We hope you will enjoy these reflections, written by members and friends of the Westminster congregation. Each writer spent time with a specific scripture passage, and then prepared a reflection about that passage to share with you during Lent. There are about three reflection per week, beginning with Ash Wednesday on March 2. May these thoughts and words be a blessing to you in this sacred Lenten season.
Week of Ash Wednesday – March 2

Isaiah 58:1-9a
Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.

"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?"
This passage resonated with me for a few reasons, first and foremost because the line above taken from the passage reminded me of a common phrase I use with my kids and with my team at work: "how we do anything is how we do everything."

I became a parent 2 and a half years ago. About eight months after Chase arrived in this world, my mother died of pneumonia, septic shock and a recurrence of cancer - a trifecta that took her life while at home under the Hospice banner for ten weeks. Eighteen months after that, I lost my father to pneumonia as well, and he had been a memory care patient for his last few years as well as a heartbroken widower after my mother, his wife of 43 years, died. In the becoming of a parent and then losing my own, I've had to show up in spades for my kids (including two older stepkids), my siblings (for whom I am often the organizer, Power of Attorney for my mother, Health Care Proxy, and now the estate Trustee), my team (I manage a team of seven employees and together we raise $10-12M for The Nature Conservancy), my friends and myself. Given this full plate, the few guiding lights I have been able to maintain include: pacing myself, staying honest with myself and those I love, drawing healthy boundaries, and doing my best everyday while recognizing my best will wax and wane by the day. In doing anything, I try to do it with integrity and care, for myself, others and the planet. The line above resonated, along with the passage, because of the importance of living year-round with values and mindfulness - not just during a given season such as Lenten - but to espouse values in how we do everything, every day, to the best of our ability.

Lindsay Hower
Psalm 51:1-12

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

First of all, let me say I really don’t like the word sin. Most of the time I use words like wrong doings and such. Somehow the word “sin” reminds me of some “holier-than-thou” people looking down on me casting judgement. Thank goodness, this is not my experience with the God that I follow or the people at WPC.

This reading is a Psalm about confessing sins/wrong doings... and asking for God to forgive you. Specifically, it is about King David’s confession following his adultery with Bathsheba and his ordering the slaying of her husband, Uriah. That is a pretty heavy story. If you want to read more about that, check it out in 2 Samuel 11 & 12.

At first the reading of this Psalm it sounds like someone pleading with an angry, vengeful God. But when I looked closer, what I see is David asking for forgiveness for his wrong doings all the while very much aware of God’s loving and forgiving nature. Is God going to forgive him? Of course God is. It is in His very nature to show His people love and compassion as well as forgiveness. I also think while David felt remorse and truly and faithfully asked for forgiveness, he knew God was going to forgive him. In verse 4 the Psalmist says “Against you alone have I sinned and done evil in your sight”. While technically that isn’t correct, I think what he is saying is when we sin and hurt or cause harm to other people, we put a division between us and God, therefore sinning against God as well.

God wants to be in a relationship with us and sin and wrong doings draws us away from God. Perhaps it’s because of our guilty feelings or just knowing we have done things wrong. Maybe that is why confession and acknowledging our short comings is important. In my experience, confession brings me closer to God because I come with an open heart. While asking for forgiveness doesn’t remove having consequences from that sin, it does bring us into right relationship with God and gives us strength to face those consequences.

Diane Newman
Matthew 6:1-6

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

As kids growing up, we used to visit Granny White during school vacations. She lived in Denton, Texas. Upon our arrival at her house, a plate of homemade tamales would be delivered to her door for us. It was a gift from her “friends,” as she called them, those for whom she provided medical care free-of-charge after work as a registered nurse in a doctor’s office. My sisters and I loved the Mexican food the way Granny’s friends prepared it.

Granny was the kind of Christian, who attended church every Christmas and every Easter. Her church pastor, whom she called “Preach,” visited Granny in her home every week. They talked over a cup of coffee with Granny making mental notes about this one or that one in the congregation who were troubled or in need. Without a word or any fanfare, a hot dish would arrive at a sick person’s home, a jar of homemade, from her garden, pepper jelly would be delivered to cheer someone, or a new baby would be cared for by Granny.

After her retirement Granny had a constant stream of telephone calls and visitors in her home every day, with some bringing her home made peanut brittle candy, newly harvested corn, or flowers from their gardens. These were the same people from the church that Granny had cared for years before. As we got older, we would visit Granny bringing our friends and later our spouses to meet her. Inevitably, she would tell each one she met; “I’m your Granny, too”!

Granny was my grandad’s second wife, whom he married after his heart attack. She had been his nurse. She had no children of her own and there were no children from their happy, long marriage. My dad called her “mom”.

