

LENT

Waiting for the Resurrection // A Collection of Readings for Lent and Easter

EASTER



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Waiting for the Resurrection: A Collection of Readings for Lent and Easter

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TO GOD
BE THE GLORY

To Our Readers

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:2).

Greetings from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary Canada team! We are delighted this Lent and Easter devotional book has made its way into your home. The MBBS Canada team is very pleased to provide you with this wonderful resource for your enrichment as you prepare to celebrate the joyous resurrection of our Lord this Easter.

We did our best to invite authors with a variety of disciplines, interests and locations across Canada to contribute to this project. The time and energy they took to carefully craft words with profundity and inspiration for our readers is much appreciated. Special thanks to Erika McAuley, the Project Editor, who worked tirelessly to make this project a success. Erika was responsible for inviting and collecting contributions from the authors and to lay out the biblical texts in a meaningful way. Her vision, insight and careful editorial work made this project extra special. Thank-you Erika!

We are happy to provide this resource to you and your family and hope that it will inspire you and give you greater insight into your relationship to our Saviour and friend, Jesus Christ. Thank-you for participating with us this Lenten season and have a blessed Easter from all of us at MBBS Canada.

MBBS CANADA TEAM

CELEBRATING LENT AND EASTER

For some, rising from the dead is a provocative notion. And yet, the very paradox of life after death exists as a reality in history, in the person of Jesus Christ. The crux of the good-news story is nothing short of spectacularly bizarre!

For the first-century world Jesus' rising from death to life meant that God's promise of salvation wasn't a hoax. The resurrection changed everything. An empty grave meant that the Son of Man really was the long-awaited Messiah—the Christ! The hope that the resurrection of Jesus stirred in the early believers was not simply because they admired Him, but because of what His rising from the dead *meant* for those who loved Him. In a moment, death turned into life and the reality of a risen Saviour made it possible for others to rise from death into new life as well [Romans 6:8].

The news spread. People throughout the Greco-Roman world were choosing to follow Jesus. And in witness to their living hope new converts were baptized when they gathered together to celebrate the resurrection. It was common for these new believers to receive instruction in the faith and practice spiritual disciplines prior to baptism. Preparation in this way remained a practice of the early church and by the end of the fourth century formal teaching was held in Jerusalem for converts who were anticipating baptism at Easter. As followers of Jesus grew in number, the whole community of faith urged one another to remember Christ's life and death before celebrating His resurrection. In this, new believers were nurtured and older believers were strengthened. Such an observance has continued in the life of the church by the power of the Spirit, in response to God's remarkable work through Christ.

Lent—as this preparation period has come to be called—represents the forty-day season of the Christian calendar that precedes the celebration of Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. In waiting for the resurrection, the people of God confess their sin, pray for forgiveness and repent to exercise dying to sin before rising to the life God intended [Romans 6:11]. Also, in waiting for the resurrection, the church fasts from the distractions of this world to contemplate more deeply the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues through to Holy Saturday, the day leading into Resurrection Sunday. In this holy season of waiting and preparation, the reflections in this book are offered in the hope that Christ's resurrection will guide us into the days ahead. We do not live as those who have no idea of what happened on that first Easter morning. Rather, we anticipate it with hope and expectation knowing that like Christ, we too will rise to newness of life [Romans 6:1-11].

DUST AND ASHES

Job 42:1-6

We begin the Lenten journey with Job's *final* response to the LORD. It is here, in the epilogue of this ancient book that the narrative comes to a head. To catch the significance of Job's response, a broader sense of the story is requisite. The author of the book acquaints the reader with the character of Job, only to explain that he loses everything (1:13-19). Despite these circumstances Job's initial response is to worship God in the midst of his mourning (1:20-22). As the story continues, God permits further suffering and we're told that Job endures significant bodily harm (2:10). We're also told in the prologue of the book that Job is an upright man—a man who loves God and obeys Him (1:1). So, in Job's anguish, he cries out to God asking for an audience in order to plead his case (31:35-37). God obliges. And in a whirlwind, the LORD bombards Job with a litany of questions, confronting him with the reality of God's sovereignty and the ignorance of Job's inquiry (38:2-41:34).

Humbled before the LORD, Job can do nothing but acknowledge the reality of God's being; that He can do all things, and nothing can oppose Him (42:2). Convinced of God's authority over everything, including his own suffering, Job's attempt to call out God for what happened to him is unwarranted and he confesses his ignorance before the LORD, recounting God's own words to him (42:3-4). Moved to proclaim his trust in God's workings and his ability to see the truth—to see God as the answer to his suffering—Job finishes his response to the LORD in an overt act of repentance, mourning his sin, as signified by his use of dust and ashes (42:5-6).

