

LENTEN
MEDITATIONS

2014

ASH WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – March 5, 2014

Joel 2:1-2; 12-17 or: Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51:1-17; 2

Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

TEARING THE FABRIC OF YOUR HEART

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments . . . – Joel 2:12-13

THE LENTEN SEASON is a time of reflection and repentance, of determination and deprivation; a time of separation and sanctification. Today is Ash Wednesday and marks the beginning of a forty-day journey leading us to Easter Sunday (not counting the inclusive Sundays). During this time, we seek to identify with the Lamb of God as ashes are gently applied to our foreheads in the sign of the cross. We also determine what we will sacrifice to commemorate the season, articulating our determination by outward and symbolic gestures in the form of spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines, however, are meaningless unless they are practiced with the heart. In Joel's prophecy, the Lord God warns Judah of the coming judgment known as the great *Day of the Lord* and calls people to repentance: Turn to me with all your heart (inwardly) and with fasting, weeping, and mourning (outwardly). Here he admonishes us to display outward signs of inner realities. Yet, the Lord says that we should be rending or “tearing” our hearts even more so than our garments.

As you receive the ashes as a sign of repentance of sin, may you receive with your heart. Jesus's discipline was not merely outward in nature; it was an inner determination to fulfill the will of the Father. “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13b, NKJV).

LIVING SIMPLY:

Write the word H-E-A-R-T as an acrostic, using each letter to describe your spiritual determination this Lenten season. Write each of them on 3 X 5 cards and support them with Scripture. Refer to them often!

PRAYER:

Eternal Father, strong to save, I come before you in true repentance, marking the beginning of this Lenten season. I turn to you with the rending of my heart in devotion to and meditation of our Lord's journey to the cross. Receive my broken heart as well as my feeble attempts at spiritual formation, and grant me your peace through Christ my Lord, amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – March 6, 2014

Psalm 51

Jonah 3:1-10

Romans 1:1-7

CALLED TO BE SAINTS

... among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints. – Rom. 1:6-7

IN TODAY'S FAST-PACED WORLD, the statement "take a number and be seated," grates on us and can feel like an inconvenience. Whether waiting for a specialty sandwich or renewing our driver's license, we breathe a huge sigh of relief when our name or number is . . . finally . . . called.

The greatest relief of all, however, is the call we receive to become Christ-followers. Each one of us has been summoned to sainthood. Jesus, born of the seed of David, declared (publicly displayed) to be the Son of God by the power of the Spirit of holiness, and raised from the dead, provides the righteousness necessary for us to be holy before the Father, as those called to be saints.

St. Francis of Assisi is well remembered for his love of nature and animals. What you may not realize is that the real burden of his heart was the impoverished. Coming from a wealthy family, he tired of living the worldly life and joined himself to the poor at St. Peter's Basilica. He would devote the remainder of his life and ministry to the needs of the poor, practicing saintly character as one who had been called to this very purpose.

The Lenten season is a time for inconvenience. No, it's not about the "annoyances" of waiting in line to be called; it's about the willingness and desire to be inconvenienced in order to experience Jesus's suffering and to minister with saintly character. Be mindful that you are among those who are the called of Jesus Christ. As such, welcome annoyance; welcome inconvenience; welcome the opportunity to exhibit saintly character with the patience and the compassion of St. Francis.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Be proactive and find opportunities to reach out to the less fortunate. Visit a homeless shelter, or be intentional and locate someone with a cardboard sign, responding generously and sacrificially.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for calling me to be a saint and cloaking me in Jesus's righteousness. Create in me an attitude of thanksgiving for opportunities to serve those less fortunate. May your Spirit move me to act upon my gratitude and seek out those in need. For Jesus's sake, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – March 7, 2014

Psalm 51

Jonah 4:1-11

Romans 1:8-17

ANGER: THE GREAT MALADY OF THE HEART

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” – Jonah 4:1-3

THE GREATEST ENEMY against mercy and grace is anger. In this passage, we watch the prophet Jonah grow angry about the mercy and grace God extends to the people of Nineveh. Not only did Jonah balk at the idea of taking God’s message to a people he deemed undeserving, he also resented the fact that their repentance led to God’s relenting of anger. To make matters worse, Jonah attempted to maintain an angry heart throughout his prayer to God.

The truth is, prayer is the great remedy for anger. In a true encounter with God, we can hope that anger will subside at the start of our prayer and be purged by the conclusion of prayer. In the midst of Jonah’s prayer before God, the Lord asks Jonah, “Do you have a good reason to be angry?” Jonah had reached a low point of despair and was, no doubt, disappointment with himself. He became so despondent that he asked for God to take his life. Here is a classic case in which we see how prolonged anger leads to bitterness, bitterness leads to self-pity, and self-pity can lead to the despairing of life itself.

If the greatest *enemy* of mercy and grace is anger, what is the greatest *friend*? Humility. The one who will daily consider his own infirmities and failings—and receive Christ’s forgiveness—causes the sin of another to shrink away from his thinking. Consider the example of Jesus, who suffered all the contradictions of sinners and received all affronts. In everything, he was as gentle as the morning sun.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Reflect on the people with whom you are angry and write them a letter. Practice humility and thank God for them, determining to esteem them above yourself. Practice the presence of Jesus and have a forgiving spirit. Also use this time to recognize your own shortcomings and repent before God. Lastly, don’t mail the letter; instead, keep it and refer to it often.

PRAYER:

Lord of glory, I come before you in humility, realizing my anger toward others is a sin against you. I confess that I harbor ill will toward those upon whom you have great compassion. Grant me a forgiving spirit, and help me to see the good in others. For Jesus’s sake, amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – March 8, 2014

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 18:1-7

Psalm 51

THE JOY OF GOD'S DELIVERANCE

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. – Psalm 51:10-12

IT IS WIDELY AGREED that King David wrote Psalm 51 following his affair with Bathsheba, after the sins of his flesh necessitated a spiritual cleansing. In this psalm, David speaks of two spirits; *first*, he speaks of his own human spirit as a ship listing in a tumultuous sea, in need of righting. Weakened by sin, he asks for stability. He also requests that God would be the one to sustain him with a willing spirit.

Second, David invokes the Spirit of God. In the midst of the passage, he admits that a holy life is impossible without God's enabling power. Seeking to stay in God's presence, he says in a desperate tone, "Do not take the anointing of your Spirit from my life and ministry!"

In ancient Israel, before Christ, the Spirit did not permanently dwell in God's people. As in the case of David's predecessor, Saul, God could remove the Spirit's presence and power from a life. Therefore, David's simple request for the return of joy in his life meant, more specifically, the joy of God's salvation. Salvation is of the Lord God, whether it's the initial cleansing of sin, or the restoration to fellowship with God. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." This phrase must become real to us again during the Lenten season.

In your confession and repentance, petition God for the renewed fruit of joy that comes to our spirit by his Spirit. Always remember, joy results from recognizing the source of our salvation or deliverance.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Make sure that your heart is right before God. Confess your sin, repent, and seek God's promise of forgiveness. Then, seek out someone in need of joy. Remind him or her that, unlike happiness, joy does not depend upon circumstances. Strive to personify or live joy into the lives of others by your devotion to God.

PRAYER:

Holy One of Israel, I come into your presence with a desire to once again know the joy of your salvation. I confess that I have sinned against heaven and I repent of my sin. Renew a steadfast and willing spirit within me and use me to bring joy to others. In Jesus's name, amen.

SUNDAY'S READINGS – March 9, 2014 (*First Sunday of Lent*)

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32 (10)

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

The tempter came to him and said, "If (since) you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" – Matthew 4:3-4

MOST OF US LOVE TO EAT, hungry or not. Have you ever experienced prolonged hunger? If so, then you know the physiological changes that take place when the human body is denied food: Desires and appeal turn to cravings; cravings turn to hunger pains; and hunger pains ultimately lead to such weakness that eating becomes almost impossible.

Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit, and later tempted by the devil. A forty-day fast meant some serious hunger. The tempter hurled his fiery dart toward Jesus by seizing upon the reality of his personage. "Okay, you're hungry. You have the ability to do something about it because you are the Son of God; so just turn the stones into bread and satisfy your hunger." But Jesus responds with, "As it is written . . ." Drawing upon Scripture for strength, he quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 and says, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Think back to a time when you were too busy to eat; a time when satisfying your hunger meant the drive-through at a fast-food restaurant. In terms of sustenance, convenience often wins out. Unfortunately, the same can go for our spiritual appetite. We convince ourselves that we're not *that* hungry or that we don't *need* to eat to be healthy and whole. In effort to get by, we utilize some kind of spiritual drive-through as a passing gesture of partaking in spiritual food.

Jesus's fasting is a lesson in itself. His response to the devil's targeted arrow, however, is the even greater lesson. We have little or no problem with a spiritual fast. (It can sometimes even make life more convenient!) Yet Jesus is pointing us toward a purer priority: answering temporal needs with spiritual dependence upon God.

Choosing to fast this Lenten season, depriving yourself of food or some other regular participation, is a noble gesture. But be certain to replace your deprivation with "every word that comes from the mouth of God." Don't be content with spiritual fast-food; rather, feast on the Word of God. He will meet with you at the banquet table, and you will be satisfied!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Determine to rely upon Scripture today for every one of life's challenges. Find an appropriate Scripture passage for all forms of temptation you encounter. Journal each challenge with the appropriate Scripture, and include a prayer of thanksgiving.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, I thank you for your example of meeting temptation with Scripture. Help me give myself wholly to the written Word as I seek to be filled. Subdue my physical appetites, and increase my hunger for the bread that satisfies in both temptation and triumph. Amen.

MONDAY'S READINGS – March 10, 2014

1 Kings 19:1-8

Hebrews 2:10-18

Psalm 32

SEEK AND GO HIDE

Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. – Psalm 32:6-7

MOST OF US REMEMBER playing the children's game of hide-and-seek. A lesser-known version in some of our neighborhoods was *Look Out for the Bear*, in which the seeker was the "bear" and all others were in hiding. If one managed to reach a designated spot without being tagged by the bear, they were safe for another game.