Granny always made my favorite dishes when visiting her: fried okra and corn bread baked in specially designed little baking pans so that the corn bread came out in the shape of a corn-on-the-cob. She never forgot my birthday with a gift of a handwritten letter and a check for ten dollars. Over the years the handwriting got a little shaky but the words of love and encouragement that she wrote were as strong and faithful as they ever had been.
Granny White lived to be a healthy ninety-three. At her funeral Preach told the overflowing crowd in church that day: “the rest of the world may have Mother Teresa, but, we have Granny White.”

Maryland White Swenson
Matthew 6:19-21

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Do not store up treasure on earth — I have some questions

Do not store up treasure on earth where moth and rust destroy
But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
Where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

What is that treasure? The one we’re supposed to store in heaven?
For that matter, isn’t heaven – the kingdom of God – here, now, what we make of this life?
How we live our todays?

If the kingdom of God is all around and within us – isn’t heaven with us now?
So, why not lay up these treasures in heaven?

Treasures of
  Connection
  Surprise
  Gratitude
  Listening
  The present moment.

Treasures of
  A rose-drenched sunrise
    A swift swooping hummingbird
    The dawning call of a barn owl
    The purple pink and blue of the evening sky.

Treasures of
  Caring for the wellbeing of our neighbor
    A stroll shared with a lonely friend
    A meal (or a frosted cupcake) taken to a neighbor
    An “I think of you often” note or call.

Treasure the joys of today.
No moths or rust or thieves
But store up treasure of the God-ness of today.

Judi Sachs
Week of March 6 - Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘God will command God’s angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

“When God seems far away…guess who moved.”

There was a young boy who was raised in a loving Baptist family.

At the age of 11 he responded to the invitation to accept Jesus and was baptized by immersion. His parents were often not well but worked 6 days per week causing his young man to often feel very lonely. But his activities at the church helped him to keep his focus on an early walk with Jesus. His maternal grandparents were a constant model for Christian life and prayer when they were alive. They would together kneel next to the bed to pray together before retiring…every night!

This young man went off to college leaving his parents and the grandparents who had both passed by that time.

College was a whole new experience and culture. The opportunity to engage in behavior he previously would never consider was increasingly strong. At first when he was tempted to stray, he would get centered by thinking “grandma is looking down on me” and would often enable him to have the strength to resist.

It was not long until the influence of grandma…and Jesus…was in the rear view mirror. For three years of college and two years of graduate school this young man did NOT resist most temptations. Grandma and Jesus were rarely present. “When God seems far away…guessed who moved”.

Jumping ahead a few years the young man was married, had 2 children, and was heavily involved in building his professional career. He returned to attending church…motivated by his
wife and the desire to allow his children to learn about God. He still thought of himself as an agnostic…but feeling the tug of Jesus.

In 1976, at the age of 33 (his messianic year) this young man was led by a loving, young, assistant pastor of the church he attended to accept Christ as his personal savior. He returned to grandma and sensed her smile and joy that he decided to walk with Jesus. He began to seriously learn about…and experience the peace of Jesus.

There were many times over the rest of his years when he was tempted. There were times when he was tested. But at the age of 78, he loves Jesus more than ever and constantly looks for ways to serve the Lord.

That man is me. Praise God!

Ron Meserve
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

The promise of peace and protection, regardless of the direness of our current circumstances, is one of the cornerstone beliefs for us in the Old Testament. It is something we deeply share with our Jewish brethren and arguably with believers in other faiths that do not exactly have the same lovely poetry as David’s words here.

This passage is particularly apt when reflecting upon the recent passing of our friend and fellow WPC elder, Peter Wuertz.

For more than a year before Peter Wuertz’s passing, he knew that he was on the downward glide path toward death as his body betrayed him in numerous ways. It was more tangible for him than for many of the rest of us headed more slowly down that eventual path. None of us gets out of here alive. Peter was reminded of his fate daily as even the simplest of life’s functions became onerous tasks for him.

Peter was not alone in that long and painful end journey – family and friends, who offered him comfort and encouragement during his decline even as the outlook grew increasingly bleak, always surrounded him. In this way, the Lord was providing refuge to this man of deep faith and of unending service to others when he was able.

We, too, can be the Lord’s angels in helping fulfill the promise in this Psalm. In our service to others, it may not always be readily apparent how meaningful or important our efforts are to the people we encounter. We have only a limited time to perform such service to others and only in hindsight, if ever, can we really know how much it is appreciated. Our motivation isn’t whatever thanks we’ll get or whatever reward we might get back in our own time of need, but rather the unseen effect we may have on improving someone else’s life – often in ways we never contemplated.

