live out life.

As I take inventory of last year, I hold in the balance that life throws us whammies constantly and the world is filled with lots of scary things. I suppose that is why it is so important to remember. The history of how God has shown up in my life grounded me in 2020. So this life lesson to open my heart and open my mouth to thank God has been a beautiful journey of invoking gratitude. I embrace the zeal and fervor

imbued in this passage. I say this because 2020 was filled with all kinds of deliverance worthy moments! I leaned into this fervor because God did indeed sustain me! So I appreciate that this Psalm tells us to practice remembering God's miracles and wonders in our lives.

I love the memories I have of my Grandmother. She was a homemaker by profession and was marvelous at creating a loving home. Regularly, as she went about her day; whether, ironing, cooking, canning or cleaning, she intentionally breathed out a "thank you Lord"...ever so gentle. This clear memory of her remembering God, her worship, her acknowledgement, her quiet adoration as she blessed God in the middle of the middle, her eased expression of gratitude, her devotion to remember- it is still ever present with me today. I find that I now whisper and sing and dance "thank you Lord" in my life. As I create the practice of this simple phrase, this holy phrase -flowing freely from my lips, I feel the assurance that it creates. The wild and measured gratitude. The clarity of a whisper and the wild joy of a song. I bore witness to my Grandmother telling the world of her appreciation- because I heard. This private exchange that wasn't private. In the hearing I became a witness. I now have my own full-bodied rejoice for God.

Dedication to remembering invokes a deep connection to God's power in our lives. God's covenant with Israel is a testimony that has inspired generations through thousands of years. That "through" is powerful. He delivered them from Egypt into provision that prepared them for provision. They went from glory to glory... God took them. God takes us too.

So, the remembering is for now. For our own upcoming testimony time. Our worship is to remember and anchor us to tomorrow. The storytelling is precisely for now, to hear the stories of old and how they navigated relinquishing control and settling in. And that incites my desire to nurture my ability to see the bright side- because I keep in clear view, God's side. I want to remember.

During this lent season I will continue my journey of releasing my blotchy memory, my proclivity to forget that all is well in God. God's grace has crossed the generations to pour into my present. I will allow myself to let go because like in verse 41, I want the rocks to break open and the water to gush into my barren lands...our barren lands.

I encourage you to remember and hold your evidence of God's faithfulness close because... verse 43 says they sang their way into the promised land.

What testimony will you allow to flow from your lips? What songs are you singing on your way "through"? What flows in your whisper? As for me, I remember- I hear you Grandma. And now- so does the world.

Respond

I encourage you to create a daily 5-15 minute ritual of naming what you are grateful for. Start with deep breaths to settle your mind. Allow your body to relax and then name at least five things you are grateful for. Release expectations about list making and start where you are. Allow yourself to be delighted. Allow the wonder to enter in. Lastly, take your time and let the joy build over the days and weeks and months and...Keep this habit because these moments of remembering can bless you and those around you to create generational wellbeing...and more.

Rest

Holy God that is. Your life long love for us has sustained, maintained, inspired and nurtured our lives. May we find delight. May we find peace. May we find that deep belly joy and wonder in remembering our history in you. Our very breath is manna. May we find rest in our memories and let the praise story of You, oh God flow freely from our lips. Amen.



About the Author

Leslie Michele is a Chicago based, classically trained musician steeped in music that has grown out of the Black American experience. As a speaker, writer and performer, she has performed all over the world, and is dedicated to making music and crafting immersive, artistic experiences that facilitate change and transform society for the better. Additionally, she is a member of the band, The Many- an uncommon, intentionally diverse collective making music for people to sing together about peace and justice and a world where all belong.

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To check out the band: www.themanyarehere.com

A Reflection for Tuesday 3/2

By Marcia de Vries

Lectionary reading for 3/2/2021: Psalm 105:1-11; Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19 (NIV)

Read

Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-19

1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.

3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (...)

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had an opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Reflect

Whenever I read the story about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice the only son that God gave him (the child he literally had to wait 100 years for to receive), I am always surprised at the ease with which Abraham is ready to obey what God has asked him to do. Abraham heard the Lord and immediately built an altar, tied up his young son Isaac and took out his knife. He did this without questioning or doubting. It was only at that moment that God made it clear to Abraham that it was a test and he was able to spare Isaac. Hebrews 11:18 reminds us that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, even though God had promised Abraham that he would become a father of many nations through Isaac.

Abraham must have had an incredible amount of faith that God knew what He was doing, and that what He was doing was good. Hebrews 11:1-3 tells us what it means to have faith: to have confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. The Amplified Bible describes this assurance as "the evidence of things unseen and the conviction of their reality."

I don't know about you, but sometimes I struggle to have that kind of conviction, to feel assured of things that I cannot see. I don't always feel like I have that deep confidence that things which seem impossible or at very best a far stretch will come to pass, just because I believe God has spoken to me about this.

And yet: I am so challenged by what I read in Hebrews 11: 13-16. Some of the Biblical examples mentioned in this chapter died only seeing God's promises (the things they had faith for) from a distance, without every truly setting foot on the promised land themselves. It would have been so easy for them to stay in their homeland, where they knew what life was like and what to expect. Or they could have become discouraged during their faith-journey, only to turn around to travel back to the safety of their old home. Instead, they lived their lives in the assurance that no matter what the promises of God would look like in their lifetime, walking forward in faith was better than staying where they knew what to expect (or perhaps more accurately: where they didn't have many expectations at all).

Ultimately, it is the choice we must all make: are we going to trust in what we can see, understand and control for ourselves or do we have the assurance and the conviction that God has the best in mind, even when it doesn't (yet) make sense or when it requires sacrifice on our part (whether that be to our own comfort, to a dream, to whatever it is that we may have built up for ourselves). Do we believe that He can lead us into a different kind of world?

Respond

Think of an area where you believe God wants to bring a change in your life or a way in which He wants to bring a change through you. Pray and ask Him how you can take the next step toward where He is leading you. Are there things that are keeping you back from walking in faith in this area of your life?

Rest

Lord, today I choose to have faith in you - the assurance and confidence in what I cannot see (yet). I choose not to follow my own understanding or live in my own comfort zone but to trust in Your unfailing character and Your love for me. Amen.



About the Author

After traveling the globe for most of her life, Marcia de Vries has now settled in her home town of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She has worked as a missionary and aid worker for many years until her heart for justice led her into the legal field.

A Reflection for Wednesday 3/3

By Rev. Ellie VerGowe

Lectionary reading for 3/3/2021: Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Jeremiah 30:12-22; John 12:36-43

Selected passage for reflection: John 12:36b-43 (NRSV)

Read

John 12:36b-43

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,

“He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.

Reflect

Glory and wonder. When the pandemic began, I didn’t see much of either. Where was God’s glory when a new virus was spreading? Where was God as we were afraid? Was there glory in our grief? Wonder in our aching?

The writers of Isaiah and John were not without their own griefs, fears and aches. And from their writings it doesn’t look like they suppressed their overwhelming feelings nor pretended they didn’t have questions. But they also saw God’s glory, too, maybe sometimes mixed with the grief. In exile and its aftermath, Isaiah preached of the glory of God’s heart of grace removing sins as far as the East is from the West. John, after the tumult of the fall of Rome, wrote of the wonder of God becoming flesh and making home among us.

And so I set out to find that glory and wonder for myself. It took some time. I wasn’t especially happy to be trapped at home and worried about getting sick or getting others sick when I left for unavoidable work and life things. I was still afraid. I was still in the middle of grief. But soon some things came to me. And I wrote this poem:

Wonder

*In this space
I want to find wonder,
Not just in flowers
Leaves dew drops laden
And skies painted red.
I want to find it
Too
In a clean sink
In uncomfortable solitude (for what does it tell me?)
In opening a window
In the way light reflects on my wall
In the time of day I am never home
And in the glory
Of freshly washed sheets.*

I felt an invitation to watch for the glory and watch for the wonder. It started pretty small with things like noticing new leaves on my houseplants or basking in the warmth of clean laundry. But soon, glory came in all shapes and sizes and I began to feel awe when my roommate's puppy looked at me with hopeful eyes, when Mount Rainier peaked through the clouds, or when I met a neighbor while getting my mail who had the most delightful crinkle on the side of her eyes above her mask.

I began to think that perhaps that glory and wonder had been in front of me the whole time and maybe even in the most devastating of moments. And I wondered how many times I saw that glory and wonder and stayed quiet about it because people might talk. Because when I started looking for glory and wonder, I tended to find it in the most unexpected and most "unworthy" of places. Tiny scraggly plants that burst through cement were utterly gorgeous. People who weren't considered polite company were very clearly wonderful and those who were pushed to the edges of things were obviously glorious.

The threat of the Pharisees kicking them out of the synagogue and their communities kept many from confessing to God's glory that they beheld. They believed the signs and wonders, saw the image of God in Gentiles and sex workers. But they didn't say anything because they knew it could bring real consequences. We know that this still happens. When God reveals Godself, the God we find isn't always accepted in our institutions and any halls of power. In fact, God's glory is usually threatening to such things. And yet, how can we witness such jaw dropping glory without also celebrating the one who created it and the ones who bear it? God, give us clear eyes to see, tender hearts to believe and courageous voices to confess to your glory!

Respond

How might the Divine be inviting you to behold glory and wonder in your life? How can you see the signs and wonders and not only believe them but also be courageous enough to confess them?

Rest

Divine God, you are glorious and we are filled with wonder when we see you in tiny plants, in clean sheets and in those that bear your image. Give us eyes to notice you each and every moment. Give us courage to celebrate and shout from the rooftops what we have witnessed in everything from clean sinks to our glorious human siblings. Amen.



About the Author

Ellie VerGowe is a pastor & artist who loves to paint, sing, write poetry & be in the mountains as much as possible! Ellie currently works as a pastor at a church in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, is a spiritual care intern at Harborview Hospital & is studying to become a spiritual director. Check out her visual art website at ellievergowear.com or at [@ellievergowear](https://www.instagram.com/ellievergowear) on instagram.

A Reflection for Thursday 3/4

By Pastor Helen Jang

Lectionary reading for 3/4/2021: Psalm 19; Exodus 19:1-9a; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Peter 2:4-10 (ESV)

Read

1 Peter 2:4-10

4As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

7So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,”

8and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Reflect

The foundation of any building structure is carefully planned and designed by the architect. It is given important attention, because the foundation will determine how well the building will stand. Specifically, the cornerstone, the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, is considered the most important piece of the building. The cornerstone is where the whole weight of the edifice rests on, and without this strong piece, the whole building would not be able to stand and would ultimately collapse.

This principal architectural term is also given to Jesus Christ (Acts 4:11). He is called the cornerstone; the foundation and the most essential in God’s building. In turn, here in 1 Peter, believers are called the “living stones”.

Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross acknowledges believers to have the honor of being called God’s living stone. Believers are called to be part of God’s building with deep affection, as we are seen as chosen and precious (v4). It pictures our now intimate and secure relationship with God as Christ the foundation. However, this calling does not have an individualistic feature.

We are made God’s living stones as an assembly (v9); we are called to be built as God’s spiritual house(v5) and proclaiming God’s excellencies (v9) as a whole. We are given a purpose to be the Church,

the body of Christ, that will be a testimony and a declaration of God's praises in this dark world. This is an outcome that comes as the Church joins together in one body.

It means we were always meant to build the Church on the foundation of the Cornerstone, with individual lives coming together as the Church. Just as a single stone is with not much power, when many stones are brought together, it can result in building strong and beautiful edifices.

Imagine the praises and the testimony of Christ that can be displayed to the world if the Church continues to grow and builds together as well as individually. If the Church is filled with harmony with one heart and mind for Christ, it will inherently bring praises to God. Along with that, the beauty of the Body of Christ that can be exhibited in the unity of the Believers would be a powerful testimony to the foundation in which the Church was built on.

So many times, churches experience detachments and divisions because we forget our calling as living stones. We lose sight and take our eyes off of the Cornerstone as our foundation, which sadly brings damage to the churches and to the Body of Christ.

The Lenten season can be used to not only reflect on our individual relationships with God, but also how we fit into the big picture of the Church. How can the Church confirm the Gospel of Christ to the world? How well are the churches doing in their testament of Christ in order to build the Church?

Let's preserve God's calling to be His living stone and secure our foundation as Christ, the Cornerstone

Respond

What can you do individually to help edify and support your churches in order to keep Jesus as the foundation of the Church? What role can you play in building the Church? What can you do to love the Church more? Reflect on different ways you can step up in your church in order to bring unity and praises to God in your church.

Rest

Father God, we confess, as the Church, we need Christ to be our foundation. We pray that your churches may bring praises to You as You build us in unity. May you use Your churches for Your Kingdom work and for Your glory. May your calling be our life's purpose and vision. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.



About the Author

Helen Jang graduated from North Park Theological with a Master of Divinity degree in 2012 and resides in Chicago. She is currently a full time social worker with Catholic Charities and is also the Young Adults Pastor and Youth Pastor at Full Gospel Chicago Church. She has been doing youth ministry since 1996 and can't imagine using her life for anything else.

A Reflection for Friday 3/5

By Anna Murphy

Lectionary reading for 3/5/2021: Psalm 19; Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 7:30-40 (NIV)

Read

Acts 7:30-40

“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord’s voice: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’ This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’ He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”

Reflect

Has God ever asked you to step into a place you didn’t want to go or feel ready to go? Or maybe even go back to? If I was Moses, 40 years of hiding from my past would have me lulled into a false sense of security. I can almost hear myself say, “I’m just fine out here living my quiet life in Midian with my family. People don’t know where I come from or what I’ve done. I’m safe here.”

But God wasn’t done with Moses, and he couldn’t hide from his Father anywhere on earth. In fact, the Lord would call Moses right back to the very land where, surely, he would have been reminded of what caused him to leave all those years ago. Can you imagine how it must have felt returning to a place of regret and pain? And yet, God will never lead us to a place or position he hasn’t prepared. What was once a memory of shame and death, will now forever be redeemed in his story as a place of freedom as he led the Israelites to liberation- freeing himself from a different kind of captivity at the very same time. Not only did he have to contend with the voices in his own head, but the text says he was also rejected by his fellow Israelites.

Moses went from a man who fled and lived in hiding to a faithful, courageous leader simply by being obedient to the Lord’s voice. He was never disqualified or forgotten because of his past. Our God is about redemption- not replacement. I believe he wants the same thing for each of us.

Respond

Could God be calling you to return to a place, event, or experience to give you freedom and liberate others? Moses heard the Lord calling him back through the flames of a burning bush in the desert. Get into the desert and see if you can't hear the Lord! In what area of your life do you need to trust God to give a new ending to an old story?

Rest

Lord you are the giver of life and author of our stories. Will you give us the courage to draw closer to you that we might hear your voice clearly. It's not always easy to quiet the voices around us- including our own. Bring our focus back to you, and give us the strength to do what you have laid ahead of us. We thank you, God, that you can take the scary, broken parts and places of our story and use them for good. May we receive the living words you have for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



About the Author

Anna Murphy is an unschooled, ordinary woman who has been with Jesus. She lives in Richmond, VA and works in the field of addiction and recovery. Anna's passion is to empower and encourage others into freedom and a life lived fully alive through Jesus.

A Reflection for Saturday 3/6

By Melanie Marie Myatt

Lectionary reading for 3/6/2021: Psalm 19; Exodus 19:16-25; Mark 9:2-8

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 9:2-8 (NLT)

Read

Mark 9:2-8

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them. Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus.

Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them.

Reflect

As I write this, my dog is sound asleep at my feet, my kids are laughing in the next room, and I am trying to ignore the toys and mess that are scattered around me.

Ordinary life.

But every so often, in the midst of ordinary life, don't we catch a glimpse of glory?

Peter, James, and John received more than a glimpse of glory when they were on that mountain with Jesus. We know that what they saw changed their lives forever because of how they wrote about it in other places in the Bible.

Why was this experience so life-changing?

Because what they saw, as incredible and close to unbelievable as it seems, is our reality. We live as those for whom this world is not our home. Jesus revealed to the three disciples, and, through them, to us, that something glorious is present just outside of our line of sight.

We begin Lent on Ash Wednesday. For many of us, that includes having ashes spread on our foreheads as we are told, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

For how can we see God's glory if we are caught up in our own sense of glory and greatness? Instead we need to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. When we keep our "earthiness" in its proper perspective, we are better able to glimpse God's glory and greatness.

Ash Wednesday is our welcome into the season of Lent. During this time, many of us choose to sacrifice something that is important to us or commit to acts of service to others. When we do something different, when we change our routine, we remember that there is something greater than us, something greater outside our ordinary life. Those Lenten moments when we think of our sacrifice, when we consider an act of service, we are reminded God's glory is just outside our line of sight.

I remember when my brother-in-law lent me his polarized sunglasses one summer day. Suddenly I could see the fish swimming beneath the glimmering surface of the lake. A whole world opened up to me because I put on those special lenses.

The good news is that because of Christ's life, death, and sacrifice, we receive special lenses to view glimpses of God's glory. Any time we pause to close our eyes to ordinary life we open our hearts to glimpses of God's glory in the form of God's love, compassion, forgiveness, and joy.

Just outside our line of sight, God's glory shines. Let's watch for glimpses of God's glory.

Respond

Wherever you are right now, take a few moments to settle yourself into your space. Close your eyes and take some deep, cleansing breaths. Imagine yourself up on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John. You hear God's voice: "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." Listen carefully and quietly for Jesus' words to you. What does Jesus want you to know today?

Rest

Glorious God, you have always given us invitations to glimpse your glory. When you met with Moses, his face glowed with your glory. You gave plans for the building of the Tabernacle and the Temple that reflect your own heavenly throne room. You revealed yourself to Elijah on the mountain and gave Elisha the sign of the fiery chariot. Then you did the unthinkable. You sent Jesus so that we could have an opportunity to see you in human form. You continue to give us glimpses of your glory in the mundanity and busyness of our ordinary lives. Today, open our eyes to your glory. Open our hearts and minds to the reality that is always just beyond the line of sight. Though we cannot see you face to face, let us hear your gentle whisper today. Amen.



About the Author

Melanie is a writer, speaker, preacher, spiritual director, and teacher. You can join her in her search for glimpses of glory on Instagram and Facebook. She has a Master of Arts in English, a Master of Divinity and a certificate in Spiritual Direction. She lives in Chicago with her four kids and her co-dependant dog.

A Reflection for Sunday 3/7

By Rev. Sarah Robinson

Lectionary reading for 3/7/2021: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Selected passage for reflection: John 2:13-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

Read

John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 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. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 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.

Reflect

I have been thinking a lot lately about Holy/Righteous Anger. Of all the stories about Jesus, this is the most zealous and passionate, the most angry we see him. And so it is worth reflecting on as we look to Jesus, God-in-human-form, and what made him angry and how he handled it.

Sometimes when I read this passage I find myself alienated by the Jesus I find here, bewildered by his anger. I am not used to an angry Jesus. I don't know what to do with him.