The psalmist also speaks of our relationship with God in terms of seeking and hiding. The godly are admonished to pray and seek the Lord while he may be found. We find within these scriptures intimation of God's hiddenness, documentation of times in which he cannot be found. We also see in the text an example of how the faithful respond when God goes quiet: seeking him through prayer. It is not a far stretch, then, to say that prayerfully seeking God in times of trouble is to behave "within the faith."

Unlike the children's game, the One we seek is also the One in whom we hide. He gives us the promise of protection from trouble and serenades us with songs of salvation and deliverance. The season of Lent creates for us a tender time of seeking and hiding in the only *hiding place* that is secure. It may seem antithetical, but in order to seek God, we must first hide in him.

LIVING SIMPLY:

As you review today's Lenten readings, pray for opportunities to seek the Lord God in the midst of the troubles of this life. Flip through a hymnal or look up the lyrics to a worship song that speaks of God's deliverance. Journal about it.

PRAYER:

Father, I come seeking you today in order to find rest, solace, and refuge. I thank you that you have not shortened your arm toward me, and that my prayers have reached the throne of grace. I take comfort in your shelter and ask you to keep me hidden in your presence throughout the storms of life, now and forever, amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – March 11, 2014

Genesis 4:1-6

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Psalm 32

TRIUMPH IN TEMPTATION

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. 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. – Hebrews 4:14-15

THE BIBLE TELLS US that sin easily entangles us all. Unfortunately, we sometimes conclude that our temptations are unique to ourselves. *No one understands*, we think. *No one could possibly relate to what I experience over and over again.* Yet Scripture affirms that our High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, is able to empathize with our weaknesses and propensities toward sin. In fact, the writer of Hebrews tells us that our great High Priest has been tempted in *every* way, just as we are tempted. The qualifier, however, is that he never yielded to temptation; he was without sin.

What sin easily entangles you? Greed, selfishness, pride, lust, lying? Sin is always bad news—bad news for you, for others, and bad news for your loving Creator. Even so, God has good news for the repeat offender. No matter how many times you stumble and fall, you have a High Priest who understands, empathizes with, and intercedes on your behalf. Forgiveness and the application of Christ's redeeming blood are yours for the taking, but often we need confession and repentance to make us aware of it. We know the contrite and lowly spirit evokes empathy in the heart of our Christ!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Align yourself with someone with whom you can develop an accountability relationship. Trust them to listen to your struggles. Practice the confession of your faults to one another. Pray together, believe together, and hold firmly together to the faith that you profess (vs. 14a). Share strategies of tearing down strongholds and unraveling those pesky sins that entangle you.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus Christ, I come humbly before you to acknowledge my persistent sin. I confess that in my attitude of repentance, I determine to forsake my sin, yet I find myself repeating the same transgression. Empower me live into the truth that the weapons of war against sin are not like the weapons of the world, but are divine empowerments to tear down the strongholds in my life. Amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – March 12, 2014

Psalm 32

Exodus 34:1-9; 27-28

Matthew 18:10-14

HAPPY, HAPPY, HAPPY!

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the guilt of my sin." – Psalm 32:1-5

PHIL ROBERTSON, a once-obscure, rugged outdoorsman from the Deep South, recently became an overnight television celebrity and media sensation when his show "Duck Dynasty" went public. While far from perfect, his life is a testimony of the wonderful transformation that can happen as a result of God's grace. Among his favorite expressions is this one: "Happy, happy, happy!"

Robertson's expression is also found in today's text. *Blessed* is a Hebrew word that means "Oh the happinesses," indicating manifold happiness. The psalmist identifies the happy man as the one whose transgressions are forgiven and sins covered; the man whose sin is not held against him and whose spirit is void of deceit or guile. When we refuse to acknowledge our sin, we are unable to be nourished by the subsequent grace extended to us. In this way, we are only able to groan our way through life. Are you groaning your way through life because of unconfessed sin? Are you trying to cover up your sin rather than have your sin covered?

Happy, happy, happy is the one whose sin is not counted against him! We simply need to search our hearts, pray that God will reveal the sin that has weakened us, and then freely receive his mercy. Acknowledge your sin, reveal it, repent of it, and be "blessed" knowing that sin does not have the last word.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take a long walk today. As you go, look for things that make you happy. As you meet others, greet them with a big smile—you just might brighten their day!

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, I am so thankful that you died for my sins. I ask for your Spirit to search me, know me, and try my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and make me aware so that I may also know all of the ways you have forgiven me. Let me believe once again my "blessed" state in Christ. In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – March 13, 2014

Psalm 121

Isaiah 51:1-3

2 Timothy 1:3-7

FANNING THE FLAME

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. – 2 Timothy 1:6-7

PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY is believed to be his last epistle before death. It stands to reason that he shared some of the matters most important to his heart in this final correspondence. Within its contents, he encourages Timothy to be faithful. He also reminds Timothy that his faith is the result of faithful family members, specifically his grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice. (And couldn't we all use an occasional reminder of heritage?)

Timothy's faith is the result of family faithfulness. Now, Paul calls upon Timothy to be faithful in order that others might find faith in God. As part of his demonstration of faithfulness, Paul instructs Timothy to "fan into flame" the gift he already possesses: the authority to oversee a group of churches in the vicinity of Ephesus. Certainly, this would have been a daunting task for anyone, but especially for this very young servant of God. Paul knew that Timothy must trust in the enabling power of God to fulfill his responsibilities faithfully.

Sometimes the gift within us lies dormant, barely glowing like an aging ember among the ashes. When faithfulness begins to wane, we chase that which is temporal and has no eternal benefit. We fail to keep the main thing the main thing! It is only when the ember (gift) is fanned (stirred) by the wind of the Spirit that we can demonstrate power, love, and self-discipline. In a world that grows dark, the virtue of faithfulness is vitally important in the lives of Christ-followers.

Does your life glow with God's power? Do you burn with the love of God that is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit who has been given to you? Are you exercising self-discipline, not allowing the cares of this world to control you? Just as a gentle breath gives renewed flame to a glowing ember, so too the Spirit gives renewal to the one who is willing to receive divine breath.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Find a suitable place to build a campfire and invite several friends to gather around, sharing testimonies and evidence of God's work in your lives. Share today's Scripture and encourage others to be faithful with the gifts given them.

PRAYER:

Precious Spirit of God, blow gently across my heart and fan into flame the embers that remain. May I once again burn brightly for you and be found faithful. In the name of the true Light I pray, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – March 14, 2014

Psalm 121

Micah 7:18-20

Romans 3:21-31

THE COVENANT-KEEPING GOD

*Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, **as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.** – Micah 7:18-20 (emphasis added)*

IF THERE'S ANYTHING IN LIFE THAT DISAPPOINTS, it's broken promises. Children reel from broken promises previously made by their parents; employees leave work discouraged as they learn that their boss's words were empty ones.

No one and nothing can stand up under the pressure of the broken promises we make, except God. No matter how many times we renege on our commitments to him, God shows compassion and a renewed commitment to our holiness. Over and over Israel sinned against God, and while he did discipline his covenant children (for their good), he dealt with their sin and was merciful toward them.

God kept his word then, and he keeps his word today. Though it is difficult for us to comprehend the ultimate example of promise-keeping; though we are prone to break our own promises and become victims of the broken promises of others, it is so vitally important to remember that "all the promises of God are "Yes, and amen, in Christ." We are both children and heirs of the most powerful and transformative promise ever made. Micah ends his prophecy by declaring his confidence in God: No matter how great the sin of Israel, God faithfully and mercifully pardons, casting all sin into the depths of the sea. So it is, today; your sin is buried beyond retrieval, to be remembered no more.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Find a suitable rock, and with a marking pen write "M Y S I N" across the face of the rock. Take the stone to a pond, lake, or river and prayerfully cast the stone into the water, declaring that the Lord's mercies are evidenced and your sin is unable to be retrieved. Quietly give thanks to God for keeping his promises of forgiveness no matter what.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for always keeping your word. I am grateful that Jesus believed your promises as he steadfastly set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing of his demise. Help me to always cast away my sin, repent, and finish the work that you have given me to do. For Jesus's sake, amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – March 15, 2014

Psalm 121

Isaiah 51:4-8

Luke 7:1-10

FAITH THAT AMAZES EVEN JESUS

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. – Luke 7:9-10

A ROMAN CENTURION who became extremely concerned for his dying servant, sent a few Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his sick servant. The elders pleaded with Jesus as if he were not inclined to respond, yet Jesus set out with them. Before he arrived, the centurion sent friends to tell Jesus not to trouble himself with journeying to the house, that the centurion himself was unworthy to have Christ there. In addition, the centurion believed that Jesus could heal the man from a distance, simply by his word. It was at this point that Jesus was astonished by the man's faith. Being so impressed, he seized the opportunity as a teachable moment and turned to the crowd to cite the man's faith as a great example. In Luke's narrative of the account, we come to learn that Jesus did, in fact, heal the servant by merely speaking the word.

For us, it is enough to realize that the centurion's faith *amazed* Jesus. Normally, we are enamored with the amazing grace of God, and well we should be. In this instance, however, God himself was amazed and greatly moved to act on behalf of the centurion.

Why is it that we limit God, and allow ourselves to have such a small imagination about him? Somewhere along the way, we've come to believe that God is not impressed by our hearts, and as a result, we see little, if any, divine work in the midst of our sorrows. This Lenten season, remember that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to the power that is at work in us. Amaze Jesus by your faith!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take time today to visit someone who is sick. Offer to pray with them and remind them of God's love. Commit to pray for them throughout the Lenten season.

PRAYER:

God of all comfort, you are the Great Physician. I ask you this day to heal those who linger in illness. Make me a messenger of your hope and an instrument of your compassion. Give me a greater sensitivity to those whose lives are marked by infirmity. In the name of Jesus, amen.

SUNDAY'S READINGS – March 16, 2014 (*Second Sunday of Lent*)

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9

PUTTING FEET ON OUR FAITH

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." . . . So Abram left, as the Lord had told him. – Genesis 12:1, 4a

IT'S WIDELY UNDERSTOOD that being a missionary for God doesn't necessarily mean that we must leave our country, city, or family. In fact, there's an old saying in ministry that the only requirement for missions is that we leave ourselves! For many of us, this is true. We are called to be faithful to the *local* work of the kingdom. As for Abraham, God had different plans that included calling him out of his own country, away from his circle of friends and family, to go to a land that would later be revealed to him.