Randy Huyser
Philippians 3:17-20

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am drawn to the first two lines of this passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians (although I wished it wasn’t just written to the brothers) as a reminder of how we should live our lives by reaching for the high calling that Jesus modeled for us. In lay words, how do we “do Jesus” in the ambiguity of life today. BUT when Paul tells them he is sad because many “are enemies of Christ’s death” and they are going to end up in Hell, then I too am sad. I think he knew what it felt like to be an enemy, as that was his life before he was transformed by Jesus’ teachings, and he didn’t want that for anyone. He now knew the joy and peace that comes from “the Christ light within us.” The final sentence assures us of God’s grace and our place in our eternal home.

Gwen Mauvais
**Week of March 13 - Psalm 27:1-6**

*The L ORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The L ORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh - my adversaries and foes - they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I asked of the L ORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the L ORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the L ORD, and to inquire in his temple. For God will hide me in God’s shelter in the day of trouble; God will conceal me under the cover of God’s tent; God will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in God’s tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the L ORD.*

**INTRO: MY VIEW**

The Bible is a marvelous collection of writing that at the very least provides humanity with guidance on how we should live. And, is seen by many as divinely inspired Revelation. I believe it is “all of the above.”

I have tried more than a few times to become better acquainted with this Book, and usually begin my journey … at the beginning … with GENESIS. This beautifully written account of Creation (actually, 2 versions) seems entirely compatible with the events described by the brightest minds (in the language of science) on just how we got here. (The same Truth, revealed in the Bible and discovered by science.)

**PSALM 27**

So, what does this have to do with PSALM 27? GENESIS is so beautiful that I have never been able to get much farther than the Creation account. And so it is with this psalm that I find myself focused on a single verse:

“This only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the L ORD all the days of my life”.

As with so many Biblical passages, enemies are smited, stumble and fall, and though armies besiege, the L ORD’s chosen are protected. And this Psalm is certainly current in the face of the world’s latest scary crisis in Ukraine. (Prayers for peace … and freedom.)

But I also find a message in my personal experience. All within the space of the past several weeks, we quarantined after testing positive (mild symptoms, fully recovered); a close friend suffered a series of strokes and is dying; another close, incredibly fit friend suffered a heart attack; and a new grandchild arrived, both mother and child doing very well.

None of these events were remotely within my control. Yet in the waking hours of quiet reflection, I understood (or was it Revealed?) that I can choose a place of faith, quiet, and calm. … or as Psalm 27 puts it, “to dwell in the house of L ORD.”

Michael Hatfield
Psalm 27:7-14

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

In her Lenten Zephyrs article, WPC music director RuthE. Wells encouraged us to consider singing as a spiritual practice this Lenten season. She invited us to sing a simple song – perhaps a Taize chant – as a way to focus on our breath, as well as to ground us in faith and hope.

If you have not yet tried this practice, you are invited to give it a try it this week. The Taize chant “Wait for the Lord,” written by Jacques Berthier, is inspired by the last line of Psalm 27. The lyrics are:

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord; be strong; take heart!

There are many different versions of this chant available on YouTube. One favorite was recorded by the St. Francis de Sales Church choir in Ontario, Canada. You can find that version here - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37k20ZZ9h-A

As you listen to and sing this chant, consider these words from the Taize community. “Singing is one of the most essential elements of worship. Short songs, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character. Using just a few words they express a basic reality of faith, quickly grasped by the mind. As the words are sung over many times, this reality gradually penetrates the whole being. Meditative singing thus becomes a way of listening to God. These songs also sustain personal prayer. Through them, little by little, our being finds an inner unity in God. They can continue in the silence of our hearts when we are at work, speaking with others or resting. In this way prayer and daily life are united. They allow us to keep on praying even when we are unaware of it, in the silence of our hearts.” (from www.taize.fr/en)
Numbers 14:17-24

“‘And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, ‘The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.’ Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.’”

Then the LORD said, “I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless - as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD - none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.”

Promise, Forgiveness and Justice.

Not one of these is a simple concept. There are myriad books written on each one! And yet, this scripture passage contains each of them in just a few verses.

A quick recap: The Lord has promised a new land to the Jews who have fled Egypt, and in their waiting they doubt that promise over and over. God tells Moses that such doubt will be punished, and yet Moses is able to advocate for the people, eliciting God’s forgiveness. Even still, God doesn’t let the pendulum swing too far. God reminds Moses that there will be consequences for sin and continual disobedience will not be rewarded. There will still be justice with forgiveness.

Over the past two years, we have had our own sort of waiting. Waiting for the threats of the pandemic to subside. The journey keeps taking longer and longer… and I don’t think I can be blamed for having times of doubt that we’ll ever arrive.

On top of that, my family has had severe trials. We’ve had cancer diagnoses, one member with the emergence of a severe eating disorder, and another who is self-harming. It has truly felt like a time in the desert. My pleas of “Are we there yet, God?” have taken on a desperate tone!

This passage offers me the balance that I need of promise, forgiveness and justice.

I cling to God’s promise! It affirms the hope that better days are ahead; blessing will once again be abundant. We won’t toil in this desert forever!