But lately, I feel like I identify more and more with angry-in-the-temple Jesus. Over and over, we see a pattern of who and what made Jesus frustrated and angry. Most often it was the religious authorities in his community- those who burdened the people with religion instead of freeing them with it, all the while lining their own pockets and basking in glory and attention.

In Matthew 12:34 Jesus actually even refers to the Pharisees as a "brood of vipers," warning them to check their hearts and speech- is it helpful or hurting?

Over and over, the anger seems to be at a sort of double standard and a misuse of scripture and the artifacts of their religion (like the temple) in order to perpetuate injustice for personal gain.

In the same way, I see how this has also been happening, particularly in the white western Christian church. While some of what I have experienced as some of the most egregious examples have been in

the last few years, the biggest discovery for me is that the roots of a lot of the injustices in history have been at the hands of Christians and blessed by the church.

As a pastor and life-long Christian, I too am a part of the religious establishment that has actively participated in these wrongs and abuses, whether or not I had direct involvement or not. And so I wonder if my discomfort with Angry Jesus had more to do with an unconscious recognition of this reality.

As I grow in my awareness and faith, I have grown to identify more with Angry Jesus. But in humility I also recognize my privileged position of power and authority, and I find myself unsure what to do next.

How does this “recovering Pharisee” move to a place of discipleship with Jesus and solidarity with those he repeatedly defends and cares for whom the church is actively harming?

This Lent I feel Jesus inviting me not to the temple, but to “a deserted place to pray” (Mark 1:35). I hear Jesus calling me to a posture of learning and prayerful reflection, so I might respond in line with the Holy Spirit in answer to this question

Respond

How do you experience Angry Jesus in this passage? Who do you identify with? In this 2021 Lenten season, how is Jesus calling you in light of Jesus’ righteous anger toward the religious establishment of his day and ours?

I encourage you to find your “deserted place to pray,” even if it looks like a 60 second escape into the bathroom while your Zoom meeting is on hold and your toddler is screaming “Mama!” I promise you the Holy Spirit will honor the heart and intention of that 60 seconds and meet you there, too.

Rest

God of all creation, in this season and time, help us recenter ourselves within the heart of Jesus, even...no, especially... when it helps us enter into our own place of discomfort, a place where we can grow. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Sarah loves living in the eclectic Ecodistrict of Audubon Park in Orlando, FL. A pastor & community leader, she enjoys biking everywhere and tending her full front yard garden! She has a passion for traveling and finds great joy in connecting with people, their arts, and cultures. Instagram @pastorfarmersarah

A Reflection for Monday 3/8

by Rev. Johnna Hayward Muniz

Lectionary reading for 3/8/2021: Psalm 84; 1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Corinthians 3:10-23 (The Message)

Read

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Or, to put it another way, you are God's house. Using the gift God gave me as a good architect, I designed blueprints; Apollos is putting up the walls. Let each carpenter who comes on the job take care to build on the foundation! Remember, there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ. Take particular care in picking out your building materials. Eventually there is going to be an inspection. If you use cheap or inferior materials, you'll be found out. The inspection will be thorough and rigorous. You won't get by with a thing. If your work passes inspection, fine; if it doesn't, your part of the building will be torn out and started over. But you won't be torn out; you'll survive—but just barely.

You realize, don't you, that you are the temple of God, and God himself is present in you? No one will get by with vandalizing God's temple, you can be sure of that. God's temple is sacred—and you, remember, are the temple.

Don't fool yourself. Don't think that you can be wise merely by being relevant. Be God's fool—that's the path to true wisdom. What the world calls smart, God calls stupid. It's written in Scripture, He exposes the hype of the hipsters.

The Master sees through the smoke screens of the know-it-alls.

I don't want to hear any of you bragging about yourself or anyone else. Everything is already yours as a gift—Paul, Apollos, Peter, the world, life, death, the present, the future—all of it is yours, and you are privileged to be in union with Christ, who is in union with God.

Reflect

How do we build when it feels like the foundation is crumbling? We approach this Easter knowing that the world is in turmoil. Though it has been in chaos before, it seems more palpable for many of us now due to the ability to connect to news anywhere in the world at any time. Whether we live in Japan, Belgium, Brazil or the U.S., there is a type of division taking place even as the ease in understanding one another is potentially the highest. How can this paradox exist?

The crises have become something we share globally now - pandemic, unveiling of systemic injustice on a world scale, economic stress, health care inequalities, the rise of nationalism. Pick almost any country and you can trace the effects of each one of these. Our sense of sturdy ground, perhaps our illusion of a solid foundation, is falling apart and more than I can remember in my lifetime, the Word of God seems as relevant as ever. Karl Barth's charge to read the Bible and the newspaper side by side fits our times.

When I interpret the newspaper through the Word of God, (meaning Scripture and also the Person of Jesus), I have hope that indeed, the foundation is NOT crumbling. Despite what I can see with my eyes and hear with my ears, “there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ.”

This passage stuck out to me because in our work in Lyon, France, we call ourselves “Cultural Bridge Builders”. We are here as God’s temples, using the gifts God gave us to bring people together who would not normally meet and trying to build bridges between cultures, languages, social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and more. Living in the fourth most atheist country in the world, our setting is shockingly skeptical, post-Christian, anti-easy-answers and unsubstantiated faith. And this is not discouraging. To our wonderful surprise, there is a spiritual thirst and search for meaning and good - perhaps what we would call a hunt for this foundation that has already been laid - everywhere we turn. In our broken humanity and with our feeble attempts at building on the foundation, we are sometimes struck with the feeling that we are indeed “fools for Christ”.

On our best days, we are not seeking merely to be relevant. Instead, we hope our lives will be overturned, exposed, dissected, so that those in our communities see not us, but Jesus. On days when I experience discouragement or a feeling of helplessness, losing sense of the foundation and my purpose here, I have a habit of writing out what I am thankful for. “The world, life, death, the present, the future” - all of it is ours! All of it is a gift! For we desire to live in union with Christ who is in union with God. The Carpenter is rebuilding each one of us so that we may in turn build with Christ, the solid foundation of Christ, so all may see it... and believe.

Respond

Where does the foundation seem to be crumbling in your neighborhood, at your workplace, in your family, in your relationships? Ask God to reveal one place where you can build. (Example: There is a lost sense of community here, so recently, we started a running group through meetup.com so people can meet and run outside in the park with masks and social distancing.)

Rest

O God, our Architect, our Builder, our Carpenter and our one common Foundation, we embrace these new (or not so new) words and images as part of your identity. We invite you to rebuild us as you wish, in ways that may seem foolish to some, so that your Name and goodness can be seen and multiplied in our inner and outer circles. Thank you for our uniqueness, our idiosyncrasies, our humanity, our mistakes, and our foolishness. May it all be used for your glory, now and forever. Amen.



About the Author

Johnna is serving overseas with Serve Globally in Lyon, France. After living in the U.S., Japan and Belgium, she married a Brazilian and they serve their local community through conversation in English and other languages, refugee and immigrant support, and empowering people to find their part in God’s story. She is certified as an IDI Qualified Administrator and is currently being transformed by God’s grace through parenting two young girls and participating in three anti-racism cohorts.

A Reflection for Tuesday 3/9

By Brandi Sanders

Lectionary reading for 3/9/2021: Psalm 84; 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19; Hebrews 9:23-28

Selected passage for reflection: 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19 (NIV)

Read

2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19

Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah, daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done.

In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites, assembled them in the square on the east side and said: "Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the Lord our God and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the Lord's dwelling place and turned their backs on him. They also shut the doors of the portico and put out the lamps. They did not burn incense or present any burnt offerings at the sanctuary to the God of Israel. Therefore, the anger of the Lord has fallen on Judah and Jerusalem; he has made them an object of dread and horror and scorn, as you can see with your own eyes. This is why our fathers have fallen by the sword and why our sons and daughters and our wives are in captivity. Now I intend to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us. My sons, do not be negligent now, for the Lord has chosen you to stand before him and serve him, to minister before him and to burn incense."

16The priests went into the sanctuary of the Lord to purify it. They brought out to the courtyard of the Lord's temple everything unclean that they found in the temple of the Lord. The Levites took it and carried it out to the Kidron Valley. They began the consecration on the first day of the first month, and by the eighth day of the month they reached the portico of the Lord. For eight more days they consecrated the temple of the Lord itself, finishing on the sixteenth day of the first month. Then they went to King Hezekiah and reported: "We have purified the entire temple of the Lord, the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the table for setting out the consecrated bread, with all its articles. We have prepared and consecrated all the articles that King Ahaz removed in his unfaithfulness while he was king. They are now in front of the Lord's altar."

Reflect

I've seen often on television, where families have handed down family rings, houses, even businesses as a tradition! I began to think over the years, maybe my family just watched another channel. I too wanted something of value to inherit. My grandmother did share her cornbread recipe with me, and that's priceless! However, I haven't been the recipient of any family heirlooms or property. At least, not yet!

In today's text, King Hezekiah inherited the kingdom of Jerusalem.

If you read more about the very interesting lineage of kings in Jerusalem, you will find that there were So. Many. Awful. Kings! King Hezekiah was one of the greats.

One thing that isn't mentioned in this text that stands out to me, is that the king's father and predecessor, is noted for being a dreadful king (2 Chronicles 28). He refused to follow God. How then did King Hezekiah know what it looked like to obey God? How did he know what it took to be a great king? He had seen firsthand what happens when the people of God reject their God. King Hezekiah decided that he would do what was right in the sight of the Lord.

I wonder how many of us come from families that have rejected God. How many of us ourselves have refused to follow God? How many of us have been counted out because of our family history? Are you living out your family's generational curses? Does the shame of your past or present keep you from doing what's right in the sight of the Lord?

In the first month of his reign, King Hezekiah took to repairing the relationship between God and the children of Israel. In the first month, he and the people he had around him, got started on the consecration of the Temple. It took them 16 days to remove all the defiling junk that had accumulated. Sixteen days to rid the Temple of all the things that had no business there in the first place.

What can you rid yourself of in 16 days? And who do you have around to help and support you? King Hezekiah gathered the right individuals and decided to follow God. Like King Hezekiah, we too can make the decision to flip the script and be led by God. We don't have to be like our parents. We don't have to continue on the path we have found ourselves on.

It's not too late to choose God.

Respond

Choose God.

- What can you get rid of in the next 16 days?
- How many relationships can you mend?
- How many workouts can you do?
- How many steps can you take?
- How many families can you bless?
- How many compliments can you give?
- How many people can you give your cart to at Aldi?
- How many children can you pray for?
- How many people can you reach out to?

Rest

Dear God,

Thank you for grace. Thank you for another chance, and another chance, and another chance to choose you. I pray that you would surround us with individuals who will support and encourage us as we follow you. Help us to not avoid the people who will be able to help us get rid of the junk that has no place in our lives. I pray for courage and patience.

Amen.



About the Author

Brandi S. Sanders is an outgoing and proud wife, mom, daughter, sister, and auntie who currently resides in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Brandi serves as the Manager of Global Personnel for Serve Globally (a mission priority of the Evangelical Covenant Church). Many people are familiar with Brandi's singing gifts – she has been singing for as long as she can remember! Brandi is currently exploring other gifts and finding new hobbies. Near the end of 2020, she joined a virtual workout group and now appreciates being super sweaty at the end of a good workout. One last thing – Brandi is the granddaughter of the late Hezekiah Knowles.

A Reflection for Wednesday 3/10

by Leanette Pokuwaah

Lectionary reading for 3/10/2021: Psalm 84; Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19

Selected passage for reflection: Mark 11:15-19 (The Message)

Read

Mark 11:15-19

15-17 They arrived at Jerusalem. Immediately on entering the Temple Jesus started throwing out everyone who had set up shop there, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of the bankers and the stalls of the pigeon merchants. He didn't let anyone even carry a basket through the Temple. And then he taught them, quoting this text:

My house was designated a house of prayer for the nations;

You've turned it into a hangout for thieves.

18 The high priests and religion scholars heard what was going on and plotted how they might get rid of him. They panicked, for the entire crowd was carried away by his teaching.

19 At evening, Jesus and his disciples left the city.

Reflect

Complexity

In this scripture passage, I cannot help but put myself into Jesus's place. I imagine walking into what is supposed to be a sacred space transformed into the modern-day mall. Big retails, small businesses, and banks have managed to misuse this place and maybe even abuse it. As Jesus was, it is easy to become deeply outraged and I want to immediately call for justice against them too! But suddenly a sinking feeling sets in.

If I can use my "sanctified imagination" as Wil Gafney coined it, what if that was me selling and bartering outside of that sacred space and this was my desperate attempt to make the most money I could to live, to survive, to support my family?

Maybe they were not in need financially and they were the classic exploiter and oppressor, no arguments and no questions about it, as we are often taught. We are not sure of the identities of the buyers (or even the sellers) but I imagine they were exploited in some way in this business exchange. These sellers were probably these classic Zacchaeuses of their world, common thieves, taking advantage of their own people.

But let's still dive a little deeper into this common perspective. The traditional interpretation and single story we have been taught. This has made complete sense since these merchants and bankers are "the villain" characters, maybe even the religious leaders who were around, and Jesus was right in getting angry at the injustice he saw and in expressing a "fierce compassion" toward those who were being exploited.

But with every character in a story, we discover people's flaws, humanity, their complexity. Jesus came as a disrupter, ripping away at the layers of society, institutions, communities, and humanity, to say: "Hey stop here and just think. When you sell these things to make an extra buck here, you hurt people, you even hurt yourself. You rob them of their dignity, their humanity, their complexity. And because of our intrinsic interconnectedness, you lose yours too."

There is no doubt that these bankers and merchants need to own up to their mistakes, acknowledge how they exploited their own people, and offer reparations but I wonder if Jesus was calling for more than that?

Maybe Jesus was trying to break a cycle here of how we think of people and understand our own humanity? Maybe there was a call for restorative justice that deeply included collective healing of the exploited and exploiter within our communities and institutions. Jesus is challenging us to end both the personal harm and injustice we do unto to each other and the systemic harm and injustice we see in our communities and our institutions. To become bearers of compassion, kindness, healing and justice when we see harm is being done.

Respond

Take a moment to pause, find a comfortable place to sit or lay down. Take a few deep breaths right where you are, to settle into your bodies.

- How do you feel as you sink into your bodies and reflect on this passage and on my reflection?
- Which characters in this story (Jesus, the merchant, banker, buyers, the bystanders, etc) do you identify with the most and why? Which characters can't you seem to relate to and why?
- Where and how can you become bearers of compassion, kindness, healing, and justice?

Rest

Oh God of love, the God who sees us, who sees our humanity, our complexities. We are grateful for your deep well of compassion, kindness, and healing you extend toward us. May we become a reflection of you, becoming disruptors of harm and injustice. May we become bearers of compassion, kindness, healing, and justice. Amen.

About the Author



For Leanette Pokuwaah, Chicago certainly brings the scent of home for her. After being one of the first to take up leadership in the Inclusive Collective in its first year, she has seen it grow and supported this radically inclusive Christian community by facilitating an open, warm and healing worship experience. As Director of Worship, she will look forward to continuing to generate those worship experiences. She is passionate about curating communal healing spaces through faith, social justice initiatives, and community. She is a writer, teacher, coach and musician who is pursuing her Masters of Divinity and Counseling Psychology. She hopes to continue to bridge spirituality, mental health, and the Enneagram within communities of color. To learn more check-out her writing at www.enneastories.com

A Reflection for Thursday 3/11

By Leana Lopez

Lectionary reading for 3/11/2021: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Genesis 9:8-17; Ephesians 1:3-6

Selected passage for reflection: Genesis 9:8-17 (NIV)

Read

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. 16 Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

Reflect

In the past few weeks, my 1-year old son has been particularly frustrated during reading time. He doesn't understand that the objects in his books aren't real. When we read together, he will try to grab things he likes, such as a car or a balloon, because he wants to pick them out of the book to play with them. He has been especially interested in rainbows recently because there is a rainbow in a favorite bedtime story about a country farm. When he reaches out to grab the rainbow on the page, arched over the farm landscape, he looks up at me pathetically and whimpers because wants so badly to cradle it in his little hand.

It was exactly a year ago to the day that my life was abruptly put at a standstill here in Chicago by the COVID19 pandemic. As someone who works in healthcare, it has been a long and scary season of doing our work while waiting and hoping. Waiting and hoping. Each day we face challenges from the destruction and loss of lives of the patients we serve in disadvantaged communities. During these long days, I have searched many times for God and God's promise. I have wanted to feel assured that we will make it through this time. I want to trust that God has not forsaken us, and that God will bring renewal to this land again.

As I read about God's covenant to Noah symbolized in the rainbow, I find myself longing for that symbol of hope, safety, and protection. I confess that like my son, I too, feel the disappointment of not being able to hold that promise in my hands. I want to tangibly see and feel that guarantee of safety. And some days I want to wail like my son does in frustration and look up at my parent for answers. Why?

It is a practice for me every morning to remind myself that even when I can't feel God's promise of hope, that it is there. In my darkest days of waiting for the pandemic to end, I have known deep down that God's love endures forever. The promise is there, even when I cannot hold it in my hands. In this day and every day, I work at trusting that redemption is on the way for God's people.

Respond

- Have you tried to reach out recently to feel and know God's promise to you?
- Lent is a time of keeping our promises. What promises to others do you need to fulfill today?
- What restores your sense of hope?

Go and do that thing that renews you with God's promise and hope.

Rest

Lord God, thank you for your faithfulness and enduring love. I pray for patience and wisdom beyond what my eyes can see. I pray for peace within my heart and peace for all of God's people. Amen.



About the Author

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

A Reflection for Friday 3/12

by Kelly Gillan Johnston

Lectionary reading for 3/12/2021: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Daniel 12:5-13; Ephesians 1:7-14

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Read

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

2 Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,

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

17 Some became fools through their rebellious
ways

and suffered affliction because of their
iniquities.

18 They loathed all food
and drew near the gates of death.

19 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.

20 He sent out his word and healed them;
he rescued them from the grave.

21 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his
unfailing love

and his wonderful deeds for humankind.

22 Let them sacrifice thank offerings
and tell of his works with songs of joy.

Reflect

“Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story,” the psalmist declares, and please don’t skip over the hazards and hardships. If you take a glance at the entirety of Psalm 107, you’ll see that while the psalmist invites worshippers to celebrate the enduring love of God, their call is also to tell the whole story, including the ugly and embarrassing bits. The bits about wandering, rebellion, confinement, sickness, and desperation.

Part of the invitation of Lent is to name the ugly and embarrassing bits of our stories and to offer them up to God. We cry out in our trouble, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner”. There is a difference between dwelling on our troubles and directing those troubles towards God in prayer. The invitation of Lent is to turn our troubles towards God in prayer. To make an honest confession of where we have wandered, got stuck, and suffered.

For me, that means naming cancer - and the doubt that lives right alongside my faith as I fight this disease. It means naming

We name the ugly and embarrassing bits of our stories, but there is a bigger story. The bigger story is always one of God’s grace. The bigger story is that time and time again, God comes to rescue and

reclaim the one who has wandered and rebelled. Time and time again, God heals and restores the one who has been injured and broken. And God gathers these redeemed together into a community, the brave ones who will tell the whole story of sincerely needing grace and also miraculously finding it.