Take a moment to imagine his experience. Without knowing his destination, he uprooted himself and begins a journey at God's directive. The text reveals that Abraham took Sarah, his wife, his nephew Lot, and all his possessions. Together with his servants, they headed out toward Canaan. It's hard to envision what was going through Abraham's mind and heart. Yet the Apostle Paul makes reference to Abraham and indicates that "he (Abraham) believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3). Abraham put feet on his faith and stepped out, trusting God with his life.

During this season of Lent, we can be mindful also of Jesus's faith in the Father's wisdom. In his humanity, Jesus traveled through his life and ministry by faith in God's perfect will. Though he knew where his earthly journey would end, his obedience was that of a trusting son. A time came in his life where he chose to buckle down in determination and, as Scripture puts it, "set his face toward Jerusalem."

Even when he struggled with the journey set before him, Christ submitted, "If it be your will, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not MY will, but YOUR will be done." Let his great lesson to us this Lenten season be openness to the unknown or uncertain direction God may take us. Life is filled with detours, and love sometimes strikes a minor chord. Through it all, God has our eternal best in mind, and we must be continually yielded to his will. We remember today that the will of God never leads us where the grace of God cannot keep us.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Avoid playing music or listening to the radio while driving. Use the quiet time to reflect and seek God's direction. Where is his will taking you?

PRAYER:

Holy One of Israel, lead me in the pathway of righteousness for your name's sake. Guide me and direct me through the center of your will. Give me a willing heart to step out by faith and put feet to my faith. Through Christ my Lord, amen.

MONDAY'S READINGS – March 17, 2014

Psalm 128

Numbers 21:4-9

Hebrews 3:1-6

LIFTING, LOOKING, AND LIVING

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." 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, he lived. – Numbers 21:8-9

IT SOUNDS A BIT MYSTICAL: a bronze snake upon a pole becoming a focal point of salvation, and antidote from deadly snakebites. How did snakes factor into this equation in the first place? The venomous snakes mentioned in this passage resulted from Israel's constant complaints about their difficulties in the desert. Yes, their wilderness journey with a bread-and-water-replacement of manna was difficult, but it was God's provision and enough for the given day. When the Israelites complained and blamed God for their problems, they died by snakebite; when they recognized their sin and complaining spirits, praying for immunity from the serpents, God provided a rather unique remedy.

Fast forward and we see Jesus using the illustration of the bronze snake as an object lesson regarding the need for him to be crucified. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). In the same way the bronze snake provided salvation for the ailing, so too is Christ our provision of salvation from sin. He is the eternal remedy. God knew that his only begotten Son would be lifted up upon a wooden cross to suffer and experience the most horrific form of execution in the Roman world. Yet he loved humanity enough to deliver us from the venomous bite of the original serpent.

"Israel," God said once, "look upon and live." He says the same to us today: "Look upon your Christ!" Spiritual life comes only by looking to Jesus, his sacrifice, death, and resurrected life. He is worthy of our worship.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Pay particular attention today to the various crosses that you observe around you (necklaces, church steeples, etc.). As you encounter one, take time to quietly pray, giving thanks for the atoning work of Jesus to remove your sin and provide redemption.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, make me keenly aware of the cross around me. Give me a thankful heart and help me to better understand the significance of your plan of redemption, knowing that Jesus was lifted up that others might see and live eternally. Amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – March 18, 2014

Psalm 128

Isaiah 65:17-25

Romans 4:6-13

NEVER FORGET HOW WE SHALL NEVER REMEMBER

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create . . .
– Isaiah 65:17-18a

WHEN WE CONFESS AND REPENT OF SIN, the Bible indicates that God remembers it *no more*. As far as the East is from the West, he has removed our transgressions. Unfortunately, our memories tend to be jogged with past failures, sins, and iniquities. So much so, we become spiritually paralyzed. In theory, we know God has forgiven us, but we can't forgive ourselves. Consequently, our identities are marked by the past tense, and we go through life convinced that we are unworthy of God's blessing. Why does that which we seek to remember slip away, and those things we wish we could forget continually come to the forefront of our thinking?

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and promised new heavens and a new earth. In Christ, he fulfills that promise—the old, corrupt, and cursed order of creation is being replaced by the new. Not only that, God says, “The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” What comfort that should bring to those of us who will inhabit the *new*; the *old* will never come to mind.

Do you struggle to let go of what God has already forgotten? Are you tempted to wallow in your past failures and disqualify yourself from active, productive, and fruitful service to the One who already removed your sin?

Consider the instruction God gives us to rejoice in and live into what he WILL create. Like the apostle Paul told the Philippians, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12-14). *Never forget that we shall never remember.*

LIVING SIMPLY:

Memorize Philippians 4:8-9. Spend considerable time meditating upon these verses. In addition, think of someone who demonstrates Spirit-filled living. Determine to put into practice what you have learned, received, or heard from that person.

PRAYER:

God, I am guilty of being hindered by the sins you have already forgiven. I pray that your Holy Spirit will transform my mind and enable me to think upon those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Keep me from my past sin and the guilt of my past sin in order that I may live a victorious and communing life with you. For Jesus's sake, amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – March 19, 2014

Psalm 128

Ezekiel 36:22-32

John 7:53-8:11

REST FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. – John 8:7b-9

JESUS spends the day prior to his encounter with the adulterous woman in a series of tiresome confrontations with the Pharisees. In the evening, they head to their homes, but Jesus goes up to the Mount of Olives. No doubt, he is spent—emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. After all, nothing is more exasperating than trying to convince pious sinners of error; Jesus needed to retreat and be alone with the Father.

Early the next morning, he returns to the temple courts where a crowd begins to gather. Jesus, intent to teach the crowd, is instead approached by the official teachers of the Law and the Pharisees with a scenario meant to trap him: “Concerning this sinful women, the Law says . . . but what do you say?” That’s when Jesus turns the tables on them, inviting those without sin to be the first to throw a stone at the adulterous woman. One by one, beginning with the older men, the religious leaders walk away, throwing no stones.

The obvious and usual lesson taught from this passage is the Master’s wisdom in exposing the sin of those who would point out the sin of another. However, today’s reading in the Gospel of John begins before that, with the evening retreat of both Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees no doubt went to their homes to recoup their physical strength in anticipation of presenting Jesus with another test the next day. So too did Jesus retreat . . . to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus needed to commune with his Heavenly Father to realign himself with the “family mission.” What was God up to in the world? Ah yes, love and grace. The Mount of Olives was a sanctuary for renewal, refreshment, and remembrance. We also need respite from a sinful world and space to convene with God. Sometimes this means we need to get alone with God, and other times it means meeting with God’s people in a place of worship. Go to the mountain, meet with God; get with his people, and be strengthened!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take a long walk and get alone with God. Pour out your heart before him in prayer. Ask for wisdom to escape the traps set for you, and be strengthened to love.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, I confess that I do not always pass the test that others put before me. Rather than teaching others to love, I find myself joining the mob and picking up stones. Help me not to judge others, and remind me often of my need to retreat. Amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – March 20, 2014

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:1-8

Colossians 1:15-23

MANNA . . . WHAT IS IT?

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days." – Exodus 16:4-5

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING that "an army travels on its stomach." The Israelites certainly did. They longed to be back in Egypt where they claimed they had "pots of meat" and all the food they wanted. Imagine roughly two million hungry people journeying across the desert wilderness. Accompanying groaning stomachs were grumbling complaints that it would have been better to have stayed behind and died.

God provided, however; he rained down bread from heaven. This heavenly bread, *mannais*, the Hebrew word meaning, "What is it?" was going to sustain them until they arrived in the Promised Land.

"What is it?"

The bread was unlike anything God had ever provided before, and yet it was food for their table! It was also a call to obedience. For in this case, God's provision came with a stipulation and restriction; it also came as a sign of his grace. The wanderers were to gather manna in the morning and quail in the evening—but they were not to take more than a day's supply worth. These provisions would be a sign to them every morning, when they went outside to gather the bread, of their dependence on God; a reminder of who it was that brought them out of the land of Egypt.

We also need the Bread of Heaven to begin our day. Our manna is Jesus Christ, the one who is able to satisfy our spiritual hunger. As pilgrims wandering through the wilderness of life, journeying toward the Promised Land, we also are prone to grumble and complain. Sometimes we even desire to go back to whatever Egypt the Lord has led us out of. The manna the Israelites gathered was evidence of God's gracious, *daily* provision to sustain them in a weary land. Undeserving as we are, God provides the daily manna of fellowship with his Spirit to satisfy our spiritual needs.

Let us keep from allowing the cares of this life to dull our spiritual appetites, so that when we come to the banqueting table we will not turn away what he graciously provides. God's provision may not be what we would prescribe for ourselves, but it is exactly what we need to sustain us for the journey. Feast upon the Heavenly Bread and be thankful.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Abstain from meats and vegetables today. Limit your intake to bread and water. As you do so, remember the manna that God provides to nourish your soul. Thank God for the bounty of his grace.

PRAYER:

Lord, I come to you this day and give thanks for the Bread of Life, Jesus, who feeds my soul. Increase my spiritual appetite and help me to depend upon him every day. As I limit my physical intake, may I replace it with the Bread from Heaven. I pray this in Jesus's name, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – March 21, 2014

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:9-21

Ephesians 2:11-22

FAR AND NEAR

... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. – Ephesians 2:12-13

IN THIS PASSAGE, the apostle Paul describes the miserable estate of all those previously outside of the body of Christ. We were without *Christ*, without *citizenship* in spiritual Israel, without covenant *promises*, without *hope* and without *God* in the world. Not a pretty picture. “But,” Paul states, “you who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” As we journey through this Lenten season, it’s important to remember that where all human effort fails to unite sinful humanity to a holy God, we have been brought near to God through the blood of Jesus.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be without Christ in your life? He is the foremost energy of love and compassion. Without him, you would have no one to bear your burdens, no one in whose name to pray, and no one to forgive your sin and silence your condemnation. Beyond personal salvation, Christ saves you into a community. Apart from him, you would have no citizenship in the realm of spiritual Israel, for the apostle Paul wrote that all those in Christ are the “spiritual seed” of Abraham.