I need forgiveness. “To sin” comes from the world of archery, and it literally means “to miss the mark.” I confess that in the anxiety of all that has been, I have not been able to keep ahold of my
best self. I have missed the mark many times. I need forgiveness so that I can learn from my mistakes, pick up and try again.

But I also need justice. I need to know that this mess isn’t going to just evaporate from our minds, but that those who have harmed others will be brought to task. I want abundant blessings, but I want them in a world that is also safe and just.

May it be so. May God display God’s strength in this time and place – a strength composed of promise, abounding love, forgiveness and justice. And may I, my family, and all of us follow God wholeheartedly and be brought out of our desert times.

Marissa Danney
Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for God has glorified you.

This passage is titled, “An Invitation to Abundant Life.” And what a life the prophet describes! We are invited to a huge banquet and can freely partake in all of the fine food. Sounds good to me! This is presented as a metaphor for what God’s covenant with God’s children is like – abundant, overflowing with love, available to all.

I often find it a challenge to live with a sense of abundance. I regularly have a mindset of scarcity, rather than abundance … especially when it comes to finances. Will there be enough? Will I have enough? My spouse is a great teacher for me on this front. For example, she specifically keeps extra cash in her car in order to spend it on other people. The young woman selling fruit or flowers on the street corner to make ends meet? Camie will definitely be purchasing from her. The person experiencing homelessness asking for food? Camie will definitely be walking with that person to the nearest take-out restaurant to buy them a meal. It is beautiful to watch her care for her fellow humans in this way.

In the grand scheme of things, each of these interactions is likely less than $15. There will definitely still be enough! But what a great example of caring for one another abundantly. It makes me wonder about how often I am stingy, not only with my money, but also with my time, my talents, and my love – rather than sharing them freely.

Isaiah is talking about more than finances, of course. Isaiah is talking about all the ways in which we might live abundantly when we are secure in the steadfast, sure love of God. Knowing that God has made an everlasting covenant of love with you – one that will not end – how might you live with abundance, rather than scarcity? Might you challenge yourself in a new way? Might you reach out to someone you have been avoiding? Might you be of service to a person or organization? Might you try a new hobby? Might you cultivate a new relationship? When we are secure in the abundance of God’s love, the possibilities are endless!

Lent is often a time of scaling back, or of giving something up. Even if that is a part of your spiritual practice this season, may you also revel in God’s abundance. For Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Bethany Nelson
Psalm 63:1-8

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

You, God, are my God
Sometimes, in the vastness of open-space, when the emptiness both crowds you and pulls at you, the sense of loneliness can be profound. But it can clarify too. The expanse draws you up like a landmark. You become both great and humbled. The sun will find you and with resignation you stop and then, finally, you listen. You listen until it’s heard. And you hear everything. And you see everything. And you give everything. In the void we find we are never alone and the breath that we’ve held for a lifetime escapes and fills the universe.

Bruce Vieira
Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Are the sheep lost? Or rather wandering?
Is the coin missing or simply not in plain view?

Should we rejoice when the sheep or coin are found?
Or should we realize that with God’s love they are never truly lost?

Should we worry about our sin or, rather our knowledge that God does not judge?

Should we rejoice in the finding or the knowing?

Or should we work to embrace the lost, the wanderer, the sinner, those like us or those different from us?

Should we care for all not just those we know and resemble us?

Like God, should we embrace, not judge, and walk alongside all?

Food for thought!

Amen.

Carol Coffman
Week of March 27 - Psalm 32:1-7

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Throughout my teenage years, I was always envious of my peers, who would never feel bad about any of their mean or insulting actions. It felt like they had so much more freedom than I did. Now I realize that those people are worse off because they can’t own up to the mistakes. Worst of all, they will never feel "THE JOY OF FORGIVENESS."

As a little kid, I distinctly remember my parents putting in a lot of effort to teach me the importance of apologizing. If I hurt someone's feelings, I would be sent to my room and forced to think about how I would "say I'm sorry" until I was fully ready to apologize in person.

Even though I would feel better after being forgiven, the whole experience seemed overly emotional and unnecessary as a child.

As an adult, I am thankful my parents forced me to build this emotional depth. This skill has helped me regain the trust and compassion of others, which I would have completely lost without it. I have come to deeply enjoy feeling the guilt lift off me after apologizing and being forgiven.

Ned Peterson
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Because of this decision we don’t evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don’t look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We’re Christ’s representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God’s work of making things right between them. We’re speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he’s already a friend with you. How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

(“The Message” translation)

A New Creation
Sometimes I think we lack a certain amount of creativity when considering matters of faith. To believe that someone or something can be “created new.” We see the present situation and just can’t imagine how this person, or this thing can get any better. Of course, this kind of thinking can lead to despair. Maybe that’s why there seems to be so much despair.