To an ancient near eastern audience, Job's actions, attitude and posture are clear. Throwing ashes over one's head, tearing clothes, wearing sackcloth and fasting, all declare a state of mourning and confession before God, which moves one to repentance (cf. Jonah 3:6; Nehemiah 9:1-3; 2 Samuel 3:31-32; Daniel 9:3; 2 Samuel 13:19; Jeremiah 6:26; Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13).

On Ash Wednesday, we begin where Job ends. In our contemplation, may the ashes over Job's head challenge us to think deeply of God's sovereignty over our lives and even over our own suffering. In our worship, may the ashes over Job's head remind us of our sin and mortality (Genesis 3:19), and may these truths move us to confession and repentance, praying with the ancient Desert Fathers: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

1 John 1

There are few insights into the character of God that fascinate me more than John's claim: God is light. He isn't illuminated by light; He is the light. He is the source that gives vision to all things. He is the differential between a world of horror and a world of beauty. He is the fundamental presence, who orchestrates the inner workings of the universe. He is unassailably holy. He is spotless. And yet, John juxtaposes how we come to Him—blemished and broken. Not one of us can claim to be without sin. We come to Him unrighteous and sinful. 1 John 1 makes plain the great divide that exists between Him and us.

Despite such a reality, John also presents clearly the bridge to this gap. What incredible and joyous news! If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive. The blood of Jesus then purifies us from all sin. Easy! But is this recipe for success in God's kingdom as easy as it seems? True forgiveness must maintain the insurmountable divide between sin and righteousness, even while bridging the two. A pseudo-forgiveness that makes light of the consequences of sin or lowers the level of God's holiness is trifling forgiveness. Such an idea allows us to go through our daily lives without being transformed by His Spirit. Such an idea negates the real need for the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. And yet it's what we think we desire. We want forgiveness to be a cleansing dip into the holiness of God, but we forget that to claim true fellowship with Him we must no longer walk in the darkness.

While maintaining the highness of God and the lowness of sin, forgiveness must also then instill in us a yearning to walk in the light and to be purified from all unrighteousness. Purification is not simply allowing the blood of Jesus to wash away the dirt. No, purification is also the breaking off of the jagged edges so that the dirt finds fewer places to stick. The exercise will not be painless.

As we take our next step along the Lenten journey, let us speak to the Creator and ask Him to convict us of the idea of forgiveness we have desired. Ask Him to help us reject the sin that separates us from Him. Finally, ask Him, with joy, for whatever it takes to join Him in the light.

WILDERNESS-Y PEOPLE

Exodus 15:22-27

Lent is a time when we talk often about “wilderness experiences”—about times when things are hard, when God seems absent. It is a time when we acknowledge that the world is not as it should be, that we are in desperate need of a Saviour.

But Lent is also a time for looking inward. It is a time for asking hard questions of ourselves. Questions like: What about when we are wilderness-y people? What about times when the term “wilderness” describes not a set of experiences that we must navigate out there, but a disposition or way of being in here? What about times when we are rocky and craggy people, times when others are left choking on the dust that we kick up as we grumble and complain our way through the desert? What about when we are the sorts of people who are a barren wasteland to all around us?

I often have found that it is when I have been (or am in the middle of being) a wilderness-y kind of person that I am most astonished and grateful for the appearance of grace. An undeserved kindness. An affirming or encouraging word, even when I’ve done little to deserve either. Coffee and conversation with a friend who refuses to let me drown in my own selfishness and stupidity. A hug. A smile. Something, anything that says, “Enough. Let’s try walking differently now.”

In today’s passage, the people of God are grumbling (again) about their conditions in the wilderness. The LORD simply, graciously provides water for their parched bodies along with an exhortation for their wilderness-y hearts and minds: “Listen carefully. Do what is right. I am the LORD who heals you” [15:26].

And, if Israel is willing—if we are willing—goodness comes trickling in. Little rivulets of unmerited grace begin to carve their paths in the dry and dusty places, the tramped down places. And gradually the landscape is reconfigured, the dust begins to settle and little shoots of life begin to appear. Gradually our course is rerouted and we take stumbling, halting steps from being something like a wilderness to becoming something like a garden to those around us.

This is what God can do within us, despite us and for us this Lenten season.