Have you traveled to a foreign country alone? You can’t help but feel a bit excluded, without a sense of belonging. In many cases, you can’t speak the language, you are dressed differently, and you are ignorant of some of the more subtle cultural nuances. In Christ, together we are citizens of eternity. We belong to God’s family. As a result, we are also recipients of God’s covenant promises, which, according to Paul, provide the hope that was lacking in our life.

Today we remember that before Christ we were without God in the world. In remembrance, we celebrate our spiritual heritage in Christ and draw near to God in gratitude and praise.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take time today to journal your thoughts about all the spiritual truths that have become realities in your life, having been brought near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. Take time to meditate on each reality listed, and give thanks to God.

PRAYER:

Father, I give thanks today for drawing me near to you by my Savior, Jesus! Help me to live out of this reality daily, and reveal your eternal goodness to others who are without hope and without God in the world. Through Jesus I pray, amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – March 22, 2014

Psalm 95

Exodus 16:27-35

John 4:1-6

PLACES WE'D RATHER NOT BE. ♦ ♦ ♦

Now he (Jesus) had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. –John 4:4-6

WHEN JESUS TRAVELED from the southern province of Judea toward the northern province of Galilee, he had to pass through the Samaritan city of Sychar. At the time, this particular region was wrought with tension between the Jews and their northern Samaritan neighbors. In fact, it was the accepted belief that Samaritans were inferior, mere “half-breeds,” and thus it was against Jewish custom to talk to or do business with the other.

In the fourth chapter of John, we find Jesus making a radical assertion of peace by engaging in a spiritual conversation with a Samaritan woman. (And this wasn't the only time when Jesus used Samaritans as positive examples; see Luke 10.) Christ, having the knowledge of God, was able to look beyond ethnic, political, and spiritual divisions for the sake of another's eternal destiny.

In our pluralistic world, perhaps we do not understand the degree of tribal hostility present at the time of this Jewish-Samaritan story. Yet we all have prejudice, misunderstanding, and ignorance in our hearts. As Christians, God asks us to go to places we'd rather not be and speak with people we would rather avoid. If we are to embody the eternal kingdom, we must look beyond ethnic, cultural, and preferential differences in order to engage in true spiritual conversation—speaking *and* listening.

The Samaritan woman was perplexed that Jesus would ask her for a drink. No doubt Jesus was thirsty from his journey, but he seized the opportunity to begin a conversation that would forever change this woman's life (a woman whose life was racked by five failed marriages). Someone near you speaks differently, looks differently, has different taste, politics, or customs. Are you willing to look beyond superficial differences in order to share the love of God in Christ Jesus? May we confess our sin of partiality, repent of our selective evangelism, and receive God's pardon.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Make an effort today to reach out to a neighbor who has a different background from yours. Engage them in conversation and show them the love and compassion of God. Ask questions, and become genuinely interested in their heritage.

PRAYER:

Lord God, you are no respecter of persons. You love the whole world, and with you there is no partiality. Help me to celebrate differences and diversity, learning to love those who show me a fuller image of you. I confess that I have harbored prejudice instead of celebration, and so I repent. For Jesus's sake, amen.

SUNDAY'S READINGS – March 23, 2014 (*Third Sunday of Lent*)

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

STARTING FRESH

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. – Romans 5:9-11

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1914, the fighting ceased along several fronts of World War I. On the Western front, German and British soldiers began to exchange seasonal greetings and jointly sang Christmas carols. In some cases, soldiers ventured into “no man's land” and gave gifts of cigarettes, chewing gum, and candy to the former opposition. This truce is seen as a highly symbolic moment of peace amidst one of the most violent events of modern history.

One of the great truths of salvation is God's work of reconciliation with those who have previously been alienated from God. The bridging of this great gap, this spiritual no man's land between the loving Creator and his creation, is both beautifully and painfully illustrated by Jesus with two outstretched arms. When we were yet powerless, Christ died for us. Declared righteous by God and having Christ's righteousness put to our account, we have been ushered into holiness—everlasting relationship with God.

Sadly, the peace God extends to us does not always manifest in our human relations; we suffer for long periods from offenses or wrongs committed to us. One particular Sunday, a speaker noticed emotional coldness in the small church he was visiting. Afterwards, he asked one of the deacons about it, indicating he sensed things weren't as they should be. The deacon began to explain that two brothers in the church had a rift between them that had existed for over twenty years. Half of the congregation sided with one brother and the others with the opposing brother. Every Sunday, they came attempting to worship God together while still being at odds. This kind of worship isn't pleasing to God. We recall Christ's words in Matthew 5: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

Are you harboring ill feelings toward someone? Have you alienated yourself from former friends? If God is willing to bring reconciliation between himself and sinful man, shouldn't we also be willing to call a truce, forgive one another, and exchange the peace of Christ?

LIVING SIMPLY:

Pick up the telephone and call an estranged friend or relative. Determine by God's grace to be reconciled to your enemies. Give thanks and praise to God for people you may have previously eliminated from your prayer life.

PRAYER:

Holy God, thank you for reconciling me to yourself. Thank you for Jesus, my Savior, who has brought me into your holiness. Help me forgive my enemies and reconcile with those from whom I have withdrawn. For Jesus's sake, amen.

MONDAY'S READINGS – March 24, 2014

Psalm 81

Genesis 24:1-27

2 John 1-13

IDOL-MAKING FACTORIES

Hear, O my people, and I will warn you—if you would but listen to me, O Israel! You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.
– Psalm 81:8-10

THE PEOPLE OF ANCIENT ISRAEL were notorious for idolatrous behavior. Whether building a golden calf, worshipping a grove of trees, or bowing their knee to some foreign god, they were prone to idolatry and guilty of breaking God's commandment. The desire to worship someone or something isn't just an Israelite thing. In fact, God has created all of us with an innate need to worship; rather, he wired us for God-worship.

Modern humanity exhibits idolatrous living in many ways, some more sophisticated than others. We have even elevated ourselves as objects of worship, claiming our own divinity. While the 21st century church would like to believe that it is far too refined for such primal behavior, it is perhaps more idolatrous than ever before. Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, defines an idol as “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought.”

Given Keller's definition, are there idols in your life? What captures your devotion? To what or whom do you find yourself giving the most allegiance and ambition?

John ended his first epistle, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols,” and yet even this is a daily surrender.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Spend today avoiding those things that entertain you: video games, television, movies, sporting events, etc. Instead, invest that time in Bible reading and prayer.

PRAYER:

LORD, you are God and there is no other. But my heart is, like John Calvin said, “an idol-making factory.” Forgive me and keep me from the sin of idolatry. Give me a hunger for the things that edify my life spiritually. I pray this in Jesus's name, amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – March 25, 2014

Psalm 81

Genesis 29:1-14

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

DRINKING FROM THE ROCK

... they drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. – 1 Corinthians 10:4b

YEARS AGO, it was not uncommon to pass by a roadside watering hole, which consisted of spring water that flowed from a simple pipe protruding from the rocky hillside. People would travel considerable distances to stop by and fill their containers with the ice-cold, natural spring water. Somehow, we now feel safer drinking from a plastic bottle with a fancy label. Regardless, nothing quenches the thirst quite like a drink of cold water.

As Israel traveled through the wilderness, they too were refreshed by water. Moses was instructed by God to strike a rock, out of which flowed water that satisfied their desert need. The water was so sweet, in fact, that when God instructed Moses the next time to simply speak to the rock, he struck it anyway. (It had worked so well the first time!)

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he points out the way God provided for the Israelites. Christ has always been the source, he says. While most of us have never been truly parched, we do know what it is like to be spiritually thirsty. God has made satisfying provisions in Christ; are you drinking the Living Water? The Rock has been hit and poured out that you may taste eternity.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Today, look for those who are laboring in some way and give away bottles of cold water, or give financially to a water charity. Remember that whatever you do for the least of these it is as though you have done it for Christ.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, lead me to those who need to drink from the Rock, Jesus. Help me to reach out to their spiritual needs even as I reach out to their physical needs. Thank you for employing me for your purposes this day. Amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – March 26, 2014

Psalm 81

Jeremiah 2:4-13

John 7:14-31, 37-39

POINTING A FESTIVE FINGER

Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth there is nothing false about him. Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?" – John 7:16-19

WHEN JESUS ARRIVED at the Feast of Tabernacles, he went to the temple courts and began to teach. His teaching wowed the crowd and, in answer to their inquiry, Jesus explained that his words were from the Father. In saying so, Jesus distinguished himself from those who teach for their own gain; he was preaching for the glory of another. Without a personal agenda, Jesus was able to speak truth, without pretense. What truth was God speaking through Jesus? The importance of relationship with God over and above appearances. Particularly, he was calling out these religious leaders for their strict possession of the Mosaic Law.

In essence, Jesus said, "You have the Law and you've been circumcised, but it doesn't mean you have right to judge me for the miracles and mercies I perform on the Sabbath. Stop judging based on appearances!"

Appearance, or how others perceive our behavior, is important. Paul told the Thessalonians to "abstain from all appearances of evil." However, what *appears* to be a violation of God's law isn't always so. We can easily get caught up in the Lenten season, observing by fast, Bible reading, and devotion, and yet still not have our hearts in the right place. We may even take on a pharisaical nature, pointing fingers at others because they are not "rising to the level" of our religious achievement. As you make your way through the remainder of these Lenten weeks, be careful not to judge others who may not subscribe to or practice their faith in the same manner as you.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Help a neighbor weed their yard, prune trees, or mow their lawn. Another option is to visit a local non-profit organization to learn about volunteer opportunities.

PRAYER:

Lord, keep me from being judgmental toward others who choose not to observe Lent and/or practice spiritual disciplines. Give me an understanding heart. May I live and speak for your glory as Jesus did. Amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – March 27, 2014

Psalm 23

1 Samuel 15:10-21

Ephesians 4:25-32

GUARDING OUR SPEECH

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
– Ephesians 4:29-30

GUARD DUTY can be monotonous, agreed? Yet it's important, and in this passage we read Paul telling the Ephesian believers to "guard" their speech. In Matthew chapter 12, Jesus says that we will give an account one day for our spoken words. He says that our words will either justify or condemn us.