But can you imagine the creativity it took for the earliest Christians to consider the man that wrote those words, the Apostle Paul, would become a new creation himself? Paul was a known persecutor and torturer of Christians. It is said in the book of Acts that he watched approvingly of the stoning to death of Stephen for example.

Put yourself in shoes of the church at that time. Would you ever, even remotely consider someone as passionate about the destruction of your faith as Paul would become the person who would go on to write more than half the works of the New Testament and plant most of the churches along the southern Mediterranean Sea? Talk about a new creation!

But Paul’s story is one of millions of people who have been transformed, brought to new life. How many others have come through the doors of our churches broken for whatever reason only to be made whole again? It took me, someone who admittedly makes lots of mistakes, a long time to be comfortable in my own skin around people who labelled me “a troublemaker.” Sometimes it’s hard for us to see in ourselves what God sees: a dear friend.

Pause for a moment and consider, maybe even write down the names of people who became “new creations.” Maybe they found sobriety, rededicated themselves to their families, found compassion, who knows?! Pray with gratitude for their journeys. And never give up hope that the most unlikely of us can yet still be “created new.”

Jeff Shankle
Luke 9:10-17

On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.” But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

I’ll be the first to admit that the best way to describe my faith journey is one of seeker, skeptic and believer. I will also admit that I have never been one to read the Bible, seek out scripture and even more honestly, yes….I drift off during the passage readings during a service. This inner skeptic has reared its head since I was a teen…popping up and down throughout my life.

However, the seeker in me does respect and honor the wisdom of faith traditions and stands in awe of people who have studied the Bible. I can even be curious about some Bible stories. I enjoy hearing a sermon that weaves passages into current life events. Make a Bible story relevant and I can almost tip into a Believer!

But then, along comes one of these miracle stories. Feed 5000 people with five loaves of bread. Really? Want to hear the drum beat and tap shoes of my skeptic? This does it every time. That inner voice chants…”come on,” “really?” “you expect me to believe this?”

Yet here I am writing a reflection for Lent the lead up to one of the toughest miracles to wrap my head around, of all time, Easter! Risen from the dead…really?

As a child, Lent meant salted cod on mashed potatoes on Fridays with my rather evil step-grandmother. I dreaded it. Yet, if I put up with that awful tasting fish and dried overcooked potatoes for Lent it somehow turned into jelly beans and chocolate rabbits! Now that makes any skeptic a believer.

As a teen I always loved the music of Palm Sunday. Marching into the church, palms waving, it felt so joyful until that day I really listened to the Bible verses. This was not a parade. This was a man being mocked, bullied. This was not a celebration at all. I almost always cry on Palm Sunday as I think of all the youth, adults, and people across the world who are not treated with respect, kindness, love and equity. Did you just catch that? The Believer in me popped up to bring relevance to a biblical verse?
5000 loaves? A man rising from the dead? The only way I can make peaceful sense of this all is to let my skeptic, seeker and believer sing in three-part harmony. I don’t shut any one of them down anymore. I just go with the music they make - loud, cranky, out of tune, harmonious and at times glorious. Their music is one of curiosity, creation, wonder, and caution. The Skeptic is the bass…always booming along with a steady beat of questions. The seeker is the alto and tenor, revealing new interpretations. And the Believer, while not as loud as the seeker and skeptic, has taught me to pause and look for those moments where one of those rare but glorious descants takes me to new eyes on what’s possible.

So is this a miracle these 5 loaves to feed 5000 people? I can’t say, but I do know come Easter my Seeker, Skeptic and Believer choir is going to have a wonderful time thinking about it all.

Polly Chandler
Week of April 3 - Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

What a serendipitous passage for me. I recently went away for a little R&R for a birthday celebration and I saved the initial reading of this passage for my time away. I was on the Mendocino coast staring out at the amazingly beautiful and rough ocean, when I first read this passage: “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters…” What a perfect setting to contemplate this passage.

The passage got me thinking to how we are all preparing in different ways for a new thing, for what’s next, for inevitable change, for dealing with a new normal coming out of the pandemic. During Covid, we all had to be in some sort of isolation, we had to be careful of interactions, we all lived in a bit of fear. I think what this passage is saying is that with all of the change and with the uncertainty around us, we can lean on Jesus’ life and example to help us follow Him to whatever transition the future may bring to us.

I would like to think that I am someone that welcomes change. Although, as I get older, I am finding that change, or getting out of my comfort zone is not as easy as I like to think it is. Fear of the new and dwelling too much on the past mistakes has prevented me from, as this passage says, “doing a new thing.” What I do recognize, is that when I am facing a big change, I do go into that change with a good degree of faith that “it’ll all work out.” I am by my nature a trusting person without really recognizing where that trust comes from. This passage makes me think that intrinsically I have been accepting of God’s grace so that I view the change not with fear but with expectation and hope.