Brennan Manning writes that God “has a single relentless stance toward us: He loves us. He is the only God man has ever heard of who loves sinners. False gods--the gods of human manufacturing--despise sinners, but the Father of Jesus loves all, no matter what they do. But of course, this is almost too incredible for us to accept.”

If we can indeed accept that God really does love us, we are called finally to turn towards God in gratitude. “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for humankind. Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.” (21-22) Just as it’s right and healthy for us to be honest about our sins and mistakes, we would do well to be intentional about giving thanks to God for our redemption.

Respond

Making and sharing playlists is a hobby of mine - and at times, it is even a spiritual practice. During certain seasons, I have relied on a handful of songs to get through and remember the bigger story of God’s grace (for example, a “[Grateful for Life](#)” playlist in the early and intense days of my cancer journey). What songs might go on your playlist right now to help you “tell of God’s works with songs of joy”? (Or you could just listen to my [Lent 2021 playlist](#)!)

Rest

God of relentless love, you know my troubles and trials. I offer them to you, and ask you once again to cover them with grace. Show me your bigger story, bigger than me, bigger than my sins and suffering, your story of redemption and love. Let me live in that story today, thanking you all the way. Amen.



About the Author

Kelly Gillan Johnston is a mom of 3 boys who is ideally outside right now, but is probably just cleaning up a mess. She serves as Pastor of Children and Family Ministries at [Naperville Covenant Church](#) in the Chicago suburbs. Thanks to COVID, she’s been spending most of her ministry time making [videos for kids](#).

A Reflection for Saturday 3/13

By Laraine Fraijo-Paul

Lectionary reading for 3/13/2021: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 20:22-29; John 3:1-13

Selected passage for reflection: John 3: 19-21 (NIRV)

Read

John 3: 19-21

19 Here is the judgment. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. They loved darkness because what they did was evil. 20 Everyone who does evil deeds hates the light. They will not come into the light. They are afraid that what they do will be seen. 21 But anyone who lives by the truth comes into the light. They live by the truth with God's help. They come into the light so that it will be easy to see their good deeds.

Reflect

"It's really dark outside," it seems my 2 year old has made it her job to communicate when it is dark outside. Generally this is followed by things we can't do (go on a walk, play outside) and things we should do (sleep, stay inside). In her own way she has judged darkness; she doesn't love it. I sense she has some apprehension or even fear connected to the dark. It reminds me of how pure children are; she prefers the light.

In John, we are given one of the most beloved verses to so many Christians, you know "God so loved the world..." and what I am drawn to is this contrast of Jesus as the light, being in the light. I am drawn to the light too. In darkness there is evil, that's what John teaches us. It's dark outside, it's full of pain and suffering. Full of despair, anxiety, loneliness. Fear, grief, secrecy, sickness, failure, mistrust....this list can go on and on. As a psychotherapist, I am privileged to bear witness to personal darkness and the uncomfortable ways people experience that darkness. It seems only natural to avoid this pain inducing darkness.

This darkness has been all around us in this past year. We are desperate as a people to get out of the darkness.

All of my favorite metaphors demonstrate the need for struggle in order to grow, to become. A butterfly must struggle to get out of the chrysalis to become; cut it out and it will die. This season is the season of darkness in our Christian faith, the mystery of Easter awaits, the light is coming. This season is necessary. We can't become just yet. It's a natural urge to get to the next few lines, the lines about light. I want to also, even as I type, I want to get to the being the light, but my spirit urges me to honor the trepidation of the darkness. Know the tough, the sad, the desolate, honor these feelings. It's so uncomfortable, because the light of Christ inside each of us knows what is true and good: being in the light fills us with hope.

Wait. Wait on Christ to lead us into the light.

And as I reply to my daughter, “the sun will come out soon”, I am also reminded of the words of Amanda Gorman:

*When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Respond

A casual meditation: Wait, now. Sit still and notice the darkness. Notice how it feels to connect to the discomfort. Breathe. Give space for our avoidant nature to try to distract. Breathe. Forgive. Breathe. Just be. The doing is for later. Call to mind the light and feel the warmth all over you.

Rest

God of darkness and light, You reign over both the day and night. Even in the darkest of times, You are God. Let peace fill our heads and our hearts as we look for the light. Help us to turn from evil and run toward the light. In Christ's name we pray, Amen. .



About the Author

Laraine Fraijo-Paul is a licensed professional counselor in Atlanta, GA. She specializes in anxiety, life stress, and family issues. She is married to Megan and is a mother to Mary Eleanor and Olivianna. Her family enjoys daily walks within their neighborhood of Kirkwood with their dogs: Berkeley and Charleigh. They are members at the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany. Bloomconsultation.com
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A Reflection for Sunday 3/14

By Kimberly Thomas

Lectionary reading for 3/14/2021: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Selected passage for reflection: Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)

Read

Numbers 21:4-9

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.

Reflect

There is a rhyme I remember from a young girl in school. My classmates and I would sing this rhyme and run around in a circle while others would chase us.

Do you remember this old nursery rhyme?

*Here we go 'round the mulberry bush, The mulberry bush, The mulberry bush,
Here we go 'round the mulberry bush...*

In this rhyme, I see the Israelites moving around the bush. Sin or, in this case, the desire to control our own lives is the mulberry bush. The Israelites move around and around this bush, creating a cycle of forgetting, remembering, repenting, and seeking forgiveness, but never moving away from the bush.

In this passage of scripture, the Israelites are unhappy. They are on a seeming eternal road trip. They don't like the journey, the meal menu, and are thirsty. I get it. I've taken road trips that seemed endless and anxious to get to my destination. I became cranky, irritable, and unhappy. So I get it; the Israelites were tired. They survived an attack from the Canaanite king in which God gives them the victory. But these ongoing episodes create this road trip from hell as they journey to the Promised Land.

In their unhappiness, the Israelites forgot. They failed to remember who they were dealing with. Our God, in all of His awesomeness, is not to be taken for granted or treated with disdain. God is the giver of life,

love, and justice. He will turn you and your problem around. Our God will heal your body and protect you from your enemies. He will provide for your needs and send the advocate to negotiate ahead of you. Our God is strong, and the Israelites, in their discomfort, simply forgot. And our God, in His wisdom, sent them a reminder.

Imagine walking with your friends and family, complaining about what's happening in your lives, feeling like you're not getting what you deserved, wondering if God will keep His promises. Suddenly, a ton of snakes jump out from the sand, biting people, and some die instantly. God was angry with His people. They're complaining, highlighting their doubt of God's love, protection, and His ability to keep His promises. So, He threw them to the snakes, and this was an act of righteous justice. The Israelites rejected God. They were ungrateful. So, God taught them a lesson. Like us, the Israelites quickly remember who God is, who to call on in the midst of terror and fear. Who do we call when we are in trouble? God is the answer. They asked Moses to intercede on their behalf. We also have an intercessor who works on our behalf, and his name is Jesus. When we are in trouble, full of fear and facing terror, we call on his name. JESUS!

And God looks at us in pity and shows us mercy. Just as Moses hung the bronze snake on the pole and the Israelites looked at it and was healed. Our Savior Jesus hung on a cross, delivering us from sin and moving us away from the mulberry bush. Sometimes, we are like the Israelites, going around and around this bush, getting burned when we get too close, asking God for His forgiveness, then going back to the bush. The cycle doesn't end until we ask not only for forgiveness but also repent from our sins. Our sins of taking God for granted and not giving Him total control over our lives hold us in bondage. Until we let go - we won't break this cycle of forgetting, remembering, repenting, and seeking forgiveness. Around and Around the mulberry bush, we go.

Respond

What are areas of your life that you are holding unto control? Resisting God's guidance? Is there a mulberry bush in your life you keep returning to?

Listen to what God is saying to you and embrace His love and gift of acceptance.

Rest

Heavenly Father in Heaven, I ask that you bless the reader with wisdom and remembrance of all you have done in their lives. I ask You to walk alone alongside them as they come to the same conclusion I have. You are the God of everything. You see all and you are everywhere. Help us to bring our sin to you so we can repent and ask for forgiveness and never return to our sin. In Jesus' name, Amen.



About the Author

Kimberly Thomas is church planter, advocate for racial justice, women and children, event planner, administration expert, foodie and a great home cook. She's a wife and a mother, daughter and sister, friend and cheerleader. She also serves as the Pastor of Administration at Radiant Covenant Church, Renton, WA. You can follow her FB:Kimberly Anne Thomas IG:@realcookingdiva

A Reflection for Monday 3/15

By Sheli Sloterbeek

Lectionary reading for 3/15/2021: Psalm 107:1-16; Exodus 15:22-27; Hebrews 3:1-6

Selected passages for reflection: Psalm 107:1-16, Hebrews 3:1-6 (NLT)

Read

Psalm 107:1-16 NLT

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

2 Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,

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

4 Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.

5 They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.

6 Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

7 He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

8 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind,

9 for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

10 Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness, prisoners suffering in iron chains,

11 because they rebelled against God's command and despised the plans of the Most High.

12 So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help.

13 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.

14 He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains.

15 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind,

16 for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.

Hebrews 3:1-6 NLT

And so, dear brothers and sisters who belong to God and are partners with those called to heaven, think carefully about this Jesus whom we declare to be God's messenger and High Priest. 2 For he was faithful to God, who appointed him, just as Moses served faithfully when he was entrusted with God's entire house.

3 But Jesus deserves far more glory than Moses, just as a person who builds a house deserves more praise than the house itself. 4 For every house has a builder, but the one who built everything is God.

5 Moses was certainly faithful in God's house as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later. 6 But Christ, as the Son, is in charge of God's entire house. And we are God's house, if we keep our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ.

Reflect

We each have a story. A narrative that's being written each moment. And every one of our stories collides with another's story every single day. And when we hear someone else's story, our own stories often intersect - weaving together feelings and meaning. The Psalmist tells the stories of many people, displaced people searching for a city, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoners, those in the dark, those who rebelled against God. And as they cried out, God responded to their stories, redeeming each of their lives, each of their stories to himself. Satisfying their hunger, their need for a safe place, breaking their chains and prisons.

Each one of these individuals and each person in Christ is a living story in the house of God as it says in Hebrews. Each story from refugee to prisoner touches another's story - weaving in, forming our hearts into the Love that is God. God longs to hear you put words to your story of redemption and praise, of transformation and love, and how you're living and being in the House of Christ.

Even in the most desolate places we write our stories and we remember. We remember the goodness of God in the past, seek the goodness of God in the present and hope for the future. So keep courage, remain confident and rest in hope. Your story is being woven with countless other stories, past and present, in proclaiming redemptive Love.

Here is a visio divina for you today:

Visio divina is a form of divine seeing in which we prayerfully invite God to speak to our hearts as we look at an image. As you gaze at an image, you will be offered some questions for silent reflection, some of which may speak to you, while others you may choose to ignore.



As you gaze at the image, notice your breath and your body.

Simply be present to the image and allow it to speak to your heart, without any particular agenda. It might speak to you in words or respond with another image.

How do you feel looking at the image?

Is there a part of the image, a color, a shape, an idea that seems to capture your attention?

If you focus-in on that which has captured your attention, is there a word or an invitation to you in it?

Respond to God with the thoughts, emotions and questions that arise within you.

In silence, rest with God.

Respond

Take some time to remember your story. Are there places you have seen in the past or in your current life that you notice God moving? Write out your remembering in detail, set this moment as an altar of remembrance to come back to at other times in your life.

Was there an invitation, a word, or image in the visio divina for you? Take a few minutes to write it down and respond with a prayer in whatever form that comes for you (poetry, drawing, painting, etc...)

Rest

Creator, Writer, Builder - we acknowledge and praise you for the stories of our lives. We are grateful for the ability to notice how you are writing within us. We ask that you make us aware of others around us and open our hearts to weave their stories in with our own. We are grateful for the gift of memory, may we be present to setting altars of remembrance along the way as acknowledge and praise the movement of Your Spirit. Amen.



About the Author

Sheli Sloterbeek is a trained spiritual director, writer, speaker and retreat leader. She is passionate about living wholly – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband, John, daughter and two dogs who keep life entertaining. You can find her online living a slow life @theslojourney.

A Reflection for Tuesday 3/16

By Rebekah Strobel

Lectionary reading for 3/16/2021: Psalm 107:1-16; Numbers 20:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 107:1-9 (NIV)

Read

Psalm 107

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever. | and their lives ebbed away. |
| 2 Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, | 6 Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress. |
| 3 those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south. | 7 He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle. |
| 4 Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could
settle. | 8 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his
unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind, |
| 5 They were hungry and thirsty, | 9 for he satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things. |

Reflect

Story. We all have one, but how many of us have forgotten pieces of ours? As we read through today's scripture, the psalmist encourages the people to "tell their story". Notice what follows the prompt; images of wandering, of being unsettled, of hungry and thirsty bodies. Before the wonder of God is introduced, the reality of the human experience is told. Modern evangelicalism would have you say "but isn't God good?", ancient faith would say "yes, and look at this pain first. Tell the truth; God certainly isn't afraid of it." Author Glennon Doyle sums it up perfectly, "First the pain, then the waiting, then the rising."

In the ongoing hurt of a world-wide pandemic, as so many experience loss of income, loss of loved ones and loss of the life they assumed they'd be living, what we need more than ever is to tell the story. To tell the truth about our pain, our loss, our fears...and to remember our own stories of hope and redemption. We pull hope from the past to give us hope for the future, remembering how God has provided for us and others before and we dare to believe that God will provide again. This lent we cling to both realities-the present pain and the risky hope. We dare to believe that God will do it all again; that our cries will be heard, that our hopes will not fail us, that our empty bellies and hollow hearts will be filled to overflowing by the God of abundance who has always desired good things for their beloved creation.

When we tell the truth, our story, we tell it all and we hold nothing back. Remember the brutal hurt and the ecstatic joy, just like the Israelites that read and re-read those first psalms. They told the story of their hurt, of their betrayal, of their hard-earned lessons and the long roads traveled. They told the story of their cries-the cries of hundreds of years and thousands of voices. They told the story of answered

prayers, of water breaking through rocks and clearing a way in the wilderness. They told the whole story because all of it mattered, and so can we. In doing so we boldly proclaim that God isn't just present in the good, but in the very bad. God doesn't just bless the faithful, but loves and listens to and is near to those who struggle to be faithful.

I get this. I get the feeling of emptiness- of elements of my life wanting so desperately to be filled. I cry out to the LORD, I want to be delivered from my distress. This point of my story doesn't have resolution yet- how the emptiness will be filled isn't known yet. And so I read the words of the Psalmist, I echo the cries of the ancient ones, and I take a deep breath...in....out...in...out...I remember I'm not alone and I dare to believe that God will do what God has always done. I will be filled again.

Whatever your story looks like today, remember it and remember that the whole thing matters. Dare to believe that the present moment can hurt and still be filled with promise, just like the oasis that dares to exist in the middle of the desert.

Respond

Take a deep breath, hold it for five seconds, then slowly let it out. As you do, feel your whole body- what does the breath do? How do your muscles expand and relax? Where in your body does the breath feel most life giving?

Take another breath. Remember the words scripture begins with: "One day the Eternal God scooped dirt out of the ground, sculpted it into the shape we call human, breathed the breath that gives life into the nostrils of the human, and the human became a living soul." (Gen. 2:7 The Voice)

God is always breathing new life into us; how can you partner with the new life God wants to bring into your story today? Remember a time when you felt new life- hold that memory with you as you go throughout your day, breathe deeply and focus on the memory of new life.

Rest

God of Ancients--of long ago and just a moment ago, remind us what is true today. Give us grace and courage to remember our whole story- all the moments we've felt you so dearly and the moments you felt a million miles away. Remind us that every cry is heard and held, tended-to with time. Would this season be filled with such memories; of new life, of old hurts long healed, of things not yet satisfied. Fill us with hope- the scrappy kind with bruises and wounds that just refuses to give up. Thank you for loving all of us, always. Amen.



About the Author

Rebekah Strobel is an ordained reverend who lives in Burien, WA with her husband Nate, and her stepson Jack. After years of church ministry she has transitioned to non-profit leadership, serving residents of low income and affordable housing units. She loves Jesus, people, laughing, crying and nature.

A Reflection for Wednesday 3/17

By Gillie Abdiraxman-Issa

Lectionary reading for 3/17/2021: Psalm 107:1-16; Isaiah 60:15-22; John 8:12-20

Selected passage for reflection: John 8:12-20 (NKJV) & Psalm 107:1-3 (MSG)

Read

John 8:12-20

12 Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

13 The Pharisees therefore said to Him, “You bear witness of Yourself; Your witness is not true.”

14 Jesus answered and said to them, “Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. 16 And yet if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent Me. 17 It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true. 18 I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.”

19 Then they said to Him, “Where is Your Father?”

Jesus answered, “You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also.”

20 These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet come.

Psalm 107:1-3

Oh, thank God—he’s so good!

His love never runs out.

All of you set free by God, tell the world!

Tell how he freed you from oppression,

Then rounded you up from all over the place,

from the four winds, from the seven seas. (1-3)

Reflect

How often are we challenged to define who we are or where we stand? It is frustrating on any given day! Here is Jesus tending to the business of the Father, yet being badgered to explain his stance.

I find it strange that you can have your head down and doing what is important and intentional, and someone will come up to you with no true knowledge of who sent you or your intention and question the very thing that you know you are supposed to be doing.

Nevertheless, we are often taught to turn the other cheek or ignore them, but this scripture gives me life because I feel permission to be the light of the world and shine brightly while voicing the power that resides in me because I am sent. Furthermore, I have been set free from any condemnation and I am loved despite how I feel or how others try to make me feel.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees affirms me in my journey, and I hope, as you are doing the will of the Father, it will affirm you too!

Respond

Jesus spoke in John 8 v.12 "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

Do you feel that you are following Jesus? What do you see as you walk in the light?

If you feel lost and in the darkness, when do you think you lost your way? And how could you reconnect with your Source of Light.

Envision yourself for a moment in Psalm 107:1-3. What do you feel God is inviting you to proclaim?

Rest

Lord, you tell us to trace or follow you with your words and with our faith. Help us to walk and know. Help us to speak confidently just like your son, our brother, Jesus. You are the light and we have everything you have, so allow us to see in dark places. Allow us to be the light of the world. And, speak confidently into our dreams and also to others that doubt you. We know you are with us. We know you stand with us in faith. And just like Jesus--cover us.

Thank you for coming to get us out of the darkness of our unknowing and thoughtless ways.

Thank you for a clean heart, and for renewing our understanding, daily.

Thank you that we are not ashamed to go into the four corners of the earth and tell all about your goodness and your love.

We are open.

We take your hand.

Lead us and guide us in all truth.

In Jesus name, Amen.