Good speech is not always about refraining from curse words or obscenities; sometimes, it's about moving on from idle chatter in order to edify and encourage the lives of others. When we fail to speak the good news, we grieve the Holy Spirit. It's no light thing to cause grief in the heart of God.

Consider your speech. Based on what you say, what are others given to think you believe? Do you come across in a coarse, uncaring manner, or are others encouraged by what you say? Solomon wrote, "A word that is fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." Let us take account of what is spoken and left unspoken, seeking to build up others by words of encouragement and avoid contributing to their demise. The tongue is powerful, like the rudder that is able to alter the direction of a ship. Steer a course pleasing to God!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Practice silence today by avoiding any posting on Facebook, Twitter, and the like. Determine not to send any text messages for an entire day.

PRAYER:

Father, you have spoken at various times in various ways. Your word is deliberate and effective. Give me a sense of devotion and duty in my speech. Guard my lips from unwholesome speech and coarse jesting. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto you, O God, my strength and my Redeemer. In Jesus's name, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – March 28, 2014

Psalm 23

1 Samuel 15:22-31

Ephesians 5:1-9

SHEPHERD'S PIE

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. – Psalm 23:1-3a

IT BRINGS US A CERTAIN LEVEL OF COMFORT when someone other than ourselves is in charge of or responsible for our well-being. We enter this life dependent upon our parents for food and other basic necessities. Similarly, in Psalm 23, David declares himself in the possession of the divine Shepherd. “Therefore, there is nothing more I am in want of,” he writes. David, after all, had some experience taking care of sheep; he knew what a faithful shepherd meant for a flock. God would lead him to lush, green pastures.

For the Christ-follower, the green pastures of this psalm can be likened to the nourishing expanse of God's Word. We often graze Scripture, wandering about from passage to passage, nibbling a little here and there before moving on. Yet to approach the Bible this way, parsing verses in hopes of finding what we need to hear in a given moment, is not the way we were meant to interact with the text. David speaks of a sheep *lying down* in green pastures. Comfortable and content, a sheep will not only graze for food, it will take its rest there.

Are you a *nibbler* and *wanderer*? Take your rest in the green pastures of God's Word and find satisfaction there. Spend the quality and quantity of time in Scripture necessary for you to come away nourished. Be like Jeremiah the prophet who said, “Your words were found and I ate them.”

LIVING SIMPLY:

Determine to take a day of holy rest and “lie down” in the green pastures of God's Word. Let God lead you to a passage of Scripture applicable to this season of Lent and make a thorough study of the text.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I thank you for the green pastures of your Word. Make me to rest inside Scripture, the written story of your love, and depend upon it for daily sustenance. Keep me from merely nibbling and wondering my way through and, instead, make me a diligent student. Amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – March 29, 2014

Psalm 23

1 Samuel 15:32-34

John 1:1-9

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. – Psalm 23:4

AS A CONSEQUENCE OF SIN, death is all around us. While it sounds morbid to say, from the very moment we are born, we begin to die. Biologically, our cells are always dying and being replaced. One day, the replacement team will fail us, and we will reach the end of a long walk down death's road.

Most of us have been to a funeral service to memorialize a friend or family member. We are well-acquainted with grief and familiar with its narrative: By one human, sin entered the world and death by sin. A tragic story, indeed! Woody Guthrie expresses the walk of death this way:

*You gotta walk that lonesome valley,
and you gotta walk, walk it by yourself
Nobody else can walk it for you
You gotta walk, walk it by yourself.
Jesus walked this lonesome valley
and he had to walk it by Himself
Nobody else could walk it for Him,
He had to walk, walk it by Himself.*

Our observance of the Lenten season is about relating to that lonesome walk Jesus made on our behalf. He made himself of no reputation and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2). Though we *gotta* walk the same valley, we need not fear, knowing we are accompanied by him who was able to conquer death's dark shadow! We don't walk it by ourselves. And the psalmist says that in spite of such darkness and death, there is no reason to fear for those who have God's presence and comfort. Christ himself experienced death. Who better to have there beside us?

LIVING SIMPLY:

Visit a nursing home or hospice facility. Offer words of comfort to those who know Jesus as Lord, and an invitation to those who need him, all the while thanking God for accompanying us through the valley.

PRAYER:

Lord, grant me peace in the midst of the reality of death and dying. May I provide comfort to someone at death's door and assure them of your presence. I personally thank you that you comfort me with your rod and staff. In Jesus's conquering name, amen.

SUNDAY'S READINGS – March 30, 2014 (*Fourth Sunday of Lent*)

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

ONCE I WAS BLIND, BUT NOW I SEE

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." – John 9:1-3

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ASKED to stare at one those pictures that, when you shift your focus, presents a hidden image? The fancy name for these optical illusion illustrations is "autostereogram." Our story today found in the Gospel of John is a little like these multi-faceted illustrations.

The disciples, accompanying Jesus, happen upon a man who has been blind from birth. Immediately, they ask whether the blindness is the result of the man's sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus's answer is remarkable. "Neither," he says. "This is all for God's glory." Jesus's reply may challenge our theological understanding of physical malady, but it's important to take him at his word and consider what he may be saying to us.

There are a lot of people today who believe all physical suffering, pain, etc. is the direct result of sin in a person's life. Even if we wouldn't state it that way, we say to ourselves in times of difficulty, "What did I do wrong to lose God's favor?" Have you ever considered that God may allow such things for the express purpose of displaying his work in your life? Sometimes healing is the result of God's work, and other times he works through us in more mysterious ways. The words of the apostle Paul are true when he indicates that God will "work all things together for the good of those who love him."

How do you view your own pain and suffering? Do you grumble and moan your way through sickness and trial? God is redeeming your pain and desires to display a work in your life. Rather than focus on the malady, let us focus on the good story he is telling in us and through us. Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh? To our knowledge, it was not removed; yet he received a sufficient measure of God's grace to carry on. That grace is awaiting your prayerful call today.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Write an encouraging note to someone in pain. Encourage them in the Lord, and remind them of the medicinal qualities of God's grace and healing power. Pray for them also.

PRAYER:

Lord, I confess that I struggle to trust you in light of the pain and suffering in our world. There are many close to me who linger in infirmity, and I too spend my days in a broken body. Make me a blessing today, and give me the right words to be an encouragement to those who are in pain. Through Jesus I pray, amen.

MONDAY'S READINGS – March 31, 2014

Psalm 146

Isaiah 59:9-19

Acts 9:1-20

MISPLACED TRUST

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. – Psalm 146:3-6

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES THE BELIEVER from anyone else? Certainly we all navigate our way through a life that deals us victories and losses, health and disease, seasons of weeping followed by seasons of laughter. In fact, in Matthew 5, we read that God “causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” In light of this, I ask again, what differentiates the believer?

The difference between us living an eternal, heavenly existence on earth versus a hellish one, the difference between good and bad, comes down to our focus of trust. In whom or what do we hope? There is a tendency within humanity to trust in those people and things that we can see and control, those things of the flesh. Yet all of our man-made defenses will one day perish, and we with them. Our friends, families, and our very selves are powerless to save or to endure.

Who can you trust for your daily living, or when all is brought low? Let us place our trust in the eternal One. And more, let us trust his love. Thomas Merton writes, “Better than hoping for anything from the Lord, besides his love, let us place all our hope in his love itself.” That God loves us is sure, and will never fail us. His faithfulness toward us remains forever.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take time to consider and write down the ways you are *trusting in princes*. Now, thank God for his faithfulness in each of those areas and confess your trust in the One that desires your dependence upon his steadfastness.

PRAYER:

God of glory, Maker of heaven and earth, I put my sole trust in you! Forgive me for trusting in mortal men or uncertain riches. Thank you that all your promises are true in Christ Jesus, in whose name I pray, amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – April 1, 2014

Psalm 146

Isaiah 42:14-21

Colossians 1:9-14

TRANSFORMING LIGHT

... and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – Colossians 1:12-14

YEARS AGO, while touring a cave complex in southern Indiana, a group of us were led by a guide into a large cave room about six hundred feet under the earth. Then, the guide walked over and flipped a switch that left us in total darkness. A few moments later, she struck a match; the entire room was lit. One small source of light had dispelled the expansive darkness, and the flame proved sufficient not only for seeing, but for leading us around the massive cave.

Life apart from God is a state of total darkness. Paul says that all have been under the dominion of darkness, but by God's grace, the Father has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Hymn writer P.P. Bliss composed a similar sentiment:

*The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin, the Light of the world is Jesus;
Like sunshine at noon-day His glory shone in, the Light of the world is Jesus.
Come to the Light, 'tis shining for thee; Sweetly the Light has dawned upon me,
Once I was blind, but now I can see, the Light of the world is Jesus.*

Unqualified in our natural estate, God qualifies us to share in his inheritance in the kingdom of light. The Light of the world comes into our lives to dispel all darkness. Without him, we would be spiritually blind. In your Lenten devotion, don't forget to give thanks to Jesus for your rescue from the dominion of darkness.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Darken a room as much as possible. Spend several minutes in darkness, meditating on the importance of light in your life. Using a small source of light, recognize its power to dispel the darkness, and give thanks for the true Light who gives light to every man (John 1:9).

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, darkness is all around us. We need the light of Jesus in our lives. Use me to reflect his goodness in a sin-darkened world. May I not be guilty of hiding Christ's light under a bushel, but let it be seen by others that they may glorify you. Amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – April 2, 2014

Psalm 146

Isaiah 60:17-22

Matthew 9:27-34

GOD'S MERCY

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David . . ." – Matthew 9:27

MERCY has been simply defined as "God withholding from us what we rightfully deserve," while grace is generally identified as "God granting us those things undeserved." The tendency among Christ-followers is to focus on the wonderful grace of God; certainly, we should never minimize God's expression of love by bestowing upon us richly what we do not deserve. However, we see in Scripture many instances in which people are calling out for *mercy*.

In today's Lenten reading found in Matthew's gospel, there are blind men calling out to the Son of David for healing from their infirmity. Their use of the word *mercy*, originates from the same word that is sometimes rendered as "pity." The blind men, desiring to be healed, follow Jesus as he travels. Jesus asks, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" He then proceeds to touch their eyes, saying, "According to your faith, will it be done to you."