John Trotter
Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Somewhere in my readings about Psalm 126, I learned modern Jewish commentators believe the second half of the passage is about agricultural drought. This caught my attention more than the return of the Israelites from Babylon. Drought, lack of water, the next storm, a reservoir full or not, and now an obsession with succulents - daily I think of these things. On a Zoom call, a favorite pastor of mine said he thought there will be no rain this winter. On my desk sits another postcard from MMWD with water-use restrictions and penalties. And soon I will be ordering gravel for my new Mediterranean rock garden. This all makes me really sad, and, if I’m honest, scared. Then you add other climates emergencies, politics, social injustices and unrest, and a pandemic, it all can seem so hopeless, so many tears. But it’s Lent when we reflect on Christ’s ministry, death, and resurrection, and soon it will be Easter, a time of celebration and rebirth. We don’t know if there will be more rain; the Israelites didn’t know if they would return home. But when there are desperate needs, God answers. I am praying for rain, for the joy of hearing it fall on my roof and seeing it soak into the ground. That’s all I can do.

Karen Halsey
Luke 18:31-34

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

In many ways, this reads like a tough passage. Jesus is going to be mocked, insulted, and spat upon. He will be flogged, and ultimately killed. We tend to focus on these aspects, and understandably so. However, in doing so we sometimes become fixated on the suffering in a way that glorifies suffering for the sake of suffering (see Mel Gibson’s The Passion of Christ). While being faithful sometimes results in suffering, suffering is a byproduct of faith, not the only marker of it. Jesus suffered because he was faithful in the face of injustice. He was not faithful because he suffered. Sometimes, Christians believe they are only being faithful if they are suffering, if they are anxious about not being good enough, if they are always working, producing, trying to prove their worth.

But, let’s back up, because there is an important aspect to this encounter that is often overlooked, one that grabbed my attention this time around. This chain of events is set in motion with Jesus being “handed over to the Gentiles.” Surely, on a literal level, this is another marker of Jesus’ abandonment by his own religion’s power structure. It’s bad news. On a mystical level, this is a release of Jesus. He is “handed over” to the rest of the world (the Gentiles). It’s good news. It’s incredible news! Those who chose not to hold him, accept him, hear him, decide to turn him over thinking they are ending him, when in fact they are expanding his reach. The Christ does not belong to one people, but is for all people, made possible, paradoxically by his very rejection. Jesus’ resurrection on the third day is a further image of how the Christ only expands, strengthens, and rises when traditional means of suppression and extinguishing are applied.

How might we let this understanding of the Christ enter into this Lenten season? We can remember that Christ is not defeated by mockery, humiliation, intimidation, or violence. We can recognize those forces are at work in our world too, yet hold to the truth that the Christ accompanies us as if we choose to rise with Christ. Moreover, in recognizing that Christ is for all, we can understand how Christ is at work beyond our own reach. Our task to is to learn to recognize Christ’s presence already at work in the world and humbly, and in relationship, endeavor to join in.

Rob McClellan
Holy Week – April 10


When Jesus had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untieing it?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untieing the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untieing the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

This passage reminds me of waving palm branches in church on Palm Sunday. When Jesus asked for a colt that had never been ridden, he didn’t mind the colt’s lack of experience. The owners were confused why Jesus would want this colt instead of a stronger, more experienced one. I can relate to this because everyone always wants the best for themselves, but Jesus is showing that the most experienced colt isn’t necessarily the best colt in God’s mind. The colt is a symbol of Jesus being humble and one with the people; he is not riding on a majestic horse. Also, the owner’s trust that the disciples were taking the colt for God reveals the strong ties between God and his people. There was trust and faith between Jesus, his disciples, and his followers because they shout, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The final line makes me believe that if you don’t praise God, the earth will cry out.

Christopher Hanson
Holy Week – April 11

Luke 19:45-48

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer;’ but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

The original purpose of the temple was to be God’s residence. But over many centuries and several destructions and rebuilds, it gradually took on more missions, including becoming the site of a marketplace. Nobody probably thought the better of it, in fact, everyone enjoyed the convenience, until Jesus arrives on the scene.

At the temple, Jesus reminds us of its original purpose – and removes the marketplace. He replaces the void by moving in to conduct regular teaching sessions, holding the crowds “spellbound”.

This story inspires an examination of my daily or weekly routines. Has a “marketplace” established itself in my life, gradually edging out the sacred? Should I “drive out” some of these activities and replace them with something more inspirational?

To help me with my discernment, I consult 50 Ways to Pray by Teresa Blythe. The Ignatian Imagination Prayer fits the bill here. After an initial prayer, I re-read today’s Bible passage, and put myself right into the scene. I focus on my various senses – and imagine what I might see, hear, smell, and touch. I might talk to one of the visitors and find out why they are “spellbound”. I might even summon the courage to speak to Jesus and ask him for advice on how to adjust my own life. I conclude with the Lord’s Prayer, and then journal on the experience.