About the Author

Gillie is a trained Spiritual Director who wears many hats. She owns and operates the family business, Elite Concierge Chicago, and leads workshops, hosts Prayer Moments with the Divine, and journal exercises for all ages. She is a fun-loving-dance enthusiast and has been married to the love of her life, T'Chaka for 15 years. Gillie is truly a #Boymom to Xavier, Ethan, Hunter, and Ka'Marion ages 13, 10, 3, and 2. Gillie received her Bachelor of Science from Tuskegee University and has certificates of higher learning from the University of Chicago Graham School of Continuing Education and North Park Theological Seminary.

A Reflection for Thursday 3/18

By Anna Wagner

Lectionary reading for 3/18/2021: Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18; Hebrews 4:1-13

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 51:1-12 (NLT)

Read

Psalm 51:1-12

Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.	6 But you desire honesty from the womb, teaching me wisdom even there.
2 Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.	7 Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
3 For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.	8 Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me— now let me rejoice.
4 Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just.	9 Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt.
5 For I was born a sinner— yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.	10 Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.
	11 Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.
	12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.

Reflect

To me, reading Psalm 51 is an exercise in keeping distraction at bay: The king, abusing his power, rapes a woman, then kills her husband and takes her as his wife. After that, King David has the stomach to write this very song where he claims to have sinned against God, and God alone. Yes, he is allowed to exaggerate: It's a psalm, after all. A poem. Yes, God is probably suffering because of this and is therefore also a victim of David's acts. Yet any mention of Bathsheba is completely absent in this song. And wouldn't God's suffering be in response to Bathsheba's? In that way, one of the main victims of David's violent sins is made invisible.

But the psalm is also an exercise in compassion, by recognizing David's humanity. Compassion requires my imagination and engagement, but not in the sense that I can pretend to understand someone's situation fully by taking on their tormented conscience and so assimilate their experiences into mine. No, it's an exercise in compassion because even the worst of us are still human and that humanity needs our affirmation. The psalm serves its purpose: to facilitate my meeting with David so that it can also be a meeting with myself.

Psalms give us the opportunity to borrow someone else's words when ours are gone. When life leaves us speechless and lost, these prayers written by someone else are the gifts to us. When we do not know what to say, we can vocalize the words of someone else who has also run into the limits of being human.

So I ask this about Psalm 51: How can I make the piercing reality of someone else's darkness, someone I don't naturally want anything to do with, teach me about my own darkness? How is this prayer mine?

After moving beyond David as a person, and meeting myself on the page, I find in the words a desperation with a direction. What do I do when I stand before my own lack and sufficiency? As I am oscillating between being awake and asleep, tossing in my bed at night, where do I turn during moments of realization of how my actions have affected others? What do I when I have not been generous towards my partner the way I long to be, or can't help my children navigate life the way I had hoped and our relationship becomes one of me continuously correcting their course, instead of enjoying the ride? When all my promises were never quite enough, and I couldn't even keep them anyway? What do I say to myself and of myself when all I see inside are dead ends? When it feels like I'm finally and at last seeing myself for who I really am, and I don't like what I see? How can I recognize that I'm limited, wholly and truly, and yet be somewhat cautiously hopeful that there is a way to live without ruining everything and everyone around me, myself included?

When I feel like that, which sometimes happens, there is only one option left and it was what David did: he sought to live with his shadow continually kept before him, yet with hope intact. When we see ourselves for who we are, we may find ourselves doing what David did: ask God for a new beginning, a fresh start. David longs for a beginning that is so new that God even makes David willing to walk with God again: David doesn't even trust himself enough to even want to do what is good. And so he throws himself, and all of who he is, into God's care and onto God's mercy. Because sometimes when we glimpse ourselves, that's the only thing that we have left to do.

Respond

When new beginnings and New Year's resolutions don't excite me anymore because nothing seems to change anyways, Psalm 51 helps me.

What things about yourself have you lost hope in changing?

Come to God with honesty. See what happens. Notice how God meets you right where you are.

Rest

God, you know my shadow sides. When I see them too, help me turn them over to you. Show me mercy and make me new in your love. Amen.



About the Author

Anna lives in Sweden with her husband and two girls. She has a degree in comparative literature and works part time as a teaching pastor while continuing her studies and trying to juggle this one crazy life.

A Reflection for Friday 3/19

by Ruth Zschoche

Lectionary reading for 3/19/2021: Psalm 51:1-12; Exodus 30:1-10; Hebrews 4:14-5:4

Selected passages for reflection: Exodus 30:1-10 (NIV) and Hebrews 4:14-16 (NLT)

Read

Exodus 30:1-10

“Make an altar of acacia wood for burning incense. 2 It is to be square, a cubit long and a cubit wide, and two cubits high[a]—its horns of one piece with it. 3 Overlay the top and all the sides and the horns with pure gold, and make a gold molding around it. 4 Make two gold rings for the altar below the molding—two on each of the opposite sides—to hold the poles used to carry it. 5 Make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. 6 Put the altar in front of the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law—before the atonement cover that is over the tablets of the covenant law—where I will meet with you. 7 “Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. 8 He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come. 9 Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it. 10 Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering[b] for the generations to come. It is most holy to the LORD.”

Hebrews 4:14-16

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Reflect

This detailed Scripture in Exodus on the requirements of the Altar of Incense when read by itself reminds me of reading Christ’s genealogies in Matthew and Luke. “What’s the point?” I ask myself. But just as studying the genealogies shows me the importance of knowing who is in the line of Jesus, so too is looking at this Scripture of building the Altar of Incense. The burning of incense goes hand in hand with raising prayer to God.

When I think about incense, I think of something that has a strong smell, maybe a reminder of something good. I remember the perfume that two of my aunts wore. When I smell those perfumes I am filled with wonderful memories of each of these special women who are now dead. I have a signature perfume that I wear especially around my granddaughters to give them something to remind them of me, while I am still here but also when I’m no longer with them.

God had a purpose for the Altar of Incense just as He had a purpose for each part of the Tabernacle. Incense has a great importance in the Bible, as it is mentioned about 130 times. It was the job of the

High Priest to burn the incense, both in the morning and the evening as a prayer of praise being raised to God in heaven. The rising incense was the mediator between man and God.

Everything about the Altar of Incense was dictated by God. Each step in building it, in how it was to be measured, with what type of materials it was to be made of, how and when the incense was to be burned and who was to burn the incense. When the Israelites smelled the incense lifting towards heaven, it was a reminder to them that they were to be praying.

The Psalmist says in Psalm 141:2, “Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

Christ came as the Sacrifice, our Altar of Incense and Mediator between us and God. When Christ died, the Old Testament Law was fulfilled with His sacrifice. Our prayers lifted to God in the morning when we awake and in the evening before we go to sleep as well as throughout the day are like incense wafting up from the Altar of Incense in Exodus. Christ is our Great High Priest who takes our prayers to the Father as we read in Hebrews 4:14-16.

Every day I have the freedom to sit before God through Jesus Christ and raise my prayers as incense of praise. I don’t need to burn incense at specific times. I can raise a prayer whenever I smell something good or someone passes by who is wearing perfume or cologne. What a sweet reminder that prayer can be raised to God at any moment or time of day.

Respond

What does it mean to you to know that your prayers come before God as sweet incense? Do you take time in the morning to ask God to bless your day and again in the evening to praise Him for His blessings of the day? What can you use as a reminder to pray throughout the day?

Rest

Lord God, just as the Psalmist prayed the words to You, may my prayers in the morning, in the evening and throughout the day come before You as incense and my hands lifted up in praise as a daily offering. Amen.



About the Author

Ruth works with Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) at a large church in Colorado Springs, CO. She recently completed studies in Spiritual Direction at North Park Theological Seminary. She loves to listen, mentor and teach young women. She is married, has a son and daughter-in-law and is Omi to two beautiful granddaughters.

A Reflection for Saturday 3/20

by Rev. Darci Jaret

Lectionary reading for 3/20/2021: Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13; John 12:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 51:1-13 (CEB)

Read

Psalm 51:1-13

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt; purify me from my sin!

Because I know my wrongdoings, my sin is always right in front of me.

I've sinned against you—you alone.

I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,

completely correct when you issue your judgment.

Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,

from the moment my mother conceived me.

And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;

you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.

Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;

wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and celebration again;

let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

Hide your face from my sins;

wipe away all my guilty deeds!

Create a clean heart for me, God;

put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

Please don't throw me out of your presence;

please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

Return the joy of your salvation to me

and sustain me with a willing spirit

Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,

and sinners will come back to you.

Reflect

"Create in me a Clean Heart" was my daily, sometimes hourly, prayer at BreakThru House, a long-term residential recovery program in Georgia. I remember clearly the early mornings in the small house next to the daycare; up in the slanted roof attic room that I shared with "June" from Snellville. I would wake up early. It was the only time I could be alone. I would spread out my affirmation cards and small bits of paper that had decorative prayers on them. I would spread out my fingers in downward facing dog and prostrate my body in what I now understand was the connection of mind and body in somatic prayer.

"Create in me a clean heart." That was the prayer of an addict returning from the edge of oblivion to grasping for hope, serenity and one more day clean. That was the submission of a person who thought that life was over; one who was willing to end it all; someone who was so accustomed to self-abuse that self harm that the red flags were not enough warning. My water was turned off, there was always a smell combined with coffee and my self hatred out matched my need to be liked and approved of.

My heart was less than clean, or at least I felt that way. This prayer is a powerful one. This is the prayer of an afflicted one. This is the prayer of one who does not see clearly. Now as a pastor, I read these words from the Psalmist and think of the young person hitting their lowest and I want to say, “You are clean hearted! You are good enough! You are whole! And that is how God sees you too.”

This passage carries so much theology of purity, sin, guilt and forgiveness. And as I read it over and over again writing this reflection I realized that the implication in the text is that God does not already see the Psalmist as whole and good enough. In telling my story and thinking compassionately about the experience of all who find themselves prostrate on the floor, I realized, it is not God but ourselves who tell us we are not good enough. My barriers to God’s spirit were so high because I made choices out of self-hatred and the act of praying this prayer on my yoga mat in the morning was a choice of self-love. God is the constant who loves and endures and when I make those choices to love myself, I begin again to see that loved presence in my life.

Respond

Give yourself a break today. You make a lot of decisions in the day that prioritize your own self-love. Brushing your teeth. Taking a walking break. Having a balanced meal. Write them down and recognize the ways that your own self love allows you to recognize the constant, ever present love of the divine.

Rest

God of love, help us clear a path to you on this day. God of compassion lend us your compassion for ourselves. God of radical acceptance teach us your ways to grow toward loving ourselves daily. Amen.



About the Author

Darci's call to ministry is characterized by leading people in creative expression. Darci brings their artistic gifts and talents to our worship and faith development programs, as well as liturgy-building and online branding. Darci has started programs like Created 2 Create, art ministry pastoral internship. Darci received a Louisville Pastoral Study Project grant to work with people in recovery through spiritual art making. Darci holds a Masters of Divinity from Candler School of Theology, and is a co-pastor at Park Avenue Baptist Church in Atlanta. Darci's passions include painting, found-objects art, legos with their son and all forms of ideation. Their family has chickens and gardens and a lovely junky yard.

A Reflection for Sunday 3/21

By Rev. Denise McKinney

Lectionary reading for 3/21/2021: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Selected passage for reflection: John 12:20-33 (MSG)

Read

John 12:20-33

20-21 There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: "Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?"

22-23 Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, "Time's up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

24-25 "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life, just as it is, destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."

26 "If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me."

27-28 "Right now I am shaken. And what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display.'"

A voice came out of the sky: "I have glorified it, and I'll glorify it again."

29 The listening crowd said, "Thunder!"

Others said, "An angel spoke to him!"



Reflect

A pivot. A hard right turn. A change of course.

This part of John's writing about Jesus seems to abruptly shift directions. In the chapter before, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and allows himself to be lauded with "blessed is the one who comes in God's name! He is the King of Israel!" Before that, Jesus shares a meal at the home of his friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. While there, Mary surprises the gathered guests by anointing Jesus' feet with expensive aromatic oils--most likely in gratitude for bringing her brother back to life months earlier. Jesus doesn't seem taken by it, allowing her to continue even when practical protests arise about better use of the money spent on the oils. He seems to encourage people proclaiming and demonstrating that he is in fact someone significant, powerful and sent by God.

But then he pivots in this part of the story. The Greek men want to meet him, possibly because they have influence or could be benefactors. Maybe they are devout men of God and he has inspired them. No matter their motivation, though. Jesus simply says, "No. There isn't time left for these kinds of encounters."

I can only imagine the look Philip and Andrew gave Jesus. "Why would our friend who has welcomed children, women, the poor, the Samaritan, the tax collector, and so many sick and ill, now deny these men? Why is he no longer welcoming these interactions?"

Jesus seems to intuit their bewilderment and explains with what seems like an unrelated string of metaphors. He shares that a seed must die so it can sprout to life and flourish, then maybe responds to the Greek men's motives and tells all listening to serve him by following. Next, he shares a moment of vulnerability about feeling unsettled and concerned about what's coming--even the thought of asking God to get him out of it--but resolving instead to trust that this plan will put his Father's glory on full display. Lastly, when the voice of God speaks from beyond the sky like thunder, Jesus again foreshadows climactic events beginning to unfold and declares that the bootlegging ruler of this world is going to get the boot off his temporary throne as Jesus gathers people all around to follow him.

Now if it were me standing there with Philip and Andrew, I'd say my bewilderment just multiplied. What is he talking about? What does a grain of wheat have to do with serving Jesus? And wait, you are distressed? About what? What do you mean God's glory? What aren't you telling us? And what was that sound? God said what? Go on about Satan and his rule. Does this mean the evil Romans will be out of here? How will you be lifted up from the earth? What does that actually mean?

All the questions. Yet in their heart of hearts a bigger story was likely coming into view and kept refocusing through the trauma of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, then his stunning return to them. It was a picture of salvation where the seed of Jesus' God-infused humanity had been dead to the world and sprung to a new flourishing life like a tidal wave of God's love and power. And when they finally saw him with God's glory unmistakably upon him, they understood the reason for the sudden pivot during the Passover. Yes, he would live and be lifted up, but not before the heaviness of leaving them behind. He

would win the cosmic battle in the end but must turn and walk through the darkness in order for his beloved humanity to change course too.

Respond

Take a few moments and find yourself in this story. Who might you be and what are you doing? What is your response to what Jesus says? Now consider yourself a week later. How would you make sense of what you heard and the events you witnessed? What would your pivot be? How would you change course? Now consider the many pivots you have been required to make in the last year. Where do you see Jesus being lifted up so that you can follow him where he is going?

Rest

Jesus, Son of God, the one who pivoted toward the darkness so that we could change course: help us to make sense of all the seemingly unrelated moments or hard to understand losses. They don't all need to be connected, but if we are willing, each of them can point to your full glory on display in our lives. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Denise McKinney is a Church Planter/Lead Pastor in Tulsa, OK at thewelltulsa.org, married to Gary and mom of Lanie and Garrison. She wrote the YS book, *Mile Markers: A Path for Nurturing Adolescent Faith*. You can find more of her writing and speaking at denisemckinney.com.

A Reflection for Monday 3/22

By Tiffany Hines

Lectionary reading for 3/22/2021: Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 43:8-13; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 119:9-16 (NIV)

Read

Psalm 119:9-16

9 How can a young man stay pure?
Only by living in the word of God and walking in its truth.
10 I have longed for you with the passion of my heart;
don't let me stray from your directions!
11 I consider your prophecies to be my greatest treasure,
and I memorize them and write them on my heart
to keep me from committing sin's treason against you.
12 My wonderful God, you are to be praised above all;
teach me the power of your decrees!
13 I speak continually of your laws
as I recite out loud your counsel to me.
14 I find more joy in following what you tell me to do
than in chasing after all the wealth of the world.
15 I set my heart on your precepts
and pay close attention to all your ways.
16 My delight is found in all your laws,
and I won't forget to walk in your words.

Reflect

I love the places in scripture where God is pretty much giving us an exact blueprint for how to live this life as followers of Christ. Purity is way more than honoring our bodies, but what we act on, how we think, what our hearts longs for when no one is closely watching. This passage is a guide to how to live this life, but it is not implying perfection. We know it is easy to be lead astray from the things that matter to God and get caught up in the day to day of culture, life, dreams, and our many roles as women we carry. The writer finds more joy in following God's ways than his own. How does a young woman, seasoned woman, stay pure? She becomes a living, breathing, walking epistle of God's word. Indeed, God is a keeper, a promise keeper, a good shepherd who knows how to guide his sheep into the direction of a prosperous life. I pray we find a deep joy within our souls that can when tempted, when doubted, persecuted, the joy of God's word springs up like a well, and we can water to the thirsty.

Will we comprehend God's ways or even understand every move he makes? Of course not! Wouldn't it be great to know everything?? Oh, wait! That's what got us here now (dang it, Adam and Eve!) The world has lots to offer, and it's not all bad. But we have to make it a necessity in our hearts to trust that God is better. He knows better and can foresee every event that will ever happen. Our willingness, our yes, not only brings us delight, but it brings delight to God. Can you imagine at this moment, giving God, the maker of the universe, delight?

What would happen if while we had our doubts, it pushed us to God's word instead of elsewhere? We would find an unexplainable joy! Joy is attractive and contagious. I strongly believe that if there is a movement of women that have faith in Jesus Christ, thirst after righteousness, and pursue God over the saucy things the world has to offer will be filled.

Let's be filled with the joy of the Lord.

Respond

Are there any areas in your life that you wrestle with walking in God's truth? I encourage you to read the passage above and insert your name. Make it personal. You will be able to walk this beautiful life out.

One of my favorite songs about this passage is called "Proverbs 3 (Tablet of Your Heart)" by Todd Dulaney. It is full of joy, repetition, and talks about trusting the Lord with all of our hearts.

Rest

God, I first come with a heart of thankfulness that you have offered me a life of abundance. Help me to love your word and to apply it in my life that I may experience true joy and bring you delight. Amen.



About the Author

Tiffany Hines is a singer, songwriter, worship leader, and creative. She is the founder of Hines Creative Group, LLC. By day, she is a director at a church in Chicagoland overseeing ministry teams. For fun she loves traveling, city life, and hosting friends and family.

A Reflection for Tuesday 3/23

By Mary Rodriguez

Lectionary reading for 3/23/2021: Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 44:1-8; Acts 2:14-24

Selected passage for reflection: Isaiah 44:1-8 (ESV)

Read

Isaiah 44:1-8

1 “But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!

2 Thus says the Lord who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:
Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.

4 They shall spring up among the grass
like willows by flowing streams.

5 This one will say, ‘I am the Lord’s,’
another will call on the name of Jacob,
and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’

and name himself by the name of Israel.”

6 Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:

“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.

7 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and set it before me,

since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will
happen.

8 Fear not, nor be afraid;

have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me?

There is no Rock; I know not any.”