A COSMIC RESCUE MISSION

Colossians 1:13-14

My wife and I have two young kids so we are intimately familiar with the action-figure toys on the market today. Particularly popular in our household is a line from Fisher Price called Rescue Heroes. If you want classy action heroes, these men and women have it all. They rescue entire school groups from raging infernos, whole towns from cascading water walls and entire cities from vibrating earthquakes and erupting volcanoes.

I think one of the keys to the success of the Rescue Heroes is that they have a clear understanding of their mission and purpose. Their mandate is to save people who are truly in need of help. They don't get cats out of trees and they don't fix leaky faucets—as great as those tasks are. Rather the Rescue Heroes respond to the needs of people from a clear understanding of what is mission critical and what is not.

As we move through Lent and towards Easter, we are reminded that before time began God planned a cosmic rescue mission with a clear and solitary purpose: to save and redeem humanity! Paul describes this rescue mission explicitly in today's passage when he says: "For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins ... and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross (1:13-14, 20).

This is why the cross can never be simply an icon or a trinket that we wear around our necks to proclaim allegiance—it's not just a symbol. The cross is a real place of real rescue. The cross is the location where a real price was paid, where real blood was shed. The cross is the spot where God's divine rescue mission was carried out.

Those who are rescued are called to reflect on their rescuing and to rejoice in the wonder and the mystery of such an event! We are challenged to boldly declare the story of this mission that cost Jesus His very life and resulted in the redemption of your life and mine. As we reflect on the hope and the power of the most ambitious and eternally significant rescue mission ever taken up, I ask: Who's the real rescue hero?

SUNDAY REST

It is only right,
 with all the powers of our heart and mind,
 to praise You Father and Your Only-Begotten Son,
 Our Lord Jesus Christ.
 Dear Father,
 by Your wondrous condescension
 of Loving-Kindness toward us, Your servants,
 You gave up Your Son.
 Dear Jesus You paid the debt of Adam for us
 to the Eternal Father
 by Your Blood poured forth in Loving-Kindness.
 You cleared away the darkness of sin
 by Your magnificent and radiant Resurrection.
 You broke the bonds of death
 and rose from the grave as a Conqueror.
 You reconciled Heaven and earth.
 Our life had no hope of Eternal Happiness
 before You redeemed us.
 Your Resurrection has washed away our sins,
 restored our innocence and brought us joy.
 How inestimable is the tenderness of Your Love!

GREGORY THE GREAT

Jesus Christ, give us patience and faith and hope as we kneel at the foot of your Cross, and hold fast to it. Teach us by your Cross that, however ill the world may go, the Father so loved us that he did not spare you, but received the offering of your life so that we might live through you and in you and for you, who are the resurrection and the life.

CHARLES KINGSLEY

NOT *BY*, BUT *FOR*!

Ephesians 2:1-10

The question of purpose is innate to the human psyche. Not infrequently do ordinary, thinking people want to know why they exist, and what difference their contribution to the world, or at least *their* world, will make?

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians is both an enlightening and motivating response to that thoughtful question. "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things He planned for us long ago" (2:10).

Here the apostle is stressing that in Jesus Christ, God has lovingly and purposefully recreated us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18a). No longer are we "dead, doomed forever because of [our] many sins" (2:1). Rather, we are now people who are spiritually alive (2:4-6) and victorious over the evil that once enslaved us causing us to disobey God (2:2-3). This effectual work of God is ours to appropriate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Those who experience this transformation are forever changed. No longer subordinated to the capricious fluctuations of a rebellious past, by His good work we are refashioned in Christ Jesus to do the work that God had planned for us to do even before we came to faith, if not before the universe was set into place (Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010], 147). In this the apostle is emphatic, we are not saved "by" these works, but most assuredly, we are saved "for" these works!

This speaks directly to our purpose in this life. Those "good things" that the apostle speaks of may be a specific instance necessitating obedience to God, or an ethical pattern to be adopted and followed in the affairs of life (Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*, IVP New Testament Commentary [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 67). Either way, "these become witnesses" (Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 1.2.10) to Christ's restorative work in us, characterizing the Christian disciple all the days of their life. Consequently, our delightful, indeed glorious, obligation is to fulfill God's good intention in calling us to Himself (Liefeld, *Ephesians*, 67).

And the Lenten season, which anticipates the passion of the Lord Jesus, is a wonderful opportunity to be recommitted to that sure and effectual calling.