There are two things at work in this story. *First*, the persistence of the blind men in following Jesus despite their affliction. The men were willing to work through their infirmity in order to get close enough to Jesus for healing. In many cases, we seek the mercy or pity of Jesus, but we're unwilling to persist when facing resistance or struggle. If the way becomes too difficult, we give up, choosing to continue on in our helpless ways. *Second*, Jesus had more than just *pity* for the two blind men; he was compassionate toward them. He did something about it. Compassion is pity made into action.

This is a story of what happens when the mercies of God meet together with the faith of the blind men . . . they regain their sight! The lesson for us is to recognize that God is willing to meet us with his mercy when we come to him by faith. Are you struggling with sin? Is there some emotional infirmity you are convinced God is unable to heal? Are you continuing through life in spiritual blindness?

Take God at his word, and receive the same mercies that withheld judgment from you even before you began your journey of following him.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take an overflowing box of giveaway items to a thrift store near you. Also, identify someone indebted to you and forgive their debt.

PRAYER:

Father, I praise you for your mercies toward me. Though I deserve to perish in my sin, you have forgiven me and canceled my justifiable punishment. Thank you for not merely pitying me, but instead graciously and mercifully bringing healing to my soul. In Jesus's name, amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – April 3, 2014

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 1:1-3; 2:8-3:3

Revelation 10:1-11

DON'T DELAY

Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea, and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay!" – Revelation 10:5-6

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED how little control we really have of time? We can't manipulate it, whether desiring to slow it down or speed it along. We've all had the feeling of wishing we could slow the clock because we're running a bit late; or perhaps we've been so anxious or eager for some future event, we wish we could speed it up.

There are 168 hours that compose every week of our existence. While we are simply managers of time, it isn't always *simple to manage*. Remember those timed examinations in school? Nearing the end of the exam, you probably began to watch the clock, only to waste those final precious moments that should have been devoted to filling in answers.

Time freaks us out. Just as we had no control over the beginning of time, we also have no control over its cessation. Eventually, time will run its course, and eternity will begin. (This is one event in which no one will be late.) Eternity is bound up in God's decree, and is known only to him. The earth and the sea will yield its existence to the commencement of eternity.

Today's Scripture reveals the end of things as they are now known, including all the things we hold up as important. Not only will creation as we know it cease, but so will any opportunity to make things right with God. The admonition of Scripture is clear, "Behold, *now* is the accepted time; *today* is the day of salvation" (emphasis added), and "Seek the Lord while he may be found . . ."

If you're not sure if you are in Christ, today is the day to receive him as Lord and Savior. If you know you are his, but you've drifted away or there is unconfessed sin in your heart, repent today and confess your sin to God. Time is of the essence.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Arrive fifteen minutes early for school, work, or any appointments you may have scheduled. With your planner or calendar, change or move back your appointments and determine by an act of your will that you will arrive in a timely fashion.

PRAYER:

Lord of heaven and earth, you are the maker of time. In your goodness, you chose to enter the confines of time and space to be my Savior. Time, its beginning and end, is in your hand. Help me to be a good steward of time in consideration of others and for my own benefit. For Jesus's sake, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – April 4, 2014

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 33:10-16

Revelation 11:15-19

WATCHING AND WAITING

*But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning. – Psalm 130:4-6*

THE PSALMIST CRIES OUT in this *Song of Ascent* and waits for Jehovah, all the while putting hope in his word. He compares his waiting anticipation to that of the watchmen who waits for morning. Watchmen, at this time, were the men appointed to stand watch and guard at the walls of the city. In Hebrew, the term means something like “one who peers into the distance.” These were the people responsible for delivering a message of invasion if an enemy approached. No doubt the most difficult time to be a watchman was the hours between midnight and early morning. It’s no wonder that they would eagerly await the morning, which would be the end of their long and tiring watch shift.

We can relate in some ways. What a long and tiring “shift” it is for us to wait for the Lord’s coming. But like the watchmen, we are not to simply *wait* for the Lord, we are also to be *watchful*.

In Mark chapter 13, Jesus says, “No one knows about that day or hour . . . Be on guard; be alert; keep watch!” It’s easy to fall asleep in this life, but we are told to choose *his appearing* rather than our *disappearing*. Are we expectant? Are we saying, “Come, Lord Jesus” inside this Lenten season, and believing that he will?

LIVING SIMPLY:

Find a park bench or suitable public place and become a people-watcher. Observe their countenances, and pray for those who look sad or lonely.

PRAYER:

Lord, I confess that I am not always watchful. I am waiting for your return, but I fail to expect it or prepare for it. Help me to be found awake for the kingdom’s sake, and not lethargic. Amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – April 5, 2014

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 36:8-15

Revelation 11:15-19

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD IS AT HAND

The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth. –Revelation 11:18

JOHN'S RECEIPT OF JESUS'S REVELATION outlines the second half of Tribulation. After the two witnesses Moses and Elijah finish their testimony to the Jews, the beast will put them to death. A few days later, they will be resurrected by the breath of God, and he will receive them into glory. At this time, the seventh trumpet will sound and the judgment of God will be introduced.

What does Scripture mean by “judgment”? In Revelation chapter 20, we read that several books will be opened on this day. The unrepentant will be judged according to things they have done as recorded in the books and, similarly, the saints of God will be judged according to their works while in the body, either good or bad (useful or useless). However, for these believers or Christ-followers, there is good news. Judgment for sin has been executed; it is as though judgment day has already happened. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, he judged sin—both the sin principle that operates upon human nature, and he judged Satan.

Never shall the Christian be judged for sin, and in this way, sin has lost its power. Still, Christians are not without responsibility. We are still held accountable for our work. For example, our motivation for service will be judged accordingly. Did we do the works of God for his glory? Or did we perhaps serve others to draw attention to ourselves, or to “earn” our salvation? As you continue your Lenten journey, search your own heart and confess those things done in the flesh and not in the Spirit. Determine to serve God for his glory and the good of others as a response to your good-news-judgment-day.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Look for opportunities to serve others. Take a meal to someone in need, take out someone's garbage, sweep a sidewalk, give someone a ride to the doctor, etc. Consciously do these things in Jesus's name.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I know there have been instances in which I have performed works of service that were not born of the right motives. Forgive me for serving myself and help me to live my life for your glory and for the benefit of the kingdom. For Jesus's sake, amen.

SUNDAY'S READINGS – April 6, 2014 (*Fifth Sunday of Lent*)

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

THE BATTLE FOR THE MIND

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

– Romans 8:5-6

THERE'S A SAYING THAT GOES, "We aren't who we think we are, but we are what we think." Our mind, the control center of our body, dictates how we think and, subsequently, how we behave. Think of it this way: In reference to computers, we say, "Garbage in, garbage out." So it goes with our thoughts. Ask someone dealing with alcoholism or a pornography addiction, and they will testify to the mind's overpowering control of the flesh. And even if our sin appears more subtle, more cerebrally oriented, don't be fooled; the danger is the same.

In James 1, we are warned that "after desire has been conceived, it gives birth to sin" (1:15). It is a humble, yet formidable task to guard our thought lives and allow the Holy Spirit to produce the inspiration of God. Think upon those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy, we are told in Scripture. Yet we can't do it alone. David, constantly aware of his mind's struggle, knew that he needed God. And so he cried out for God to search him and test him, to know his anxious thoughts.

God isn't scared of our imperfect inner lives. The Lord knows the thoughts of man, the psalmist writes. Instead of trying to hide our thoughts from God, better to commit our thought lives to him and ask the Spirit to transform our minds. Additionally, it is important to meditate on Scripture, that inspired Word that is able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

What thoughts seek to control your life? What lies tend to present themselves to your consciousness time and time again? You will never be able to *try* hard enough to rid yourself of them on your own; the flesh is powerless to conquer such things. However, the Spirit wants to take your weakness and transform you. Like Paul says, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of this world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and *we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5, emphasis added). Let that be your prayer today.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Spend the day praying the Jesus Prayer, meditating deliberately upon each phrase, and committing your mind to the Spirit for his control.

JESUS PRAYER:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.

MONDAY'S READINGS – April 7, 2014

Psalm 147

1 Kings 17:17-24

Acts 20:7-12

HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD?

He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. . . . He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call. . . . He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. – Psalm 147:4, 9, 16

SOMETIMES IT TAKES a children's song to talk about the greatest of all realities. One of my favorites sings, "My God is so big, so strong and so mighty / There's nothing my God cannot do." This is a song that speaks about the greatness of a God who is able to create the universe and yet small enough to live within our human hearts. Reading today's passage is a glimpse into that omnipotence.

Jesus often spoke of God's sheer power and grandeur. "With God, all things are possible," he is quoted saying in the book of Matthew. Juxtapose that with the way Jesus also spoke of God's care for each person, and his granular attention to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. If God's care extends to the smallest of these, how much more will he attend to the needs of his people. When you consider Jesus's words and the words of the psalmist, you can understand that as humans we are bookended by God's love for the lesser and the greater.

In this season of Lent, let us remember that God knows us and provides for us. Or as Paul puts it, that God provides for all of our needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. In this season of the calendar, we focus on our spiritual needs, and we seek to identify with the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. It is because of this journey that we have been born into God's family and made joint-heirs with Christ. All that the Father has given him also belongs to us! Today let us focus on his promise to meet our temporal needs. For we know that a lack of trust in God for such things leads to anxiety and worry; worry leads to doubt; and doubt leads to sin. Do you trust God for your daily needs? Are you giving thanks to him for all things big and small?

LIVING SIMPLY:

Take a nature walk today and observe the birds and animals as they gather or partake of God's provision. When darkness comes, gaze upon the stars, and remember that each one has been put there and named by the God who provides for you in all ways.