Will this result in a “burning bush” type revelation from God? Probably not, but I can usually count on getting a slight nudge or two to head in a different direction or increase my focus on a certain activity…

Steffen Bartschat
Holy Week – April 12

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Grief is a messy emotion. We live in a culture that prefers it brief and mostly hidden. We are expected to spend a few days grieving, and then move on shortly afterward. My father, brother, and sister all died prematurely and most of my friends and relatives thought it should be enough that they acknowledge it with a card or quick word and then I ought to get on with it. My tears were uncomfortable for them.

Love is another messy emotion and certainly public displays of affection of a woman toward a man (especially one who was not her husband) would have been unusual in the time of Jesus.

Yet, in John 12 we see Mary behaving in a way that could be described as inappropriate, or even shocking. Mary not only uses a working man's annual wages worth of perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, but uses her own hair - considered at the time one of a woman's most sensual features - to wipe them.

For me, Mary is a guide to God's embrace of all of our difficult feelings and the myriad ways we express them. There are many interpretations, but I believe that Mary is expressing both her love of Jesus and her grief in the knowledge that the authorities would soon put an end to His life. Judas objects, as no doubt most people would. But Jesus' response suggests that God loves and welcomes not just the things about us that seem appropriate for church-going followers of Christ, but all of the feelings the community might reject. God doesn't ask us to be stoic or brave, or act in a way to make sure no one is uncomfortable. Instead, we are given permission to go where our most deeply felt, and even excruciating, emotions lead us. We are fully understood by God who sees our intentions and our heart and loves us no matter what we do.

Nancy Carlston
Holy Week – April 13


Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.

What to say about Judas’ betraying Jesus?

Well, far be it from me to take Judas’ side or to try to rehabilitate him. He’s the bad guy, no doubt.

But if we look at the ball he set in motion, maybe we can see another side to his action. Not to excuse it. Just to look at it from another perspective.

When Judas betrayed Jesus, he began the cycle that led to Jesus’ crucifixion and death. The suffering and torture that Jesus endured was a result of Judas’ action. No excusing that. And Judas should be condemned for putting Jesus on that awful path.

Ultimately, however, the end result was that Jesus died on the cross and then rose from the dead; which is central to our understanding of Jesus and a basis for most all of Christianity.

Am I saying that without Judas, Jesus would not have risen from the dead? Or that Judas had any inkling that what he did would result in Jesus’ resurrection? No. I’m not suggesting that at all. I’m saying that what happened to Jesus was terrible. But it also resulted in the miracle of him rising from the dead. Which is what we celebrate this season.

So, reflect on this…Judas did an awful thing. He caused Jesus enormous suffering and pain. And, yet, Jesus’ resurrection came as a result of Judas’ actions.

And, answer the question about whether Judas can be forgiven? Bethany frequently says that God forgives us regardless. Can He forgive Judas?

Mark Sachs
Holy Week – April 14

Luke 22:14-23

When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

In this passage, the words of Jesus at the Last Supper are again reported, a bit differently than they appear in the other Gospels, but adding up to the same thing: sharing the bread and the cup is a symbol of our oneness with Christ, with God, with the Holy Spirit, with one another and all of creation.

It has taken me years to recognize the profundity of that truth - because I originally thought communion had to do with my behavior. I thought I had to be good - if not perfect - to earn the rewards promised by being one with Christ. I didn’t see that communion serves to remind us of the truth that we are one with Christ, but there is, and could never be, a time when that is not true - God pours Godself through each and every one of us and all of creation because that is the nature of God. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth understood that and brought it to the attention of humankind, but he was representative of humanity, not the only one through whom God poured.

Part of reason it took me such a long time to figure this out is that I was raised a Christian Scientist, a form of Christianity that does not celebrate communion. As a consequence, what I knew about communion had come to me rather casually. So I didn’t know what I didn’t know - until I was invited to come to church by the pastor of my hospital roommate.

I was in the hospital due to an emergency that resulted in major surgery. My roommate was a gracious older woman who had had a double mastectomy. Although I was completely gaga from pain meds, I noticed she had a visitor who came to see her every day. What was weird to me was that they didn’t really visit. I mean, this woman would come in, they would say hello and how are you, but mostly she came in, sat down, took my roommate’s hand, and they would be quiet for about 15 minutes.
After about three days I was finally well enough to ask who she was, and I found out that she was my roommate’s pastor. They were quiet because they were praying - and, my roommate added, I was always included in their prayers.

This was 1980, and I was totally unaware that there were women ministers. The next time she came into the room I was moved to say to her “I wish I had someone like you in my life.” She immediately invited me to come to church, and, if I wanted, to talk with her in her office. I went to a Sunday service, and when communion was served, heard her say that all who were present could partake.