LET YOUR LIFE BE A LIGHT

1 Peter 3:13-17

Growing up I never really suffered “persecution” for my faith. During high school I was quite open about my relationship with Jesus. Most of my friends, unaware as to why I would follow Jesus, never rejected me because of it. However, there were moments when opinions would be said, jabs would be made and “friendly” ridicule would ensue, all because of my beliefs about God.

In 1 Peter 3:13-17 we read that followers of Jesus should expect a certain amount of persecution for their faith. Peter consoles the reader by telling, “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed” (3:14). So how should we respond when we suffer for the sake of the Gospel? Peter lays out three directives in order for us to persevere in our beliefs and share the incredible news of the Gospel with the world.

First, we are to honour Christ in our hearts. Peter says, “in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy” (3:15). The term “heart” actually refers to the very core of our being—the centre of who we are. Peter is telling us that in everything we do, with every aspect of our lives, we should honour Christ.

Second, we are to be ready to explain our hope. Peter writes of “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (3:15). When we are honouring Christ with every aspect of our lives, the world will notice. Peter tells us to be prepared when people ask us why we are so different.

Third, we are to be gentle and respectful towards others. No one has ever been “argued” into the kingdom of God. Peter ends with direction for our demeanor in suggesting that we explain our hope “with gentleness and respect” (3:15). We are called, as followers of Jesus, to give a response when people ask about the hope we have, and yet we must respond with respect. Proverbs reminds us that “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

We must remember that Christ suffered to bring us to God (3:18). Our response should be a willingness to suffer for the Gospel of Jesus in order for His name to be glorified and that in seeing our response to suffering, many people would give their lives to Him.

Take a moment to pray that we would honour Christ with our whole lives. Pray that we would be gentle and respectful when sharing the Gospel with those who do not yet believe.

ANDREW EBY // *Lead Pastor at North Peace MB Church in Fort St. John, British Columbia.*

LONGING FOR RESCUE

Matthew 3:16-4:11

The angels at the end of this story of hunger and testing do nothing to catch our attention.

No shimmering, blinding glory with this visit.

No heavenly hosts shouting, praising, singing, signaling, revealing or testifying. No rescue, no sudden appearance in a dream in order to lead to a place of safety.

When all of the actions are done, when the forty days of fasting are past and the tempter has gone, angels slip onto the scene to attend to the Son of Man.

The angels do not interrupt the face-to-face encounter with the tempter, though we have a sense that they are standing ready. The temptations are all the more powerful because of the truth of the matter. Jesus could miraculously create food, and did for a multitude of people just a little while later. He certainly did have angels ready to do His bidding, when Peter tried to rescue Jesus on the night that He was betrayed. But this day was not a day for rescue. This was a day for testing.

We prefer to *choose* our testing grounds. We enroll in a course or sign up at the gym, join a team or apply for a job, attempt a treacherous climb or set our sights on an unreasonable goal. All these give us control over the one who holds the stop watch, the length of the test and whether or not we can withdraw if things become more difficult than we had anticipated. The landscape is altered when we cannot be the author of our own testing. Our footing becomes less sure when we do not know the outcome.

Later, it would be written that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are [Hebrews 4:15].

There are times when there is no rescue. Though the sound of the Spirit echoes in our hearts from another day, new evidence of His care for us will come again. There are times when there is no way but through a difficult journey, holding fast to the truths we have learned and the promises foretold.

A VERY REAL OPTION

Mark 1:9-15

Sometimes we can read, hear and say things so many times they simply lose their meaning. Or maybe we never really understood them to begin with. Regardless, when we're talking about issues of ultimate importance (such as our destinies and the destinies of everyone around us) this can be a very serious problem. And I fear that this is often the case with Jesus' thesis statement: "I have very good news. The kingdom of God is now near. So repent! And believe it" (1:15)!

Stop for a minute (or a day or two) and think about this. Do we really even know what He's talking about here? Why is this good news? What *exactly* is the kingdom of God? What does it mean that it is now near? What does it mean to repent? And regardless of what we claim to believe, *what do our actions say about what we really believe?*

We haven't the space to explore all these questions here. However, we can touch on the one that is most appropriate for this stage in Lent. What does it mean to repent? The Greek word in the New Testament that is translated into "repent" means a change in the direction of a person's life. It doesn't mean "sorrow" or "remorse." Of course, apologizing is an excellent place to start, but it wasn't what Jesus was telling us to do. He was telling us to turn away from everything that gets between God and us and completely reorder our lives around God and the pursuit of His will. Have we done that?

This is where millions of us get stuck in our walk with God. We've apologized, but we haven't completely reordered our lives around Him. We haven't really repented. And so we don't consistently experience His love, His wisdom, His peace, His provision and all of these things that are supposedly on the table (His kingdom).