PRAYER:

God of wonder, God of might, I behold your splendor in the world around me. I'm grateful for your manifold blessings and provisions for all of creation. I trust you to meet my every need, and confess that I have been guilty of worry, doubt, and sin. Forgive me, I pray. In Jesus's name, amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – April 8, 2014

Psalm 143

2 Kings 4:18-37

Ephesians 2:1-10

THE WALKING DEAD

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead . . . – Ephesians 2:1-2, 4

ZOMBIES, identified as the walking dead, have become pretty popular characters in film these days. Portrayed with decaying flesh and rotting clothes, they roam about, almost aimlessly, in hopes of deliverance and with the intent of killing others. They don't provide us with a pretty picture of death. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul indicates that as humans all of us have experienced zombie-like spiritual conditions. That at one point, we too have walked dead in our trespasses and sins, stumbling about trying to gratify the cravings of our sinful nature.

Fortunately, God has intervened and showered us with his mercy and grace. Motivated by his great love, he has quickened us and brought us to life. This is good news, because the dead can't speak on their own behalf and, in the same way, no one has ever come to life spiritually without intervention. Consider how those with addictions and chronic sin need to experience an intervention. Every one of us needs divine intervention. Let us remember today that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son, Jesus, that whoever believes in him will have everlasting life.

Everlasting life is a life with a beginning but no end. Be thankful you're not like the fictional zombie, walking about while dead. Celebrate living as a vibrant, Spirit-led child of God!

LIVING SIMPLY:

Depending on where you live, the signs of spring will be more or less evidenced in nature. Take time to plant a seedling tree or some flowers. Cultivate and nourish them, rejoicing in your own spiritual life as those plants or trees begin to grow.

PRAYER:

God, you are the lover of my own soul. I praise you that you intervened in my life, and that I have been transformed from the darkness of death so that I may no longer walk according to the ways of this world. Help me to show your love to others and be a part of their transformation. Amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – April 9, 2014

Psalm 143

Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41

Matthew 22:23-33

SOONER RATHER THAN LATER

Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. – Psalm 143:7-8

UPON WAKING UP, have you ever had the experience of feeling unloved by or distant from God? Perhaps it's been a long time since you've had solitude or prayed. Then one morning it hits you; and you just need to know that God is still in your life. Sometimes our own spirit grows so weak it seems we can't go forward without *knowing*. The psalmist is having one of those moments, and so requests a hurried answer from God one morning. "Lord, are you there? Answer me sooner rather than later, please!"

The mercies of God are renewed each morning, and often those mercies stand side by side with our crying out for the demonstration or assurance of God's unfailing love. Maybe we are convinced that God has forsaken us. Yet even when our spirit and our faith fail us, God's love remains constant. No matter how badly we have disappointed God, he will not cast us out of his family. While God's love never *lets us off* when we sin, he also never *lets us down*, nor will his love ever *let us go*.

Regarding our current hardship, let us choose to "sleep on it," hoping that whatever it is, it will be gone in the morning and replaced by a consciousness of God's love. God's love is not dependent upon our circumstances, though our circumstances do depend upon God's love. In the passage above, David reminds God that he has placed his trust in him and desires, *sooner rather than later*, to see the face of God and know of God's unfailing love.

Do you despair? Has life seemingly dealt you a hand only worth folding? God's timing is always perfect because his love is always near.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Begin the day in meditation. Meditate upon ways that God has demonstrated his love toward you. Determine to yield your life circumstances to God's Spirit, renewing your trust in God's unfailing love.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, forgive me for doubting your great love. Like the psalmist, I pray for the revelation of your unfailing love. May I face the circumstances of life with your face shining upon me. In Jesus's name, amen.

THURSDAY'S READINGS – April 10, 2014

Psalm 31:9-16

1 Samuel 16:11-13

Philippians 1:1-11

THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.
– 1 Samuel 16:13*

CAN YOU IMAGINE IT? One by one, Jesse's sons passing before Samuel the priest, wondering if they would be chosen as the one to replace King Saul. Saul had been a miserable kingly failure, serving as an example of someone who was in it to win it—for himself! Now a new king is to be anointed. But as each son is paraded past Samuel, the God-led priest says "No." In spite of good looks and stature, not one of them is chosen. Are there any other sons? Samuel asks. At that point, as sort of an afterthought, David is summoned from the hillside; when he arrives, the Lord tells Samuel, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one."

In the story of God and ancient Israel, it was common for anyone who was called to perform a special task or service to be anointed by God's Spirit. So it is with David. With a symbolic use of oil, the Holy Spirit comes upon David in great power, equipping and enabling him for the task set before him. After Christ, the Holy Spirit is democratized, so to speak. We know that the Holy Spirit comes upon all believers and permanently indwells us, equipping us with spiritual gifts, and empowering us for works of service. While the Holy Spirit was a less accessible entity and could be removed from an Old Testament person, he has permanently taken up residence in those of us who are genuine Christ-followers.

This Lenten season, God is calling us back to works of service. He has already anointed us through the work of our Great High Priest, and we have been given his Spirit. While we lose some distinction, becoming one in Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit distributes various gifts for service to each one of us, as he determines. To what is God calling you? Has the still, small voice of God been prompting you toward service in some particular area?

Throughout Jesus's life and ministry, the Holy Spirit led and strengthened him for the work that God had sent him to accomplish. Likewise, God has anointed us. Let us go forth and fulfill the will of the Father, allowing him to empower us as servants of his kingdom.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Re-establish those spiritual disciplines that empower you for your daily tasks. Examine also your service to Christ; which gifts for service are evident in your life? Which are conspicuously absent? Try new areas of ministry and solicit the observation of others.

PRAYER:

Lord, I confess that I have not put my spiritual gifts to full use. I acknowledge your Spirit in my life, and I pray you would go before me to show me new and exciting ways to minister in the church. Help me to humbly recognize those areas in which I am not enabled to serve, so that I may instead capitalize on the strengths you have divined for me. In your name, amen.

FRIDAY'S READINGS – April 11, 2014

Psalm 31:9-16

Job 13:13-19

Philippians 1:21-30

GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him!
– Job 13:15-16

BESIDES OUR SAVIOR, no one in Scripture suffered to the extent of Job. In one fell swoop, Job loses his wealth, his family, his dignity and, ultimately, the confidence of his friends. The tragedies Job endures are closely examined by three friends in particular, and their conclusion is that Job must have some sin in his life. “What great evil have you done in God’s sight to bring this devastation?” After Zophar rattles off countless examples of God’s “judging” nature, Job stands tall and says, “I will surely defend my ways to his face.”

Job’s friends find him guilty and, seemingly, the onus is on Job to prove his innocence. But Job’s overwhelming confidence in his own innocence is expressed in his words, “Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated.” Fast forward to the story of Jesus being brought before his accusers, and ultimately, turned over to the Romans for conviction and execution. Truly innocent, his accusers said otherwise.

Walking through Lent, we can’t help but be reminded of how an innocent man was put upon a cross—that symbol standing for thieves, murderers, and the scandalous. Jesus, ultimately abandoned by the Father in order to experience spiritual death, was delivered over at the foreknowledge of God and at the accusation of a rebellious humanity. Ultimately, like Job, it turned out for his deliverance: The sinless Son would once again come before the Father face to face. The innocent Christ took our guilt upon himself. For this, we praise his holy name.

LIVING SIMPLY:

With the help of a chaplain, write a letter to an inmate. Demonstrate compassion and share God’s love and forgiveness through Jesus.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I am guilty of seeing others as deserving of their plight. Help me see them instead through the eyes of Jesus, and voice to them how much they are loved by you. I praise you that while I was guilty by my sinfulness, Jesus loved me so much that he died in my place. Let me be transformed by the truth that I am now innocent of all charges. Amen.

SATURDAY'S READINGS – April 12, 2014

Psalm 31:9-16

Lamentations 3:55-66

Mark 10:32-34

DEAD MAN WALKING

“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” – Mark 10:32-34

THE MOVIE *The Green Mile*, is set on death row and features one man's final walk to the execution chair. “Dead man walking” is the expression that both the inmates and guards in the film use to describe this event. For a lot of real imprisoned men and women, it can be years—even decades—of waiting for a conviction. It's terrifying to think that a person can be a dead man walking for that long.

In today's Scripture reading, the beginning of the end is clearly in focus for Jesus. Jesus informs the disciples that they are going up to Jerusalem, and he predicts his betrayal, condemnation, and death. You can almost imagine someone cry, *Dead man walking!* This would be the last trek into the holy city during Jesus's life and ministry. The story doesn't stop there, however. Jesus doesn't only predict his death, he also predicts that he will rise up from death. Mark, a succinct gospel writer who purposed to present Jesus as a *servant* more than a victor, records no further conversation or questions in keeping with this resurrection theme. But here it is in six words: “Three days later he will rise.”

The Bible says that each of us were dead men walking before our conversion to Christ. We had physical life, but our spirits were not united with God's. Upon conversion, we were quickened and made eternally alive, even though our bodies continue to die. Yet just as Jesus rose from the dead, our bodies will be raised and made new.

LIVING SIMPLY:

As the woes of winter begin to fade, volunteer to help a neighbor clear away dead branches, grass, and growth in order to make room for and stimulate new growth. Acknowledge the signs of death, but anticipate the certainty of new life.

PRAYER:

Lord, I thank you that while I am reminded of death, and as I deal with infirmity and affliction, you help me to reflect on Jesus's final walk to Jerusalem. He faced death on my behalf, that it may not have the last word. I glorify you and the Son and Spirit with you. In Christ's name I pray, amen.

PALM SUNDAY'S READINGS – April 13, 2014

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

Matthew 21:1-11

Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 26:14-27:66 *or*

Matthew 27:11-54

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” – Matthew 21:10

WHEN FAMOUS PEOPLE COME TO TOWN—athletes, politicians, movie stars, etc.—they are preceded by a tremendous amount of public relations. But never has a city been so stirred by the entrance of a (mostly) anonymous man, as was the case with Jesus on Palm Sunday. Paving the way for his arrival with palm branches, they shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” At the same time Jesus was being celebrated, some responded with questions. This is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee, right? What is so triumphant or jubilant about his coming?

The Jews were in great anticipation for a coming king—and that he was!—but they expected him to look and act the way their empire imaginations wanted; they wanted him to bring his kingdom *immediately* and with a power they could see.