Reflect

Isaiah, the prophet. Isaiah, the book. It’s a big book, dealing with big problems. Isaiah prophecies that though Israel is chosen and beloved by God, they must deal with the consequences of their generational sin, not following God’s commandments. Then the Babylonians defeat and displace Israel. The book of Isaiah reminds the people that they are still loved and wanted by God when things look so grim... when they have been conquered by enemies and taken into exile. Then, after they return from exile, Isaiah helps them begin to pick up the pieces of themselves as a people, beloved by God. Isaiah reviews how the people can believe that God truly cares for, shepherds, nurtures and restores what has been destroyed. These are the big subjects Isaiah grapples with, in the same way Jacob struggles and wrestles with God.

I have found myself asking similar questions recently. How do those of us in the white American culture deal with our generational sin? How is it that we have lived so long with systemic racism, bias, and privilege, but we don’t see it until protests against police brutality and glaring inequities in healthcare access bring them into view? Where is God when people without resources die alone, struggling to breathe, wracked and ruined by a virus that has laid bare our inequities? And how do we deal with community trauma? Is it still possible to find the breath to say, “I am the Lord’s”? Can it be true that the

dry places will have streams of water again? Will thirsty ground really have water poured over it? Can those who have so much to fear not be afraid?

May God, who carefully formed us from the womb, indeed help us. May the Lord pour the Spirit upon us and upon those who will come after us. Healing from trauma and a broken history is possible. If you find yourself in a thirsty land, trust that the Redeemer will ease water back into the soil and restore life again.

An accounting for sins too long perpetuated can seem like punishment. Facing the shame and guilt of being a participant in generational sin may feel like defeat or exile, but in fact, confessing the sin can be the means to restore relationships with God and neighbor. We must face and truly account for the communal sins of slavery and the perpetuated racism we have built into our laws and systems. If you find yourself defensive and struggling to believe you have had a part to play in the storyline of racism, consider again what your response might be - to instead allow the Redeemer to transform you, so you may experience and be part of the liberation and redemption.

God can restore what has been destroyed and reshape what is distorted. If you find it hard to believe this possible after so much has been lost, know that the Redeemer has chosen the one who wrestles with doubts and questions. The Lord of Israel loves the one who struggles with the difficulties and who participates in the story. Communities can protect the vulnerable, and we can find ways to resolve an epidemic. This will not be the final moment in this world. This is but a chapter in a long book. We are all witnesses and actors in this story. The Lord is like a steadfast rock, the first and the last, always one who redeems, liberates, delivers, and transforms, our Redeemer.

Respond

Are there areas in your life where it is like dry, thirsty land? Name them, and pray for healing waters to tend those wounds. Pray for the Spirit to be poured out over you and over those concerns.

Are there ways you can respond to the accounting of inequitable access to health and resources? Make a list of ways you can be a part of healing that needs to happen in your community. Pray about how you can participate in the better story of healing and restoring right relationships with each other, with God, and with the land.

Rest

O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, remember us in our times of trouble. Be with those of us who are weary, those who are afraid, and with those who are struggling. Help us to remember what we can do to account for long held sins, so we may instead have streams of mercy flow over dry, thirsty land that aches for restoration to life as you intended. We are yours. Redeem, replenish, restore. So be it, and may we be a part of it. Amen.



About the Author

Mary Rodriguez provides case management in affordable, supportive housing in the city of Chicago. The majestic beauty of creation is like a salve, and she is so grateful to live by one of the world's Great Lakes.

A Reflection for Wednesday 3/24

By Sarah Thontwa

Lectionary reading for 3/24/2021: Psalm 119:9-16; Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23; John 12:34-50

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

Read

Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23

1 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 2 “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, [a] the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 3 ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? 4 But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. 5 ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

6 “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty. 8 ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. 9 ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”

20 The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: 21 “Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. 22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall each by the sword of his brother.

23 “‘On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”

Reflect

Taking stock is important. Evaluating what was prior to what currently is, is important. I don’t feel like we linger enough in this space, I know in the past my ultimate goal was to rush out of challenging moments in order to reach the next moment, the next experience, the next chapter which in my head held the promise of a better future, a far more improved experience than what I was currently experiencing.

There is nothing wrong with wanting an improvement in our lives, there is nothing wrong with wanting a new and better experience than what we are having. But taking stock is an important first step. Who among you has seen this house in its former glory? And how is it now? Does it look like it has been reduced to nothing?

When a devastation has occurred, when an unrest settles in with our lives, this right here seems to be the proper way to engage with it, to acknowledge what is in front of us, to accept that the glory of the past has been reduced to nothing, to acknowledge indeed that brokenness, hardship, devastation, pain, loss, disappointment is present, and the former glory was perhaps greater than the current reduction of our situation to a place of less significance.

But the good news is that we do not stop there, because taking stock is needed to take us into the second step where we are called to step into our strength. Yes, what is now may be challenging, difficult but this is also where you need to be strong now because I am with you, because you are not alone, fear not for I am standing with you, says God.

It is challenging for us to see the light when darkness covers us, it is hard to see hope when failure and fear become relatable and to believe that it is us against the world, us alone. But wherever we are, there also stands God saying fear not, I am with you. I struggled with this a lot until I understood in the midst of me that I am a spiritual being first and a human being second.

My eyes can see my physical expression here but there are parts of me that my eyes cannot see, like the breath that goes into my lungs, the spirit of God in me, my soul... Just because I don't see these things with my physical eyes, it does not mean that they are not here. As a matter of fact the very fact that I am thinking now, breathing now, blinking my eyes now is a wonder coordinated by forces I cannot see with my physical.

This has helped me ground my experience in the knowing that the presence of God is with me in every moment and in every place. Realizing the presence of God in the midst of every aspect of our experiences takes us into the third step which is the door of patience. In a little while, you will see transformation, the glory of the new house will be far greater than the old one, the new experiences will by far be greater than anything you have seen or lived before. This is what God is bringing into our lives in a little while.

I am very passionate about agriculture and this took me to the farm where seeds are not planted and dug out immediately because we want to see the result now. In our tweeting/Instagram world, we want immediate results. There is a time between planting the seed and harvest, it is the time of watering, tending to the plant, trusting the soil and the seed to bring out its fullest potential. Our job is not really there, ours is to water the plant, to remove harmful substances and the seed will grow to give us the harvest we need. Patience is key, patience is needed.

God is bringing the transformation of the old house, rebuilding a new life out of the devastation and the glory of the new house will be by far greater than the old. But are we patient enough to focus on watering the plant, to regularly clean the garden of our mind and to trust the process that turns seeds

into plants and into harvest? The last step is where we enjoy the harvest, the fruits, the peace, where what is desired by all nations will come. This makes me think of how God's vision is always greater to include more than just us. We often come to God with our stuff but the answers we find are always about us and also about more than just us.

Respond

Today, take 10 minutes to take stock of what is. For anything that may be heavy on your heart, for any place where you feel like the current version of your situation is regression from what was, simply acknowledge this. Then make your way to a place where you can totally feel and know that right where you are, God also is. Just because you do not see her with your physical , it doesn't mean that she is not there. Right where you are, God also is. After this, go water a plant, a flower or any planted/living thing as a symbol of your commitment to patience and trust in the divine process that turns seed into harvest. After watering the plant, give thanks for the glory of the new house which will be greater than the old one, for the peace that will follow and for the fact that God is willing to share all of her abundance with you.

Rest

Divine intelligence, infinite presence, I understand today that God is all that is and God is everywhere. Help me rest in the knowing that nothing can ever be wasted in my life. Grant me the patience to sit in this place without fear because I know that you are with me. Thank you for my new house, for my new experience, for I know that the glory of the new will always be greater than anything I have seen so far. I give thanks for the renewing of my mind internally and for the expression of this renewal in my outer world. I give thanks for knowing that your harvest is about me and about more than just me. I know that as I rise, all nations rise with me. Thank you.



About the Author

Sarah Thontwa is a lover of life who holds a passionate interest in how inner transformation is the precursor for outer manifestations. She has been a development practitioner supporting international development projects in six countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and South East Asia. She currently lives in Antwerp, Belgium where she is completing her PhD in Applied Economics. Outside of academia, she writes from her mind, on her blog www.misskambili.com. You can also follow her facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Miss-Kambili-105735054131515>

A Reflection for Thursday 3/25

By Sarah Roquemore

Lectionary reading for 3/25/2021: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Philippians 2:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Deuteronomy 16:1-8

Read

Deuteronomy 16:1-8

16 “Observe the month of Abib and keep the Passover to the Lord your God, for in the month of Abib the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night. 2 And you shall offer the Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God, from the flock or the herd, at the place that the Lord will choose, to make his name dwell there. 3 You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction—for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste—that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. 4 No leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you sacrifice on the evening of the first day remain all night until morning. 5 You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, 6 but at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it, there you shall offer the Passover sacrifice, in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt. 7 And you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose. And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. 8 For six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it.

Reflect

For someone who is 1. Not Jewish and 2. Unable to eat gluten without painful consequences (thanks, Celiac disease!), I am surprisingly familiar with Jewish baked goods.

Here’s a quick primer: for observant Jews, challah is the bread of sabbath and community, with two loaves laid on the weekly Shabbat table, symbolizing the double portion of manna, bread from heaven, that God gave to the Israelites in the desert. The most observant bakers practice a specific “mitzvah,” or good deed, as they prepare their recipe, separating a small portion of the dough to bless and burn as a remembrance before baking the remaining bread.

By all accounts, challah is a hearty, and glutenous delight. Sweet, yeasty, soft, and warm. Heralding an invitation to pause, rest, and rejoice in the blessing of another week’s end.

But once a year, Jews stop baking challah and observe the feast of unleavened bread, also known as Passover. For six days, the only bread served is Matzoh, a flat cracker-like bread made without yeast. This bread, named in the Torah as the “Bread of Affliction” is meant to remind God’s people of their escape from Egypt, when their bread had no time to rise.

Now, in my fantasies about all the loaves of bread I would devour if suddenly there was a new cure for Celiac Disease, challah falls somewhere above sourdough and just below Brioche. Matzoh doesn't even make the list.

Because let's be honest, who wants to eat the "Bread of Affliction"? Sounds less appetizing than a gluten-free biscuit, amiright?

We love to celebrate the glory of the Exodus story, the power of the Almighty making a path through the sea, leading the people of Israel out of their oppression and captivity in Egypt. But in this passage, what strikes me is the "haste" with which the people of Israel make their escape. Can you imagine the trauma of packing up your whole life in less time than it takes for a batch of dough to rise? And yet, that was the urgency with which the Israelites left Egypt.

This moment of liberation was what they had hoped and prayed for. When God said, "Move", of course, they jumped to their feet! Yet when I consider the next page in their story, the 'wandering in the desert for 40 years' part, I can't help but empathize with their grumbling. There must have been so many conflicting emotions in that season, as their thoughts turned back to abandoned hearths, coals still hot, heaps of dough left un-kneaded on tables that would never be gathered around again.

After moving states and teaching jobs in the past year, this idea of leaving in haste especially hits home for me. I walked out of my classroom one afternoon in March, not realizing I would never teach in that space or see many of my students or colleagues in person again. Though I was already preparing mentally for a big life transition, the pandemic turned all of my plans for slow, intentional goodbyes on their head, and the forced haste of that transition left me with some pain to process.

So for me in this season, eating the Bread of Affliction means allowing myself space to sit in the sadness of these sudden changes and accept the hard truth that life doesn't always happen on my timeline. Often change, even change we've prayed for, comes suddenly and painfully. And sometimes our next season looks more like wandering in the wilderness than walking into the land of milk and honey we were promised.

Before we move on from this desert place, God invites us to stop and eat the unleavened bread of memory, to remember our past afflictions, name our trauma, and wrestle with our disappointment. Only from this vulnerability can we begin to heal. As we offer up our pain to the God of blessing, Jesus welcomes us back to the table, furnished with himself, the bread of life.

Respond

Consider what trauma, disappointment, or grief you might be carrying that you need to make space to feel, to process, and to offer to God. What “bread of affliction” might God be calling you to consume in this season?

Rest

*God of the wilderness.
Thank you for the invitation
To remember our affliction
To feel our pain
To air out the wounds we’ve suffered
The disappointments we’ve buried
The trauma we’re afraid to name*

*You alone are our redeemer.
The healer of our broken hearts.
You are not overwhelmed
By our hurt
You suffer with us.*

You weep when we weep.

*So we lift our sadness to you.
Our Passover offering.
Here in the desert
Longing for the promised land
Sustained by daily bread
Hungry for the bread of life.
Fill us, O God
With the goodness of your presence.
Bless us, O Lord
With the fullness of your love.
Amen.*



About the Author

Sarah Roquemore is a teacher, sometimes a writer, and always a daydreamer. She recently moved from Richmond, Virginia to Atlanta, Georgia, where she is finding her way through the wilderness of a new season and trying to remember to thank God for providing (gluten-free) daily bread along the way. She sporadically writes on her blog a few times a year, but definitely not so infrequently that she had to spend over ten minutes finding the url to share here: <https://sarahoffscript.blogspot.com/>

A Reflection for Friday 3/26

By Heather Watson

Lectionary reading for 3/26/2021: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:1-9; Philippians 2:12-18

Selected passage for reflection: Jeremiah 33:1-9 (CEB)

Read

Jeremiah 33:1-9

“While he was still confined to the prison quarters, the LORD’s word came to Jeremiah a second time: The LORD proclaims, the LORD who made the earth, who formed and established it, whose name is the LORD: Call to me and I will answer and reveal to you wondrous secrets that you haven’t known.

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, proclaims about the houses of this city and the palaces of the kings of Judah that were torn down to defend against the siege ramps and weapons of the invading Babylonians. They will be filled with the corpses of those slain in my fierce anger. I hid my face from the people of this city because of all their evil deeds, but now I will heal and mend them. I will make them whole and bless them with an abundance of peace and security. I will bring back the captives of Judah and Israel, and I will rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them of all the wrongdoing they committed against me, and I will forgive them for all of their guilt and rebellion. Then this city will bring me great joy, praise, and renown before all nations on earth, when they hear of all the good I provide for them. They will be in total awe at all the good and prosperity I provide for them.”

Reflect

As a kid growing up in the 90s, the song “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix-A-Lot was often used in movies. While not an appropriate song for a child to sing, I did learn the idea of “I like big butts and I can not lie” early on. However I was also a Bible nerd as a kid and so this song translated into “But, God...” for the big butts part.

My whole life is one big “But, God...”. Coming from a background filled with trauma and pain, I often felt like the reality of the city in the first part of this passage. My life was a disaster zone in my eyes. I felt as if I had no hope and no reason to live. It seemed as if everywhere I turned that was an area without life.

But God.

In August of 2015, I was sent to the hospital for a psychiatric evaluation. I was also in seminary at the time and truly felt as if I had blown any chance I had at being useful for God.

But God.

Over the past five and a half years, God has journeyed with me towards restoration. I cried out to Him and he began the process of healing, mending, restoring, rebuilding. He is making me whole. He continues to give me peace when my mind seeks chaos. He cleanses me and forgives me each time I go back to old thought patterns and old ways. He blesses me with community and gives me a secure refuge in Him.

Others may never know the depths of the journey that God and I have been on. However the journey is not about the end but about the growth on the journey. I stand in awe of him taking my brokenness and showing me the wondrous mystery of his unfailing love, mercy and grace towards those to call out to him.

Respond

What areas of your life are in need of restoration?

Ask God to begin restoring these areas to life.

Who are you willing to let walk beside you on this journey of restoration?

Who are you willing to walk with on their restoration journey?

Rest

Emmanuel, you see the areas of my life that I do not let anyone else see. You see the areas of my life I refuse to acknowledge. You try to shine your light so that restoration can begin and I hid under a blanket pretending that the light can not reach me there. But you, you grab a larger blanket and sit with me. You remind me that I am not alone and that you are with me, even in the darkness, even in the light. Remind me that you are Immanuel God with us and will not abandon me. Heal me. Mend me. Restore me. Cleanse me. Forgive me. Make me whole in you. I love you Lord. Amen.



About the Author

Heather Watson is from Alabama but lives in New Orleans with her guinea pigs. She works as a nanny and serves on the audio visual team at her church. She received her Masters of Divinity in Urban Missions at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in December of 2019. She desires to bring the church to the people and help others on their journey towards restoration. Follow her on Instagram @heathershae617.

A Reflection for Saturday 3/27

By Dr. Veronica Gilliard

Lectionary reading for 3/27/2021: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16; Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Selected passage for reflection: Jeremiah 33:10-16 (NLT)

Read

Jeremiah 33:10-16 (NLT)

10 “This is what the Lord says: You have said, ‘This is a desolate land where people and animals have all disappeared.’ Yet in the empty streets of Jerusalem and Judah’s other towns, there will be heard once more 11 the sounds of joy and laughter. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will be heard again, along with the joyous songs of people bringing thanksgiving offerings to the Lord. They will sing, ‘Give thanks to the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, for the Lord is good.

His faithful love endures forever!’

For I will restore the prosperity of this land to what it was in the past, says the Lord.

12 “This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies says: This land—though it is now desolate and has no people and animals—will once more have pastures where shepherds can lead their flocks. 13 Once again shepherds will count their flocks in the towns of the hill country, the foothills of Judah, the Negev, the land of Benjamin, the vicinity of Jerusalem, and all the towns of Judah. I, the Lord, have spoken!

14 “The day will come, says the Lord, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them.

15 “In those days and at that time

I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line.

He will do what is just and right throughout the land.

16 In that day Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.

And this will be its name:

‘The Lord Is Our Righteousness.’

Reflect

Gunshots. Smoke. Weeping. Shouting. Depression. Destruction. Carnage. Protest. Sickness. Insurrection. Acquittal. Deportation. Sinophobia. Sterilization. Death. Grief. War.

The murder of countless unarmed Black people. Violent hate crimes against people of Asian descent. Kidnapping Latino children from their parents. Disproportionate mortality from COVID-19 among Natives. How do we encounter God in the face of such desolation? How do we believe peace and goodness will be restored to our cities? How do we envision what joy and laughter could sound like amidst such anguish?

In moments of grief, we are tempted to ask difficult questions of God. We wonder how to process being asked to embrace unity as our oppressors continue to ravage our communities. We wonder why the church allows lament to absent from the conversation. We wonder if we are seen. We wonder if we are heard. We wonder if we are valued.

We often have trouble believing in the power and promises of God when everything we touch, see, hear, and smell conjures feelings of angst, anger, and uncertainty. And deep down, we struggle with believing that some people, places, and ideologies are worthy of restoration.

In the midst of our despair, we are challenged to believe that in our present-day God will do for us what He did for Israel and Judah. Our hope is found in remembering how the God of all time continues to faithfully fulfill His promises. In our day, and at this time, God promises to raise up a righteous government that will care for the people in their land. Leaders who will do what is just and right throughout the land.

In our day, and at this time, our hope lies in the promise of God to save us and to provide neighborhoods where all can live safely. The streets will once again be filled with joy and laughter. People will sing joyous songs about the God who keeps promises through delivering and restoring His people.

Then, in our day, and at this time, God will be known by the name of Yahweh Tsidqenu.