Because my impression was that communion was about behavior, I thought there was no way she actually could mean someone like me. Didn’t I have to be a member of the church and come every single Sunday? Wasn’t it limited to people who had been “saved?” Didn’t people need a ritual to cleanse them of their sins before they could share in this ritual? When, later, I asked her about these assumptions, she chuckled and said that yes, there was an entire history in Christianity about that, but that it was changing.

It was her understanding that when we shared the bread and the cup, we were confirming a truth about God, revealed by Jesus of Nazareth, that the Divine flows through all creation, and every human being, every living thing, participates in that flow. This was not a reward for being good or worthy; it was the nature of God. Even after she had explained it that clearly, it still has taken me years to absorb the profundity of that idea, but finally I realized what that means. There is no way that anything I do or that anyone else could do that would stop this flowing forth - it is way of describing the nature of God, not a measure of human performance.

Each Sunday we celebrate Communion we again honor that truth. Even when my communion elements consist of one of those odd little doo-dads that we have had to pick up from the ushers lately, we have the privilege of being reminded that God is flowing forth through each of us and all of us, and by extension, through every human being everywhere and every other living thing. Thanks be to God!

Sharon Burch
Holy Week – April 15

Luke 23:44-49

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

I used to think that goodness was a kind of armor against misfortune. If something bad happened, my first (and often only) reaction was, “Why me?”

Over time, I realized that my view of my own virtue was somewhat exaggerated. And perhaps more importantly, I began to take seriously Jesus’ teaching that, “God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” (Matt. 5:45). Previously, I’d thought that God’s sunshine was somehow reserved - if not guaranteed - for the good. But life quickly, sometimes painfully, disabuses us of that notion.

Which brings us to Jesus. He was as good as good can be, yet he underwent a long, brutal death: “From the sixth hour . . . until the ninth hour.” (Luke 23:44) Three tortured hours.

What was Jesus thinking as he hung on the cross? We have his final words in the Gospel of Luke: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” (Luke 23:46). And inevitably we think back to his words the night before in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will, but thine be done.” (Luke 22:42)

Those would not be my words. I would cry out in despair, anger, indignation, pain. For me, it is easier to relate to Jesus’ last words from the Gospel of Mark: “My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

The marvel, though, is that in both Gospels the crucified Jesus was still on speaking terms with God.

Like all humans, we suffer misfortune. As a result, our spiritual journey must run through pain and grief, not around it. What gets us through the hardest times is not stoicism or self-pity, but the opposite: reaching out - even in desperate prayer - to our Father-Mother God, who never abandons us.

Jim Snipes
Holy Week – April 16

Luke 23:50-56

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

After
A meditation on Luke 23:50-56

It was what he could do
It wasn’t easy
Take the brutalized body down
Wrap it
Lay it away
A good man responding
And good women also
Seeing where they put the body
Determined to dignify
their precious One
Expressing love and care
with ointments and spices
Not letting cruelty and violence have the last word
A bit of the Kingdom
that He taught
and embodied
“Blessed are you who…”
Existing still, in their hearts,
Shown in their actions
And we, their spiritual descendants
The Story continues with us
As we respond
A bit of the Kingdom
Blessed are you
in this world as it is

Ted Scott
Holy Week – April 17

 Luke 24:1-12

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

What strikes me about this passage is the love the women have for Jesus. Something about him really touched their souls, so they got up early, started walking in the dark, and arrived at the tomb at dawn to anoint his body. When they arrived, they found that the several ton stone covering the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. Setting that stone in its channel which ran slightly down hill was doable, but once in place over the tomb, the stone would have been very difficult to remove. Below is a photo of what the tomb probably looked like, so having that stone moved was extraordinary and would have required super human strength. Right away the women knew something was very out of the ordinary.

When the women enter the tomb, they see Jesus’s body is gone, and “strips of linen” lay where his body had been. Then they see two men “in clothes that gleamed like lightning.” Maybe they were angels; maybe they were supernatural beings, what matters is what they said. *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!”* That is what matters to me. Throughout history there have been many impactful spiritual leaders, but Jesus is the only one who is no longer in a grave. I used to think the Resurrection was just a nice Sunday school
story, but as I studied and learned more, I realized that his tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers who would have been killed if they allowed anyone to enter the tomb. Jesus really did rise from the dead, and it is documented that after his death, he appeared not only to Mary Magdalene and the disciples, but also to more than 500 people (1 Cor 15:6) before he ascended to his Father.

I believe that Jesus came to show us that we will be resurrected after our death, and equally important, that we can live a resurrected life right now on this earth by following his teachings. Jesus wants to love us, guide us, nourish us and give us renewal and hope. He came to teach us how we might receive the abundant life he promised (John 10:10) both on this earth and in the next world.

Judy Friede