Before his triumphant entry, Jesus sent two disciples into a nearby village to locate a donkey tied with its colt. They were to untie them and bring them to Jesus. If we should emulate any character in the narrative, it should be this unheralded beast of burden, the donkey! As Holy Week begins, let us lift up the One who presented himself to the people, journeying to the cross. Let us lift up the King of Kings who will one day ride again as royalty. Let us uphold the significance of his coming. We can wave branches of palm and sing our *hosannas*, but our real homage to the Son of David is our willingness to bear the burden of lifting him up before the world.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Assume an additional responsibility for Jesus today. May the palm frond you receive at church be a visible reminder of your commitment.

PRAYER:

Lord of heaven and earth, I humbly acknowledge the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In faithfulness and commitment to your Word, help me to lift him up among throngs of people. For Jesus's sake, amen.

MONDAY'S READINGS – April 14, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 36:5-11

Hebrews 9:11-15

John 12:1-11

WALKING THE FINE LINE

Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. – John 12:2b-3

THE SCENE FROM TODAY'S PASSAGE takes place just six days before the Passover (and crucifixion) in the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, whom Christ had raised from the dead. A dinner is being given in Jesus's honor, likely in gratitude for what he has done for Lazarus. Martha busies herself serving, as was her custom, and Lazarus reclines at the table with Jesus; however, the real story here is Mary.

Mary comes to Jesus with a fragrant, precious ointment and begins wiping his feet—with her hair. Although it was not unusual for the feet of guests to be washed after walking dusty roads, the act of using her own hair and pouring out expensive perfume would have been astonishing and humbling.

As Good Friday draws near, let us remember the distinction between busyness for Christ versus expressions of personal devotion. This Holy Week, we should lean more toward the testimony of Mary, who exhibited humility in cleaning Jesus's feet, rather than the hustle and bustle of service. That which is necessary must be done, but take time to pour out your personal devotion and gratitude for what he has done for us.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Choose something that you consider valuable and meaningful, and give it away to someone in need or to your church.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, help me to be a giver as well as a doer. As I reflect upon what Jesus has given for me, help me to express his love to others by a token or expression of sacrifice. Amen.

TUESDAY'S READINGS – April 15, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 71:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

John 12:20-36

FOOLS FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. . . . God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise . . . – 1 Corinthians 1:18, 27a

RECENTLY, several memorials honoring veterans have been criticized because of their religious symbolism. Two in particular, memorials in the Mojave Desert and on Mt. Soledad, display crosses and, thus, have been challenged in court. It should not surprise or offend us that this is so. Paul indicates that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who don't believe. But the good news is this: God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

As Christians, we should not be surprised that our hope is misunderstood. Many will view Christianity as old-fashioned, obsolete, or just plain foolishness. By the world's standards we may be foolish because we believe the cross has great significance, but Paul says anyone who thinks they are wise by the world's standards should become a fool and find true wisdom (1 Cor. 3). We have come to understand by the Spirit that the cross represents sacrifice and love on behalf of sinful humanity. Are you willing to endure opposition for the sake of all that is secretly wise?

LIVING SIMPLY:

You may have ushered in the Lenten season with ashes on your forehead. As you draw near to Good Friday, boldly display your foolishness by wearing a cross. Memorize Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, all around me I witness the expression of my faith by the symbol of the cross. I thank you for the message it represents, a life-saving message that has become personal to me. Help me to share the person of true wisdom, Christ our Lord, with others. Amen.

WEDNESDAY'S READINGS – April 16, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 70

Hebrews 12:1-3

John 13:21-32

RUNNING A GOOD RACE

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.
– Hebrews 12:1-2a

IF YOU HAVE EVER RUN A RACE, you know how demanding it is. Yet the ways of a runner are various. Some people run very calculated distances on a treadmill, others run cross country courses, or laps around an oval. Some just declare themselves free spirits and set out in a jog, not knowing where they're going or how far they'll get.

The writer of Hebrews likens the Christian life to a race, offering some helpful hints. *For starters*, we're being observed. There are spectators gathered around the marathon course; these people are our witnesses. *Second*, as Christ-followers, we should "throw off" everything that hinders or entangles. Track stars wear only the minimum apparel when competing, even their spiked cleats are feathery-light. Perhaps in training they may wear ankle weights or the like, but when competing, everything possible is removed. *Third*, the author of Hebrews indicates that as Christ-followers, the race is marked out for us. Every Christian has a particular race to run and the boundaries, distances, and obstacles are determined; they are determined by God. *Lastly*, we have a perfect runner to emulate in the person of Jesus.

Jesus went the distance. What if, in correspondence to our location in the Lenten calendar, Jesus were to have tired and withdrawn from the race? Thankfully, the author or *trailblazer* of our faith also *finished* the race set out for him. In fact, he was unwilling to quit his ministry until he returned to the Father's right hand. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising its shame.

LIVING SIMPLY:

If able, take a walk or jog, visit the gym, or use a treadmill. Pray as you run.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I commit myself to looking to Jesus as I run my race in life. Strengthen me when I become weak, and may the breath of your Spirit fill and energize me that I might endure. Amen.

HOLY THURSDAY'S READINGS – April 17, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Exodus 12:1-4 {5-10} 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26a

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

MAUNDY (HOLY) THURSDAY

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. – John 13:1

THE THURSDAY BEFORE EASTER SUNDAY, Maundy Thursday, is observed to commemorate the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples in the upper room. In this scene, Jesus is keenly aware that it is time for him to leave the world and return to the Father. His death would be the very next day and, out of great care for his friends, he had likely been reflecting upon these men who had left their vocations to follow him. We get a glimpse into a very intimate moment when we read an account of this last meal. Gathered in the upstairs chamber as the evening meal is being served, Jesus uses the bread and the cup to speak of his body that will be broken, and his blood that will be shed. When the meal is finished, he begins to wash the disciples' feet, expressing the full extent of his love.

Peter, feeling embarrassed by the actions of Jesus, indicates that, if anything, he should wash the feet of his Master. "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me," Jesus responds. There is spiritual application to Jesus's display: "You are clean," he tells them. How his heart must have already been bleeding for his devoted, though imperfect, disciples. Beloved to him, he makes them clean by association.

Like all good things, this cleansing ritual cost something. No loving deed is without price. In this case, Jesus humbles himself to cleanse his disciples. He then tells them to go and do likewise for one another. The point? Humility. In Christ, humility in service rules out over authority. Love wins out over position. Meekness, power under control, is our Maundy invitation.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Go out of your way to be of service to someone; offer to run errands for a neighbor, etc. Attend a Maundy Thursday church service and practice humility.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you provided the perfect example of expressing love through an act of humility. Help me to love others, especially the unlovely, and convict me of my pride. For Jesus's sake, amen.

GOOD FRIDAY'S READINGS – April 18, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

ABUSED, NEGLECTED, AND ABANDONED

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O My God, I cry out by day, by night, and am not silent . . .

– Psalm 22:1-2

ON THIS GOOD FRIDAY, we remember the terror of our Savior, Jesus, experiencing death on behalf of us all. The events leading up to the crucifixion are well-documented, and one could hardly argue against the abuse that Jesus suffered in those final hours. Mocked, scorned, spat upon, and beaten, Jesus continued the journey to Golgotha's hill called Calvary.

Upon the cross, Jesus not only endured the suffering and abuse of crucifixion, he was also abandoned by his followers. Only the beloved disciple John, Jesus's mother, Mary, and a few other women followed at a distance. To determine the extent of the disciples' neglect is impossible, but, suffice it to say, their neglect was evident as early as the night of Jesus's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The most trying and bewildering fact, however, is the abandonment Christ felt by God his Father. Jesus cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The phrase Jesus uses is a quote from today's text, Psalm 22. We sometimes forget that Jesus had to die both physically and spiritually. There is tremendous clarity in the gospels of Jesus's physical death. However, in order to be humanity's substitute, the implicit spiritual death was also necessary. Christ had to sacrifice fully, come fully unto death, so that the power of God's promise could raise him up. As you meditate upon the significance of this Good Friday, be mindful that Jesus took your place of abandonment and made it possible for you to draw near to God.

LIVING SIMPLY:

Investigate the possibility of becoming a big brother or sister to a foster child. Discover ways to serve those who are abused, neglected, or abandoned.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, Jesus became well acquainted with grief and suffered mistreatment for me. Help me to become more sensitive and compassionate toward others who lack a sense of belonging and whose spirits have been broken or bruised. For Jesus's sake, amen.

HOLY SATURDAY'S READINGS – April 19, 2014 (*Holy Week*)

Job 14:1-14 or Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

1 Peter 4:1-8

Matthew 27:57-66 or John 19:38-42

THE SEAL OF UPHEAVAL

“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go; make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

– Matthew 27:65-66

FOLLOWING CHRIST'S DEATH, a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, a follower of Jesus, goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus's body. Preparing the body for proper burial, he then places it in his own tomb, and a stone is rolled in front of its entrance. The next day, Saturday, some chief priests remind Pilate of Jesus's words about rising up after three days. Fearing that the disciples will come and steal the body and make it seem as though Christ's words were fulfilled, Pilate orders the tomb to be secured and posts guards outside.

Words are powerful, and when God speaks, realities are moved. No seal, no stone, and no guard could prevent Jesus's prophecy from being fulfilled. Interestingly, Pilate, who still reeled with guilt over convicting an innocent man, showed genuine concern about the level of security at the tomb. There was some telling fear around *this* dead man. A fear different from that around, say, Lazarus, the man Jesus had resurrected while in the town of Bethany.

The religious leaders were right to be frightened by the power of Christ's resurrection. When Lazarus arose, he came forth bound in his grave clothes, the trappings of death. However, in Jesus's case, as we read it in the Easter story, after the seal on Christ's tomb was broken and the stone was rolled away, the grave clothes of Jesus remained in the tomb.

Jesus, when he arose, left death and sin behind. Our sin was buried once and for all. This was more than a triumph over the physical, it was the ultimate spiritual victory. Thank God for the victory that is ours in Christ Jesus, for we shall tomorrow and forever declare: “He is risen! He is risen, indeed!”

LIVING SIMPLY:

Write down on a piece of paper your greatest failures. Place the list in a container, dig a hole and bury it. Consider such failures gone forever.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, I give you thanks and praise for the hope of life after death. Though I still bear in my body the marks of sin and death, I claim your promises of my own resurrection. In Jesus's name, amen.