Our Lord is our righteousness. People will bring their gifts of thanksgiving to the Lord for all He is doing. This vision will be fulfilled, and we can receive it in our day and for our time in expectant hope of restoration, because all prophetic visions require God's people to live fully in the 'here' but 'not yet' tension of restoration unfolding. Our God is a God of justice and He will restore the prosperity of our land and the joy of His people.

Respond

Reflect on a time in your life when you questioned God's ability to restore something you felt was broken. In what ways did you witness God's restoration? In what ways are you still waiting for God to bring restoration? Have you gone to God in prayer about these needs and shared them with your local faith community? Commit to journaling about your journey – take note of how it feels to experience God's restorative power in seasons that felt desolate. In moments of despair, refer back to this journal for encouragement to truly believe in the restorative power of God.

Rest

Lord, in the days when we are filled with fear and trembling, traumatized by the sounds and sights of persecution surrounding us, in these moments of confusion, anxiety, and subjugation, may we remember your sovereignty. May we lean into community and live into your promises with expectant hope for the joy found within your restoration.



About the Author

Dr. Veronica Gilliard is the founder of the Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Institute, a nonprofit organization committed to demystifying, explicating and mitigating the systemic consequences of the strongholds of patriarchy and white supremacy on the physical, vocational, financial and emotional wellbeing of marginalized people. Learn more at www.jedi-institute.com.

A Reflection for Palm Sunday 3/28

By Prajakta David

Lectionary reading for 3/28/2021: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 118:19-29 (NIV)

*Today is **Palm Sunday**, the day we celebrate Jesus coming into Jerusalem. People welcomed Jesus with palm leaves on the streets, shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Jesus was celebrated just a week before his death as a change-maker, someone who would restore justice and peace. Today, many churches celebrate by waving palms. After services those palms are often burned to make ashes for next year’s Ash Wednesday.*

Read

Psalm 118:19-29

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever

2 Let Israel say:
“His love endures forever.”

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I
may enter through them and give thanks to
the Lord

²⁰This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall
enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me and
have become my salvation.

²²**The stone that the builders rejected has
become the chief cornerstone.**

²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our
eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made; let us
rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we
beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of
the Lord. We bless you from the house of
the Lord.

²⁷The Lord is God, and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches, up to
the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for
his steadfast love endures forever.

Reflect

A cornerstone—a foundational stone that joins two walls—is the first real support of a building, determining its structure and position. In many older public buildings, the cornerstone is inscribed, telling passersby when the structure was built and what its purpose was. Psalm 118:22 alludes to the stone rejected that becomes a cornerstone. The New Testament uses the cornerstone metaphor to talk about Jesus. Christ, a stone rejected by people that becomes a cornerstone. Christ on whose foundation the church is built. Our images of self and community have a profound effect on how we relate with others. The church built on Christ, a firm foundation becomes a place of God’s presence that lives out the goodness and grace of God in the world. As building stones connected to other stones on this

foundation, we are reminded of our call as the Church to be a place of living out God's radical love. Our call to work toward the healing, restoration and building of a community that glorifies Christ. Too often the church in power today has become inward focused by wanting to be the center stone rather than imitating the cornerstone and living out Christ's love. In this season of Lent, we are reminded of our identity as the Church, a Church called to live out its witness in our world not by being a Centerstone, rather a church that lives out Christ's powerful transforming love that unifies us.

Respond

What are some ways you can work towards the healing, restoration and building-up of your communities-your neighborhood, your church community and the global community?

There are thousands of good answers to this question, so I encourage you to do what seems right to you, but if you are looking for suggestions, here are mine:

Your neighborhood: Volunteer to help the elderly or people with limited access to the internet navigate food delivery or COVID-19 vaccine sign-up.

Your church: Many people have lost their jobs or fallen ill in 2020 and 2021. As the Church its important that we are a healing balm for people in pain. Find out what your church is doing for outreach in your local community, and see how they may be able to use your resources or talents.

The world: Globally, an estimated 4.7 million persons are caught in sex trafficking today. Approximately 250,000–350,000 American children and youth are at risk for sex trafficking each year. Serve Globally and Love Mercy Do Justice are collaborating through [FREE](#), an anti-sex trafficking initiative of the [Evangelical Covenant Church](#) that calls the global church to Pray, Learn, Give, and Act to oppose the evil of sex-trafficking both domestically and globally. Visit covchurch.org/free to learn more.

Rest

Christ, cornerstone of our lives. transform us by the power of your love that calls us to be faithful witnesses to your light in midst of the pain of our world. Amen.



About the Author

Prajakta David serves as the Manager of Church Relations for Serve Globally. In her role, she works to resource churches to equip them to engage well in global mission. She lives in Chicago and loves walking around in the city discovering fun restaurants.

A Reflection for Holy Monday 3/29

By Rev. Rukiya Davis

Lectionary reading for 3/29/2021: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 9:11-15 NIV

Read

Hebrews 9:11-15

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here,[a] he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining[b] eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

Reflect

Have you ever felt as if you were in a situation where you battled shame, regret, hopelessness or just felt stuck in feelings of unhappiness? These feelings can open the door for thoughts that will eventually lead to the mindset that there is no opportunity for resolution. These thoughts will then create emotions that will also lead to unhealthy responses/behaviors. Our relationship with others, how we see ourselves, motivation for daily life tasks and most importantly our relationship with Christ is hindered by these consciences or mindsets. If that is where you are or have then been then you are in the moment where the Blood of Christ can do the greatest work!

That may sound cliché or churchy but it's actually very true. Verse 13 and 14 reminds us that we have an opportunity to live a life free from feelings of guilt, shame, regret, hopeless any kind of unhealthy thoughts that overwhelms our conscience. Unhealthy thoughts can lead to death, death of hope, vision, goals, and an overall desire to live. As Christians it is imperative to remember that Christ came that we would live life abundantly, to the fullest. Now, that does not mean to deny and pretend as if the thoughts are not there. I don't know about you, but I am tired of wearing masks spiritually and literally. Processing your thoughts honestly in prayer, with a trusted loved one, Therapist, Pastor etc. are healthy steps to take. So, the question is, how long will you allow unhealthy thinking patterns to isolate you, hinder you in general? Seriously, how long?

Respond

Spend some time reflecting on the following:

- What are the actual thoughts that are hindering you?
- What does scripture say about these thoughts and feelings?
- Who are the trusted people or what resource (s) you can connect to?

Rest

Finally pray along these lines:

Heavenly Father I confess that I have struggled with thoughts of ____, ____, ____ and this makes me feel ____, ____, and _____. You came that I should live a life free of negative mindsets and consciences that lead to death of the plans you have for me. It has taken me some time to admit this and I am ready to be a better version of me. Lord, I am ready to be free of these thoughts and allow you to lead me in this process. Lord, lead me and guide me.



About the Author

Rev. Rukiya Davis is a native of Chicago, IL. A graduate from North Park Theological Seminary with a Masters in Christian Ministry and University of Maryland Masters in Social Work. She has dedicated her life to ministry and the mental health field for over fifteen years. Rukiya is also a licensed therapist who believes in the importance of mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy believers.

A Reflection for Holy Tuesday 3/30

By Rev. Jodi Mullen Fondell

Lectionary reading for 3/30/2021: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

Selected passage for reflection: John 12:20-36 (NRSV)

Read

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah[b] remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Reflect

This statement: *We wish to see Jesus*. When I read that I think, yes, yes, don't we all wish to see Jesus? But then I think, well, actually, do we really want to see Jesus in the fullness of his ministry and purpose? If I really see Jesus, that could mean something for me and the manner in which I want to live my life. If I truly encounter Jesus, I might have to change the way I understand an issue or prioritize my life, or treat another human being. Do I really want to see Jesus in all of his fullness? What might that require of us, if we were to really see Jesus?

It is striking to me that our first encounter with Jesus in this text is a reference to dying. When he says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus isn't referring to a moment of glory as the world defines glory. No, he is referencing his death. And then he returns to speaking in metaphor by referencing the grain of wheat that must fall into the ground and die in order to grow. Jesus is always full of contrast, isn't he? Christ's glory is made manifest in his death and therefore it makes sense that in order for us to share in his glory, we too must share in his death. So it's not only that we receive the grace so freely offered by Jesus but also that we must die to ourselves in a manner that ultimately reflects the glory of God.

At this point in our Lenten journey, perhaps the most important question for us to ask is this: "What is it in my life that I must be willing to die to in order to more fully reflect the glory of God made manifest in Christ's death?" This question returns me to our desire to truly see Jesus. Are we able to see Jesus as the lover of justice? Are we able to see Jesus as the one who challenged the status quo and sought to center the more vulnerable? Are we able to see Jesus as the one who cared deeply for those on the margins, seeking to tell their story and understand their point of view? As we consider these questions, maybe what we most need to die are the practices in our lives that prevent us from more fully adapting a point of view that considers the most vulnerable and powerless in our society. Instead of drawing upon knee-jerk reactions that make us defensive, what we need to do is to sit with our discomfort and allow God to reveal the places in our hearts and minds that need to die. This may be a good time to do some work as it relates to racial understanding. Dying to the power that we hold and instead being open to new ways of doing and being in relationship to other people is a way we truly see Jesus. Reading books by those with a new point of view opens us up to seeing in another way. Exposing ourselves to sermons or podcasts from people of color who are living with the realities of a racist society will help us lose the blinders that prevent us from seeing others with the eyes of Jesus. If we really want to see Jesus, we need to be willing to die to the things that we hold most dear and that surely includes re-examining the way we consider what justice is all about from Christ's point of view.

At the end of our text for today, we return to the theme of light and darkness so prevalent in Christ's teaching. We are called to follow the light in order to avoid living in darkness. May we all find the courage and strength to look full into the light of Christ in order that he might erase all darkness from our hearts. May we die to that which keeps us in darkness and emerge anew more fully bathed in the light that is indeed Christ in all of his glorious fullness. Amen.

Respond

As you consider what you might need to die to in order to see Jesus in the fullness of his glory, especially as it relates to his commitment to justice, what comes to mind as an area of struggle for you? Find a resource: a book, a sermon, a podcast, or a friend, where you can be challenged and broadened in your understanding of a justice issue. Grapple with it as you seek to die to your former self and emerge more fully bathed in the light of Christ.

Rest

Dear Jesus. Thank you for dying for us all that we might know the fullness of salvation that is given to us as a free gift from God. May we find the courage to die to ourselves in order to be resurrected as more faithful disciples, pursuing not only your grace and peace, but also your justice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.



About the Author

Jodi Mullen Fondell is a Covenant Pastor serving as co-associate pastor (alongside her husband) at The American Church in Paris. She loves to travel and hang out with her Labrador, Maddie. Her experience of serving International churches in Europe led her to write a book entitled “I Was A Stranger: The church's responsibility to welcome and embrace the foreigner.” It is available on Amazon and through wipfandstock.com

A Reflection for Holy Wednesday 3/31

By Rev. Dr. Liz Mosbo VerHage

Lectionary reading for 3/31/2021: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

Selected passage for reflection: John 13:21-32 (NIV)

Read

John 13:21-32

After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.”

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.” Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

Reflect

This text stops me in my tracks and arrests my attention. In this Lenten walk we are on toward Good Friday, in the waiting in the midst of death as we prepare for the resurrection life of Easter, this story of Jesus with his disciples at the last supper teaches us that there is still much happening within the waiting - being drawn toward intimacy with Jesus, or being tempted toward betrayal in the darkness.

In this reading we find Jesus reclining, up close and personal, enjoying food, community, rest, and sharing last reminders with his closest friends, savoring every bit of goodness at his last meal with the disciples before the cross. Those he is closest to lean on him, in tenderness and familiarity, with trust - it's a scene of community, fidelity, and faith. Yet this is also messy, in between, waiting space. Jesus knows that next comes suffering; that his friends now faithful will soon fall asleep, flee the cross, forget the miraculous signs they witnessed; that one of his closest companions will betray him for a lumpy bag of silver. Jesus knows - and yet he remains, he waits, he chooses tender presence, he points to glorifying God. Even before the new life of Easter is obvious, visible, or has interrupted the way things are. He could have struck Judas dead or exposed him, or tried to rig the next scene to avoid the unfair suffering coming. But instead of control, Jesus chooses to trust what God is doing. Instead of arrogance he names the truth, even if others don't catch on. Instead of isolation he chooses community.

Judas reminds me that in our walk of faith we have choices and we are capable of walking out into the darkness, even right after we've enjoyed the warmth of being by Jesus' side. What called Judas out from that community of loyalty toward death? Was it greed, fear, his own wounds, a sense that he would miss out if he didn't secure his own future? Or did he just get numb, desensitized, become simply an easy target for the powers of death that whisper to do things our own way and make life easier? Are we so different from the villain in the story, or could any of us be Judas on any given day, if we leave the warmth of intimacy with Jesus for whatever else beckons?

I don't see Judas as a cautionary tale, but rather the truth-telling of what happens to all of us when we let fear, control, our own pain, or the not-truth that wriggles into our minds and spirits get the best of us. I have to fight against this every single day, and know that naming this reality, seeing that temptation toward movement away from Jesus, is not so much about guilt, but is an invitation. We are invited to intimacy with Jesus, in every mess we are in, invited to be sustained as Jesus was through trust, truth, and community. How will you and I choose in the waiting, in the unknown, before the clarity of Easter morning dawns?

The unwritten power at work underneath this whole story is of course the power of the living God, the power that would bring life from death, triumph from shame, liberation from fear. The forces at work that pulled Judas into the night, that would make the disciples forget at the cross, these forces prowl at our doors today - the multiple pandemics at work, loss and pain, injustice and oppression, the gaps in the church and in our own lives - in the midst of all these and more, we can always choose the intimacy of trusting Jesus. It's there that we hear the truth, even if others don't recognize it. It's there that we are fortified to walk toward our call, whatever our own next unique steps. It's there as we recline back on the powerful name of Jesus, knowing we are not alone, remembering that we have been empowered and authorized by One who waits with us in the mess, the in between, and who always brings new life.

Respond

What are you waiting for, fleeing from, or tempted by in this season?

What reminds you that Jesus is always with you, empowering you, in the waiting?

Rest

God of the resurrection, in our thin and worn out places we cry out - meet us in the mess Oh God! Meet us in all of our needs, questions, fears and wounds, gather us up into your presence, your truth, your justice, and your redemption. We wait on you God, help us to wait on you. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Dr. Liz Mosbo VerHage is the Pastor of Formation and Justice Ministries at Quest Church in Seattle, WA, and is also an adjunct professor, clergy coach, church consultant, and writer/speaker on topics such as healthy leadership, spiritual formation, racial justice, reclaiming the mission of the church, politics and faith, and strengthening urban ministries. She currently lives with her husband and 2 kids in the Seattle area after ministry in Chicago and Minneapolis. She writes at www.livingtheology.org.

A Reflection for Maundy Thursday 4/1

By Rev. Cath Kaminski

Lectionary reading for 4/1/2021: Exodus 12:1-4, 5-10, 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 ; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Selected passage for reflection: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (NIV)

*Today the Church observes **Maundy Thursday**. This day commemorates Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and The Last Supper, where Jesus blesses the bread and the wine, serves it to the apostles, and asks that breaking bread and drinking wine be a way to remember Him.*

Read

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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

Reflect

These words are so familiar. We hear them in some form or another in most celebrations of communion, and yet the first words of the Apostle Paul from the passage struck me anew: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you." In the sacred rhythm of Lent, as we press through Holy Week, it is not simple about the opportunities for individual growth and reflection, but how we invite others in and pass on what we receive.

Let this moment not be an excuse to go through the motions, but stop, listen, pay attention and receive. We have nothing to share if we fail to open our hands to the gift before us. Did the disciples know the invitation extended to them on that very night? Do we know the invitation?

The miracle of communion is found in the join of the ordinary with the divine. The mystery of the sacrament is how simple elements, familiar to many tables, become sacred as we ceremoniously take, bless, break and remember. We can participate before we understand. Sometimes the motions move our faith forward. This day, I invite you to open your eyes to the peace and grace offered first and foremost by a Savior who knew He'd face death for you.

May you receive afresh this day. May the ordinary things of life be filled with the Spirit and transformed. May you pass on what you receive that others might know that surpassing grace and mercy found in the One who laid down his life for you and me.

Respond

Find communion elements in your home. What is often on your table? A staple at every meal? Take it. Bless it as Jesus did. Break it and remember this command the Lord gave to the men and women dining with him on that fateful evening.

Sit with the invitation to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.” Savor the opportunity to take the ordinary and witness the transformation to sacred as God comes.

Invite someone else to the table. Share your experience.

Rest

*Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, meet me in this moment. Help me see the opportunity in the ordinary and how your Spirit takes us deeper. As I **take, bless, break and remember** help me to see your invitation to grace, your offer of peace, your ability to sustain and how I might share this good news with others. AMEN.*



About the Author

Cath Kaminski is privileged to be the church planter at Beacon Community Church in Lincoln, NE. Beacon’s ministry is founded on the gospel and justice. Cath helps lead this open and affirming body through the difficult & fruitful waters of racial reconciliation & righteousness, inclusivity & embrace of all people.

A Reflection for Good Friday 4/2

By Valeri Chow Tao

Lectionary reading for 4/2/2021: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

Selected passage for reflection: Hebrews 10:16-25 (NIV)

*Today the Church observes **Good Friday** commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus and his death on Calvary.*

Read

Hebrews 10:16-25

16 “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.”

17 Then he adds:

“Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more.

18 And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. 19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and

since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Reflect

Today is Good Friday. We as 21st century followers of Jesus have the benefit of history. Today is Good Friday because we know Sunday is coming, we know Jesus rose from the dead and declared victory over sin and death. We know that on Friday, even though it happens on Sunday. Our passage today from Hebrews reminds us of work that Jesus did on the cross, which allows us to be in right standing before God, in relationship with God and find beloved community with the People of God. God made a Covenant with his people where “sins and lawless acts” will no longer be remembered and a new way opened to be with God in and because of the work of Christ on Good Friday.

After the author of Hebrews gives a reminder of the work of Christ, the readers are exhorted to hold on to the hope of Christ because God is faithful AND to encourage one another on towards living as ones called by God, especially in light of the “Day” where God will make all things right. It’s a powerful and

packed passage. The hope that we profess, the hope of Christ is not a hope just for individuals but it is a hope for community and in light of God's ongoing work.

The events we remember on Good Friday drive us towards community. In this year, more than most, we are reminded of our need for community, of our need for each other. COVID has made it near impossible to meet together, but even in these extraordinary times, let us find (socially distant) ways to encourage one another's faith. Let us remind each other that we are not alone, especially as verse 25 says, "as you see the Day approaching." The Day is coming, where Jesus will come again to make all things right once and for all.

The Day is coming when every person, every community and the systems, structures and powers and principalities will be made right, just as God intended. But until then, we in faith participate in the work of furthering the reality of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, because we hold to the faith that we profess and know that our God who promised is faithful. Just as we remember that Good Friday is indeed good, because we know Resurrection Sunday is coming, we can hold firm to the reality that Jesus has come and he will come again to make all things new.

Respond

Take a moment and meditate on the gift of grace God has given us in Christ. Think about how you can both encourage those around you AND remind them (or yourself) of the greater Kingdom reality we live in the midst of.

Rest

*Almighty God- Thank you that we are yours in Christ Jesus. May we always be reminded of the awesome privilege and responsibility we have to participate in bringing forth your intended reality on earth as it is in heaven. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear who you are calling us to love, where you are calling us to belong and what you are calling us to do.
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*



About the Author

Valeri Chow Tao resides in Chicago. Valeri is a child of God, wife, mother, non profit professional, musician, chaplain and future pastor.

A Reflection for Holy Saturday 4/3

By Tricia Ivanoff

Lectionary reading for 4/3/2021: Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16; 1 Peter 4:1-8 ;
Matthew 27:57-66

Selected passage for reflection: Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24 (NRSV)

Read

Lamentations 3:1-9,19-24

1 I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;
2 he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
3 against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.
4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste
away,
and broken my bones;
5 he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
6 he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago
7 He has walled me about so that I cannot
escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
8 though I call and cry for help,

he shuts out my prayer;
9 he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.

19 The thought of my affliction and my
homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
20 My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.
21 But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

Reflect

The Easter story is often centered around Jesus' death and resurrection. At least that is what I grew up with. It was because we knew that Sunday was coming, and therefore it was easy to overlook the day in between. Holy Saturday, a day often marked by darkness and waiting. Waiting in the darkness. Learning to wait in the darkness. Who wants to reflect on that? I sure don't; however, the fact of the matter is that in this life there will be moments of darkness. There seems to be no escaping it no matter how hard we try to ensure our happiness. And for those who have had their fair share of dark nights of the soul or being thrust into dark times due to traumatic events, loss, depression, reflecting on this day is necessary. Talking about the darkness is necessary. What do we do when we find ourselves driven into darkness without any light?

Darkness is scary. We can't see. We often feel lost, alone, and afraid, and we tend to stumble, trip, and fall. Darkness has the ability to crush our soul, and at times it feels as though we are being held down by heavy chains. It can leave us feeling bitter. Often times it feels as though God is distant or that God has intentionally put us here to teach us a lesson perhaps to depend upon Her and Her alone. Although it is hard for me to believe that God intentionally envelops us in darkness, I do believe that we can find God in the midst of darkness. What this passage and Holy Saturday teaches us is that we do not need to be afraid of the darkness because there God is present. Jesus is in the tomb with us, and when it is time, we will be resurrected with Him.

When people find out that I am from Alaska, they immediately ask me how many hours of daylight we get in the summer, or is it true that in the winter, you will not see the sun for 30 days? Just so you know, only villages above the Arctic circle will not see the sun rise again for about 66 days meaning that people spend a majority of that time in darkness. They've endured it for years and continue to endure it because they know that eventually the sun will rise again.

God often speaks to me through metaphors of light and darkness because of where I live. Over Christmas break, I was able to travel to Nome to spend some time in Alaska. I ended up going on a walk with a friend of mine and told her of the darkness that I had been sitting in due to the tragic loss of my brother the summer prior and that slowly the Light was coming back into my life. As we were gazing at the ocean talking, the sun began to set. She drew my attention to the light and that what I am experiencing right now, much like the days after the winter solstice, is a reversal of light. The days will grow brighter, slowly but surely. Darkness doesn't last forever, and it will not win. There is light on the horizon, and that light is Jesus. Having walked through darkness for much of last year, the darkness does not seem so scary anymore, for darkness is as light to God (Psalm 139:12).

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Respond

Take a moment and reflect on some of the heavier times in your life. Perhaps you are in the thick of it right now. Take a few deep breaths to help you center yourself. Visualize Jesus with you in those moments. Where is he? What is he doing? What is he saying to you? Record this encounter with Jesus in a journal or a note on your phone or computer. After you are done, listen to Psalm 139 by Monica Laytham and let the words wash over you.

Rest

Quyana Agaiyun, thank you God that your love never ceases - that your mercies never come to an end and that they are new each morning. Great is your faithfulness. God, we are grateful that you are a God who does not leave nor forsake us rather that You walk with us in the midst of the dark moments of our lives. You have given us reason to hope and that hope lies in your Son who needed to spend time in the dark tomb in order to be resurrected so that we too might have the hope of the resurrection. Amen.



About the Author

Tricia Ivanoff is from the small village of Unalakleet, Alaska. She is Inupiaq and Yup'ik. Currently, she is pursuing a Master of Divinity and Master of Business Administration from North Park Theological Seminary. She is passionate about working towards the healing of Native peoples' in her region and is a continual learner of her peoples' traditional ways and language.

Easter

Today, around the world, people celebrate Easter or Resurrection Sunday, commemorating Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the promise that we, too, can experience new life. In many churches, this day marks the season of Eastertide, from April 4th to May 23rd. We will celebrate each Easter Sunday and the Day of Ascension with a reflection just like the ones you have enjoyed during Lent. Today, and throughout the Easter season, many Christians will celebrate by shouting, "Hallelujah, He is risen! He is risen, indeed!"



Holy Women at the Tomb, by Ilyas Basim Khuri Bazzi Rahib 1684

A Reflection for Resurrection Sunday 4/4

by Pastor Judy Peterson

Lectionary reading for 4/4/2021: Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 ; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

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

Read

John 20:1-18

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. **2** So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4** Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7** as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. **8** Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **9** (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) **10** Then the disciples went back to where they were staying

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb **12** and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." **14** At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflect

What God did, God still does

The resurrection is the event upon which I have built my hope because I believe what God did, God still does. This means that no matter how many “words” death speaks over our lives; words like finality, failure, frustration, sickness, sadness, struggle, loneliness, meaninglessness, hopelessness, divisions, criticisms or cynicism, that the deaths in this life will not get the *last* word. Because what God did, God still does.

But while death may not get the last word, it will still get in a word. And I don’t want to just run past this truth today. Because so often believers in the resurrection begin acting as if the resurrection inoculates us from death and that somehow our belief issues us a get out of death free card to that we miraculously get to pass over all the deaths, all the tomb-laying and the Holy Saturday not-knowing and move directly into a place called Hallelujah and Praise the Lord. I just want to remind us that death is in fact a prerequisite for resurrection and that our faith doesn’t promise a formula where everything always works out, but rather declares there is a promised resurrection on the other side of things that don’t seem to work out at all.

And so, on the Easter morning as we together seek to hold onto our hope that what God did, God still does, let me offer just a few footholds that I have found helpful for climbing up out of the grave. John 20 begins, *“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb.”*

I have found it helpful to re-member that *while it was still dark* and while Mary was *still making her way*, the resurrection was already taking place and that resurrections in our lives often works in similar ways. In the dark of the spring soil, bulbs are breaking open and shoots are making their way to the surface even before evidence of life becomes visible. Can I encourage us to bring this kind of hope to every grave encounter? It doesn’t speed up the process, nor does it mean we won’t still have to make our way, but it does help us hold open the possibility that resurrection might be taking place even before we can see it.

Mary arrives at the tomb to find it empty. She alerts the disciples and they come to find it just as she said; the stone rolled away, Jesus’ body missing, and the grave clothes lying in place. After assessing the situation, the disciples returned home, but Mary remained outside the tomb. Mary doesn’t run away from the place of her greatest loss, but instead looks in again and it is her second look that ultimately brings her face to face with a resurrected life. Can I invite you to be brave? To look again at what you’ve lost and consider that God might still do what God did then by allowing you to see what others have missed.

Mary first sees two angels and then comes face to face with the resurrected Christ, whom she does not recognize. And this brings me to another ponderable point. What if right now resurrection is standing right in front of us and we don’t even recognize it because we thought the seed that was buried in the ground would look like the resurrection that springs up out of it. Perhaps we placed childlessness in the tomb and we expected children to be raised or we placed singleness in the tomb and we expected

marriage to be raised. Maybe we placed our failures in the tomb and we expected success to be raised or we placed our disappointment with the church in the tomb and we expected a perfect church with perfect people when it was raised from the dead. But what if instead of children God raises a mission? What if instead of marriage God gives you visions and dreams? What if instead of success God brings to life in you an incredible grace for other people's failures? What if instead of a perfect church God raises up an abundance of compassion for the broken and battered gathering of God's people? You see, so often, we like Mary are looking for what was buried to rise again in the same form and because of this so many of us miss the resurrected life already standing right in front of us.

It is in this place of misunderstanding that Jesus speaks Mary's name and because of this very personal exchange Mary comes to recognize the resurrected life in front of her and is able claim in a flesh and blood way that in spite of everything she has previously known, apparently death does not get the last word when God is involved.

Respond

I'm wondering if this very day you would consider boldly asking God to speak directly to you; to call you by name and to reveal to you the reality of a resurrected life? I can't make this happen, but I know it still does and I'm hoping that through your tears and as you linger around your own losses that God would give you a clear vision of a previously unfathomable resurrection.

Rest

Resurrected and resurrecting God help me trust that what you have done, you can still do. Grant me the courage to hope that even while it's still dark and even as I am still making my way, that even before I see evidence that things are being raised back to life. Help me bravely look again at the places of my greatest grief and recognize the resurrection even if it doesn't look like what was placed in the grave. And increase my faith today so that I might believe that life will have the last word. Amen.



About the Author

Judy Peterson is a pastor-at-large, committed to the embodied work of the gospel of Jesus the Christ, pastoring people who are still making their way. Judy once walked across the United States, and knows the discipline of walking through grief. She believes we must learn to walk about our convictions. She loves walking alongside others who are seeking to put feet to their faith, and you can find her at @walkingpastor on IG

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 4/11

by Rev. Sung Yeon Choi Morrow

Lectionary reading for 4/11/2021: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 4:32-35 (NIV)

Read

Acts 4:32-35

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Reflect

When I read this passage, I am struck by how powerfully people experienced God's grace. So much so that "no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had". This to me demonstrates ultimate vulnerability and living into abundance.

One of the things I'm constantly thinking about is how little Christians demonstrate a life that is evidence of God's grace. We may individually be grateful for the transforming love and grace of God in our personal and individual relationship with God but I'm struck by how we as a community fail to show this to our broken world that is in so much need of grace. We don't live to demonstrate this type of grace as the Christians in Acts did.

Back when I was in college I read a book called "What's so Amazing About Grace" by Philip Yancy. The opening story to that book has been seared in my memory and that book, among others is the reason I do what I do, in public policy advocacy because of my faith. Yancy opens the book with a story of a prostitute who is a drug addict and she is at the steps of his church crying. He comes to find out that because of her need to feed her addiction, she sold her young daughter for sex for the first time and she was beside herself because of guilt. Yancy asks her "why don't you go inside the church and ask for support?" And her answer haunts me to this day. She goes, "I already feel so awful about what I did, why would I go in there just so they can make me feel worse!?"

That haunts me because that answer is a simple summary of how people experience the church. When I was a senior at Wheaton College, I interned for an advocacy organization. I would go to community meetings about housing, voting and language access. When people found out I was a senior at Wheaton College, more than not, people's first reaction would be "what are you doing here?" or "I would have never expected to meet a Wheaton College student here" and when I would inquire more, the answers

always were about how Wheaton College was conservative, and what the various groups I was meeting with were doing were too progressive for folks at Wheaton College. Basically they said they didn't know people at Wheaton College cared about changing the world so it's a more fair and equitable society.

Years later, after my seminary education, I went on to work as a community organizer and I was met with similar reactions. But because I had a seminary degree, I had many folks who had walked away from the faith asking me theological questions because they all walked away from the faith because they could not reconcile the bigotry and greed of "Christianity" with their developing sense to fight for social justice.

When I read this passage in Acts it really pains me because the early Christians, who were so touched by the power of God's grace were all about generosity and giving of themselves, which seems quite the opposite from the display we see of Christianity today in this country.

I currently work as an executive director of an organization that is advocating for public policy changes so that immigrant women, and all women of color can thrive and have agency over their lives. I cannot express how hard this fight is and the people who are the biggest obstacle are those who profess to be Christians.

Respond

It is my prayer that those of us who are committed to demonstrating the power of God's grace that leads us to live radically generous lives continue to shine our lights brighter and let our salt be saltier than those who claim to be Christians who do not demonstrate the radical grace-filled lives that we should be living.

Rest

Lord, give us the courage, creativity and perseverance to live our lives that demonstrates the power of your grace that has transformed our lives. Help us live more generously, boldly and prophetically. Amen.



About the Author

The Reverend Sung Yeon Choimorrow is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) ordained to specialized ministry. She currently serves as the Executive Director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), an organization building power with Asian American Pacific Islander Women and Girls to create a world where we can all thrive and have agency over our bodies, families and communities. Sung Yeon is a first generation Korean American living in Chicago with her partner Joseph and daughter Ella where her family focuses on raising Ella to be proud to be Black and Korean American.

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 4/18

by Sue Braun

Lectionary reading for 4/18/2021: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 3:12-19 (NIV)

Read

Acts 3:12-19

12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. 14 You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. 16 By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

17 “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. 18 But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

Reflect

It’s a hard thing to hear when someone tells you the truth about yourself. A friend once said to me, “You don’t like people telling you ‘No’, do you?” I winced. I had no come-back for that because I knew in that moment it was true. I was embarrassed because I hadn’t seen this part of myself before. I felt exposed.

I wonder what the people who were listening to Peter felt when he told the truth about them? “...you handed him over to be killed...disowned him...killed the author of life...” Painful stuff to hear and own. Did they cringe? Hide? Defend themselves? Get angry at Peter? Slink away? Brush it off? Continue to relive his words?

The Prayer of Examen helps me see the truth about myself. Doing the Examen, I walk with Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit back through my day and ask for help in seeing where I moved toward God and where I moved away from God (or where I showed love and didn’t show love, or moved toward compassion and away from compassion). The key, I think, is to remember that God is walking with me as I remember my day. If it’s just me walking back through my day, I can think I’m so good that I don’t need to repent of anything or so bad that I want to run away and not be with myself or God. With the Holy Spirit with me, I can respond with gratefulness for the times I see that I moved with love and I can also face the times I didn’t squarely and let the Spirit do some healing work in me.

Respond

Sometime today or tomorrow, take 5-7min to do the Prayer of Examen. Ask Jesus to walk back through your day with you. You can imagine that you are holding Jesus' hand as you do this or imagine that a candle or a light is walking with you and illuminating your path. Say a word of gratefulness when you feel it. When something hard comes into view, take a breath and look at it together with Jesus or the light. Name what happened, express whatever feelings come up, and move on to the next memory. You can end this practice with a simple "Thank you."

Rest

God, we need You to tell us the truth. Sometimes we don't see it. Help us to become more and more aware of where you are in our lives and how You are working.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.



About the Author

Sue Braun is a spiritual director, a supervisor at the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction at North Park Seminary in Chicago, and a group facilitator at North Park Seminary's School of Restorative Arts. Sue is a native Chicagoan, loves the lakefront in all kinds of weather, and especially likes seeing the first Snowdrops poke their heads up in Spring.

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 4/25

By Amanda Svejda

Lectionary reading for 4/25/2021: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24 ; John 10:11-18

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 4:5-12 (NRSV)

Read

Acts 4:5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, **6** with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John,[a] and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. **7** When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” **8** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, **9** if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, **10** let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. **11** This Jesus[d] is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.’

12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Reflect

Like me, has the last year beat you up, knocked you around and even shaken your faith a little (or a lot)? In America, we are still living through some of our darkest days. The past year seemed to be on some sort of cruelly endless bad news cycle:

- The coronavirus.
- Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. Innocent black and brown people continue to senselessly die at the hands of law enforcement.
- The January 6, 2021 insurrection in the Capitol building.
- Millions of Americans lost jobs last year (myself included).
- Many people are struggling with isolation, fear and anxiety as they enter a full year of social distancing and spending most days at home.

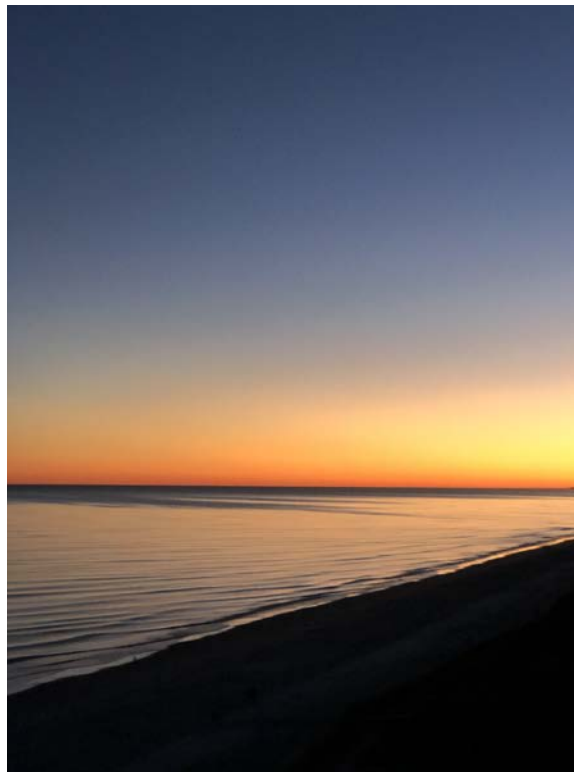
As we look full on in the face of these circumstances, we can begin to ask, “God, where are you? Where were you? Why?” (All legit questions we probably *should* ask and take to God). Yet if we stare at these events too long--just the circumstances that took place--we can begin to feel hopeless. Because it does seem that the world is crashing down around us. All the reality we thought we knew, well, just isn’t. Everything is changing. Fast in some ways. Not fast enough in others. And honestly, the questions seem many and the answers seem too few. I have often felt helpless, like I wanted to do more and say more and encourage people more through these trying times. But my words didn’t seem enough or the right

words didn't come. And full disclosure--at times I just did not have the energy or courage to do what may have been best to do.

But as I reflected on today's reading, I found three unshakeable, unchanging and timeless truths that have the power to anchor me, you, and all believers through the ages, no matter what is swirling around us:

1. God is here. God is with us. We are not alone. This makes all the difference.
2. Peter and John healed the disabled man, and boldly proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not by their own power or might, but because they were filled with the Holy Spirit.
3. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name except the name of Jesus Christ by which we can be saved.

These truths bring the light of the presence, love and power of God to bear on what for many has been the most difficult year of their lives. They show us that no matter what events inform our experience, there is One who never changes, never leaves, never fails. We can cry out in pain, mourning, and loss. We can cry out in desperation and anxiety and sadness. And yes, we can cry out and give praise to God. Because we know God is with us wherever we are and whatever we're going through. And this momentary chapter is not the final word. The Holy Spirit fills us and energizes us to move. And we know our salvation is secure. Nothing--not coronavirus, not racial injustice, not anxiety or isolation-- will disrupt the eternal, wonderful plans of our Mighty God.



Respond

Spend a few minutes rereading Acts 4:5-12 and ask simply, “Holy Spirit, come. Speak to me, your servant. I am listening.”

Now, think of all the times in the past year you have been afraid, lonely, sick, hurting or suffering. Spend a few moments mourning if that is what you need. Then, turn your eyes to God. Say, pray or write what you need to express. Respectfully, but honestly. Understanding that God is with you and for you, open your heart to Him. Then, call to mind all the times God has met you in these moments, whether you needed courage, healing, or simply to believe in the powerful Name of Jesus. Thank God for the many times He has met you where you are, and allow yourself to rest in the presence of the Holy Spirit for a few moments before you end.

Rest

Dear God, in you, Father, we have endless love and faithfulness. In you alone, Jesus Christ, we have salvation. And in you, Holy Spirit we find the ever-present God who emboldens us to believe, to act and to speak in God’s Name. Be with us now and go with us. Help us to speak and act in love, with courage, and to proclaim your Name as we go. Amen.



About the Author

Amanda is wife to Joey and proud mama to the world’s cutest fur-baby, Kona (the cute puppy who's now five). Amanda graduated from Northern Seminary in 2007 with a Master of Divinity degree. Her interests include writing, social justice, news, coffee, walking by the lake and laughing with friends. Every year she somehow finds new opportunities to engage in lots of existential questions and is always looking for the “right path” but is starting to understand that trusting God daily is more important than having all the right answers. Feel free to reach out to her at: amanda.svejda@gmail.com

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 5/2

By Rev. Eva Sullivan-Knoff

Lectionary reading for 5/2/2021: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Selected passage for reflection: John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

Read

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.



Reflect

Read the following prayer poem which is a response to the scripture. Read it through the first time to just take it in. Pause prayerfully to let it steep in you like a tea bag does in hot water.

The second time you read it, notice to which word or phrase you are drawn. Prayerfully pause. What is it about that word or phrase that speaks to you at this time.

Abiding

*Oh Gracious One,
Asking us to abide in you
is a gift clothed in a commandment,
for when we uncover it,
it opens up this expansive place in us.
We can breathe freely and deeply there,
taking in the wonder of your presence.
It fills us up with unspeakable joy
and a peace greater than anything
we have ever experienced.
We are completely known and accepted there
and wholly loved.
You, our Divine Companion,
who call us your own,
invite us into this unimaginable communion,
this Divine Intimacy,
which is our life source.
It nurtures us and fills us*

*with all that we need and so much more.
It transforms everything:
changing how we live and move in the world;
the way we see others through your eyes;
which defines how we respond to them.
It undergirds us with strength to walk through
trying times.
It reminds us that we are your beloved.
No wonder you ask us to abide in you.
It is life and love itself, for us,
and for the places and people you call us to.
Praise you Divine One,
Our Constant Companion,
Our Beloved.
Keep us here,
moment by moment,
leaning into You, Amen.*

Respond

Notice God's presence with you as you move throughout the day. Lean into God's presence by offering breath prayers, which are just a few syllables long. Offer thanks when you see or experience something beautiful, by simply praying as you breathe it in, "Thank you God." Or offer petitions when you are aware of someone in need, like in praying "Comfort, Lord" or "Help, God." Breath prayers are a way for us to practice the presence of God in the moment.

Rest

Thank you gracious God for the divine communion you offer us. Your presence is everything. Deepen our awareness of you in everyday moments and keep us leaning into you. Amen.



About the Author

Rev. Eva Sullivan-Knoff is the Founder and Executive Director of Journey Center of Chicago, offering retreats, spiritual direction, contemplative spaces, and training people to become spiritual directors. <https://journeycenterofchicago.org/> She is married to the love of her life, John, and they have two grown kids who are their joy.

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 5/9

by Dr. Cindy Hoover

Lectionary reading for 5/9/2021: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 10:44-48 (MSG)

Read

Acts 10:44-48

No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on quotation marks outsider" non— Jews, but there was – they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

Then Peter said do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did" hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.

Reflect

This story makes more sense if you read the whole of Acts 10. Let me tell you the story. Peter was one of the first disciples of Jesus. He was known for being impetuous, but he also was a man of great faith, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah before anyone else. He was a good Jewish man. The Jews had been God's chosen people to be a light to the nations, but Jesus came and was the fulfilling light coming into the world. The Jewish believers had not yet understood this concept. One day while waiting for lunch, Peter had a dream. A blanket was let down from heaven with every type of animal a voice told him to eat from all of them. Peter objected because there were non-kosher animals included. But the voice told him that that did not matter anymore. Elsewhere, somewhat before this time, Cornelius, a devout God worshiper and Roman, had a visit from an angel who told him how to find Peter, and to send his men to invite him to his house. After Peter had awakened from his dream, people from Cornelius' household came to his door inviting him to Cornelius' house. Because of his dream, Peter went right away.

Once Peter got to Cornelius's house he preached the gospel to them. All the household believed and immediately the Holy Spirit came on them just as it had on the original Jewish disciples on the day of Pentecost. All were amazed at what had happened. Peter exclaimed that surely God was no respecter of persons. God had given the Holy Spirit to these non-Jews just as he did to Jewish believers. He was anxious to therefore baptize them and welcome them into the church.

What an important message this has for us in the church today. God is no respecter of persons. God does not care about the color of our skin, our ethnicity, our language, our physical or mental ability, our sex or gender, or anything else that we use to distinguish people. All can receive God's grace. Just as when God pulled up the corners of that blanket with all the animals with the kosher and non-kosher

animals mixed together with no distinction, so God has looked at what we see as center and margins, and pulled up the corners of our world, leaving no distinction. We think of center and margins. God thinks of one whole of humanity. In the pulled-up bundle there is no longer a center nor are there margins. Everyone is intermixed. The church could learn much from this.

Respond

Take a cloth napkin and lay it out straight on a table. Place little trinkets of varying value on the napkin with your most precious in the center and your least precious on the margins. Look at that for a little while. Then carefully pick up the corners and the midpoints of each side and bring them together up into a bundle like a hobo's pouch. What's in the center now? What's in the margins? Some of the edges may bother other items and eventually they might wear them down smoother. But there is no center nor are there margins. There is the enfolding beloved community of God's beloved children. Contemplate what this would mean in your life if there were no center but just one United whole.

Rest

Our gracious and loving God, we thank you that you are not a respecter of persons, but accept all without distinction. We thank you that you pour out your Spirit and you let each of us now be the light to all people. Help us to bring together the corners of the bundles in our lives so that we no longer put people on the margins to be ignored but so that we hold everyone together in your kingdom of grace. We thank you that you allow this through the love of Jesus Christ. Amen



About the Author

It has been said that Cindy has never met a degree she doesn't like. She therefore has an alphabet soup of letters after her name. They can best be summarized as pediatrician, public health specialist, and missionary, but she prefers just calling herself a beloved daughter of God who has been allowed to have an adventurous career. A rare autoimmune syndrome sidelined her from Oaxaca sooner than expected, so now she is adding a few more letters by pursuing a DMin in practical theology of disability. She has shared her house with schnauzers most of her life and currently is waiting for the right shelter dog to rescue her.

An Eastertide Reflection for Ascension Thursday 5/13

By Jennifer Leavitt-Moy

Lectionary reading for 5/13/2021: Acts 1:1-11 ; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Selected passage for reflection: Ephesians 1:15-23 (NIV)

Read

Ephesians 1:15-23

15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people,¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Reflect

When I read this passage, I can imagine Paul, in Rome, imprisoned. He is in the midst of what was likely a very lonely time, and yet his love for, and encouragement to, God's people is unrepressed. Quite likely Paul was not alone, he was perhaps surrounded by other prisoners, but the proximity of others does not remove the quality of aloneness.

Though many of us are not alone, we are surrounded perhaps by children, or a spouse, a partner, perhaps friends or a pod, and yet, loneliness is still a quality that can be experienced despite proximity to others. In addition, during this pandemic, many of us are in fact completely alone. The image of Paul in prison also resonates with the countless individuals, over the last year, existing in isolation, fear, grief, confusion, overwhelm and anxiety. We have collectively, globally, been called to isolate, to cut ourselves off from the familiar encouragement and love that many of us have been accustomed to. In the midst of this current chaos, like Paul in prison, there is a certain loneliness of spirit that can take hold; it forces us to reflect more deeply and pause. This kind of loneliness can seep into our souls and can dampen our faith, but if we can reframe it as solitude, and imagine our universal connection through prayer, this season of aloneness can be transformed.

There can be a fine line, but it exists nonetheless, between loneliness and solitude. Perhaps, in what appeared to be loneliness, Paul found solitude. That quality of aloneness that does not feel lonely.

Solitude could be the space for many that enables deep and profound reflection, an opportunity to take stalk, and then, coming through and out of our solitude more equipped, though perhaps physically we went nowhere at all.

Paul reaches out of his solitude through reflection and prayer. First, his solitude allows him time for reflection. This reflection is something we can all benefit from. Time to look inward, to understand who we are, both the wonderful and the weary. We have to look with intention at our own hearts, our lives, and see where we need to mend, where we have been operating in a way that is not optimal. We “open the eyes of our heart” and take the opportunity with opened eyes to see where we have been inhibiting the Spirit of God within us.

From this place of deep personal reflection we can emerge from our solitude better: better for ourselves, but also better for the world. Through radical self reflection we can invite God to help us heal, and become a closer version to the one He imagines us to be. As we become more aligned with God’s vision for us, we are better equipped to help those around us. Finally, Paul’s prayer transcends his experience and hopes to encourage those he wishes he could be nearer to. He prays for those he loves to embrace that power of the spirit which God has shared with those who know Him. That prayer, to connect with the spirit, is what joins us collectively.

As the Lenten and Easter Seasons come to a close, we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. This is a celebration of the time when, after accomplishing all He was sent to do on earth, Jesus ascends to his place at the right hand of the Father. We, humanity, are left alone. However, we celebrate the aloneness that is not lonely, the aloneness that invites radical self reflection, empowered through the Holy Spirit, that the eyes of our heart may be opened through solitude. From that place of solitude and reflection we can emerge through prayer because it reminds us of what binds us together: Our common Father, the Holy Spirit which Jesus died to share with us, and the celebration of Jesus Risen and Ascended.



He Qi, The Risen Lord, 2013

Respond

Has this last year been a season of loneliness or solitude? Can you frame it in terms of solitude and use this time of solitude for radical self reflection? Can the eyes of your heart be opened to the call that God has on your life? Can you heal a broken part that, once healed will allow you to reach out to others through prayer, or even through action?

What encouragement can you offer yourself? Your loved ones that you've not been able to see?

Rest

Father God, I pray for all of the people enduring this season of loneliness. I pray that we could all find the opportunity to reframe our experience of loneliness to a space of solitude, and that in the midst of our solitude we can connect to ourselves through self reflection, and then, when we are ready with others through prayer and encouragement. Amen.



About the Author

Jennifer Leavitt-Moy is a mother, wife and encourager to those around her. She has been living in Montreal, Quebec for a year, but otherwise hails from the Midwest (Madison, WI or Chicago, IL) depending on the year. She has three sons: Phoenix, Justice and Lorenzo. She has had an eclectic career and is currently working with her husband, Roberto Rivera, in a nonprofit.

An Eastertide Reflection for Sunday 5/16

by Rachel Lee

Lectionary reading for 5/16/2021: Acts 1:15-17, Acts 1:21-26, Psalm 1, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

Selected passage for reflection: Psalm 1 (The Message)

Read

Psalm 1

1 How well God must like you— you don't walk in the ruts of those blind-as-bats, you don't stand with the good-for-nothings, you don't take your seat among the know-it-alls.	bearing fresh fruit every month, Never dropping a leaf, always in blossom.
2-3 Instead you thrill to God's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night. You're a tree replanted in Eden,	4-5 You're not at all like the wicked, who are mere windblown dust— Without defense in court, unfit company for innocent people.
	6 God charts the road you take. The road they take leads to nowhere.

Reflect

How much more relaxed I am in the presence of those who like and accept me. I feel safe and my choices are a result of this anchored contentment. Happiness instead of lack. This contrasts to when I feel unknown, unaccepted or unanchored. My shoulders constrict, eyes scan the room and choices are often a result of how I lack.

Being born and raised in Canada to Chinese immigrant parents, I often found myself navigating spaces and scanning faces to determine if I belonged. My face looked different than those surrounding me in North America. When I lived in Hong Kong for a few years as a child, faces looked like mine but my accented Chinese gave me away. I often made choices to compensate for the lack of acceptance and anchor I felt in both spaces. I grasped and made choices that often ended up hurting myself or others. Like the time I shared with my classmates at school in Canada that pandas played in my backyard when I lived in Asia. This impressed them until my mom showed up for a field trip and my friends asked her about it. No blossoming fruit from the trust lost between friends.

Psalm 1 here offers us two roads or two choices. The first is to trust in and receive the Divine presence that is always readily available to us. God offers us immeasurable tenderness and affection for our entire being and story; "how well God must like you." Her Word consistently offers this thrilling promise for us to chew on and digest. We are invited to experience the freedom of rooting and anchoring. We become a tree so anchored, it's rooted goodness bears fruit regularly.

The second choice is to deny this gift and find ourselves in spaces we didn't plan for; "roads leading to nowhere". With no anchor, we expend our energy grasping for earned affection and control. We find ourselves spun around like mere windblown dust swirling with striving expectation.

One constant invitation leading to two contrasting roads and images.

Respond

Imagine God's gaze of tenderness on you as you spend time together. "I like you", they say. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Inhale deeply and pray "Be," and as you exhale, "Loved." Pray and rest in this gaze of affection. This can be the eyes of Christ looking at you, the warmth of the Holy Spirit holding you or the deep sense of safety and acceptance God our creator offers you.

When I spend time with this gaze, we are often sitting on top of the rocky mountains in Canada where I grew up, after a long hike, my lungs full of crisp fresh air and vision inundated with stunning views. Other times, we are in the comfort of my living room, socks off, laying amongst soft cushions in silence.

Rest in this gaze, wherever it takes you and anchor deeply to the thrilling promise of how loved, good and accepted you are. Inhale, "Be" and exhale, "Loved." Spend five minutes resting and breathing prayer.

Rest

The goodness in us is old. The threats to us seem ever new. Fear crowds out our hope within. The call to find rest in you is old. The barriers to peace seem ever new. Guide our choices towards rootedness beside flowing rivers. We ask in the name of our God our Provider, Christ our Protector, and the Holy Spirit, our Guide. Amen.



About the Author

Rachel Lee is a Chinese Canadian American currently living in Austin, TX spending her days practicing as a spiritual director, working in public education and living with her partner of 2 decades, 3 kids, 1 dog and 1 bird.

An Eastertide Reflection for Pentecost Sunday 5/23

by Julia Styles

Lectionary reading for 5/16/2021: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Selected passage for reflection: Acts 2:1-21 (NIV)

Read

Acts 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,[b] 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Reflect

“God says, I will pour out my Spirit on **ALL** people, your sons and daughters, young and old, men and women [and non-binary people] will prophesy and see visions and dream dreams!” God promised that

Peter Addresses the Crowd

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

17 “***In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.***

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

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

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

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

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

They would give Their Spirit to all people, no matter their ethnicity or gender or age or station. God proclaimed through Joel that all people who call on the name of the Lord will be saved--not just people from Jerusalem or the United States, not just Evangelicals or Catholics or Mainline Protestants--**everyone**.

Throughout history, people have drawn lines for who is “in” or “out.” No wonder the people in Jerusalem were disturbed by what they heard, that the holy scriptures, once only spoken in their tongue, were now being translated into every language! Where were the dividing lines to determine who was holy and who was not holy?

Christianity is about inclusivity: we have an Old Testament derived from Hebrew, a New Testament derived from Greek, Jesus spoke Aramaic, and at Pentecost, through the power of the Holy Spirit, early Christians heard scripture in their native languages. Today the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages. The Christian faith has always been one of translating the Good News, so that everybody could hear and believe. The God of compassion translated Their very nature into that of a human being in Jesus Christ, in hopes that we humans would hear God just a little more clearly, in our own human and cultural contexts. Accessibility and inclusivity are a part of the Gospel: Peter quotes the Prophet Joel, “Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!”

And although Christians proclaim that “every knee shall bow and tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord,” we still seem to forget that the Holy Spirit is speaking to people in their native tongue. Most Christian publications, sermons, theology, and music is exported from North America and Europe, predominantly by white men. Good theology and praxis have come from these people and places, but just like iron sharpens iron, the rest of the planet has messages from the Holy Spirit that will sharpen the Christian faith, and show us the dull areas, where the Christian church has gone astray.

Are we listening to diverse voices, or do we tune-out when we hear a name or gender for God that makes us uncomfortable? Are we listening to diverse voices, or do we tune-out when BIPOC Christians warn us of the blatant white supremacy that has intertwined with the history of the Church? Are we listening when trans-people teach us about the gender inclusivity of God, or when LGBTQ+ tell us how they have been wounded by the Church? Just like the religious people in Jerusalem who were scandalized by the Holy Spirit reaching people of different languages, Christians today are often scandalized by the communities challenging the status quo of the church. Similar to pentecost, we pass by them dismissively, assuming drunkenness (or unorthodoxy). The Holy Spirit is speaking to people on the margins, and the Church does itself a disservice by only listening to the person with the megaphone or the man behind the pulpit.

This devotional has been about *widening the gates*, and creating a platform for female voices. Whether cis-or trans-gendered, straight or gay, BIPOC or white, married or single, inside or outside of the church clergy, young or old, we have all shared a truth that the Holy Spirit spoke to us. We are grateful that you stopped and listened.

Respond

God is speaking to women. Write a list of the women theologians and pastors you are listening to.

God is speaking to people of color around the world. Write a list of the BIPOC voices you are listening to.

God is speaking to people who are differently-abled. Write a list of influencers who are differently-abled.

God is speaking to LGBTQIA people. Write a list of LGBTQIA Christians and theologians you are learning from.

How long are your lists?

God has always spoken to people at the margins. Are we listening, or are their voices being drowned out by larger megaphones? It takes work to learn from and follow people who have not been pushed to the center. Do some research to increase the number of influencers, teachers, pastors, writers, and theologians who are women, BIPOC, differently-abled and LGBTQIA. I promise, your understanding of God's love will only grow.

Rest

God, thank you for this devotional. Thank you for all the women and trans persons that took time to pray, to read, reflect, respond and rest in your Name. God, thank you for speaking my language and empowering me with the Holy Spirit. Help me notice the power of the Holy Spirit in others, especially those outside of the center, and take the time to listen to what they have to say. And Lord, help me realize the power of the Holy Spirit within myself to speak truth and good news, as well. Amen.



About the Author

Julia Styles is a Spiritual Director and Diversity & Inclusion Consultant living in Atlanta, Georgia. Julia has a Masters in Christian Ministry and Certificate in Spiritual Direction from North Park Theological Seminary, and a Masters in International Public Affairs from the University of Wisconsin. With over 20 years of ministry experience in cross-cultural environments, Julia is passionate about creating welcoming spaces for people to authentically pursue their calling. Most days you can find Julia at one of the beautiful parks in Atlanta with her husband, Derek, and son, Jakob.