But I have good news. If this is the kind of existence we want—a life drenched in God—it's available. Starting immediately. All we need to do to enter it is turn from *any and every* thing that conflicts with our pursuit of God and *run after Him with everything we have*. Drop the deadweight and chase Reality.

This is a very real option. Starting now.

OBEDIENCE AND FAITH

Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-8

Lent is a time of humility—denying self and sacrificing (giving up something) in order to prepare for the Passover. Even as God did not hold back, but gave His one and only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins, we in a very small way can prepare our hearts for this time of year by giving up ourselves. Our giving up is in order to focus on the Saviour and on the salvation He is for us. But what does this look like? What does self-sacrifice truly look like? Does it mean giving more money? Does it mean giving more time? Or does it mean something more? Does it mean giving our whole hearts in holy devotion to the Lord? In asking these questions, I am reminded of what the prophet Samuel said to Saul, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22b).

So, what does the theme of self-sacrifice have to do with Abraham and the passages of Scripture for today? I propose that it is our own reason we are to give up. What do I mean? We read in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified by faith, not works, just as we are. It was not because of what he did or could do to earn God’s favour, but by simply obeying God and taking Him at His word, Abraham was justified and declared righteous before God the Father. The prevailing notion in all world religions, except biblical Christianity, is that we can earn our way to heaven if we say enough prayers and do enough good to outweigh the bad. No doubt, this temptation would have been great for Abram (Abraham) as well.

At one point he takes God at His word, and obeys Him. In that, He is saved, justified and forgiven. But then in Genesis 16 Abram falls back into trusting himself, walking in his own reason in regards to the promise of God to give him a son. By misappropriating his trust, he casts doubt on God’s word and disobeys Him.

What is the application for us today? We too must learn to walk in obedience and faith. During this Lenten season, let’s determine to take God at His word, to lean not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6), to give up trusting our own reason and to lean whole-heartedly on the Lord.

THE WONDERS OF GOD

Psalm 22:23-31

As I stand in line at the post office, I wonder how long the lineup will take? As the person cuts me off in traffic, I wonder how he or she has a license? As I try and give instructions to a group of middle-school students, I wonder if they'll ever stop interrupting me so we can actually play the game? These curiosities come easily to me. However, they aren't the concerns I want to spend my time thinking about. Instead, I want to wonder how the Lord makes the long, slippery grass dance in the breeze? Or how He orchestrates my life perfectly so my husband and I both have time off at the same time on a day we need it? I want to be in wonder when I watch my youth band lead worship. Or wonder how that giant maple tree came to grow in that spot? Or be in wonder of God's grace for me.

God's wonders are all around us, sometimes in big ways, but often in small ways—ways that are easy to miss. In our reading the Psalmist writes, "Future generations will hear about the wonders of the Lord" (22:30). Proclaiming Jesus' wonders should be an impulse within us, just like it was for the people Jesus healed in the miracle accounts of the New Testament. The healed shouted in response: "look what happened! I've been healed! I can see, walk, hear! Jesus worked wonders in me!"

But to tell of these wonders, we need to see and experience them first. We don't want to miss the wonders of God because the house cleaning takes priority, or dinner, or a meeting. We should be able to see the wonders of the Lord in all of these moments, and also in the quiet moments.

There is such joy and fulfillment in seeing God at work around us, so then why do we choose not to look for it? God is performing His wonders all around us all the time. Are our eyes open? As we venture further along our Lenten journey, let us tell of the wonders of the Lord as we see, hear and experience them.

SUNDAY REST

All ye that seek the Lord Who died,
Your God for sinners crucified,
Prevent the earliest dawn, and come
To worship at His sacred tomb.

Bring the sweet spices of your sighs,
Your contrite hearts, and streaming eyes,
Your sad complaints, and humble fears;
Come, and embalm Him with your tears.

While thus ye love your souls t'employ,
Your sorrow shall be turned to joy:
Now, let all your grief be o'er!
Believe, and ye shall weep no more.

An earthquake hath the cavern shook,
And burst the door, and rent the rock;
The Lord hath sent His angel down,
And he hath rolled away the stone.

As snow behold his garment white,
His countenance as lightning bright:
He sits, and waves a flaming sword,
And waits upon his rising Lord.

The third auspicious morn is come,
And calls your Savior from the tomb,
The bands of death are torn away,
The yawning tomb gives back its prey.

Could neither seal nor stone secure,
Nor men, nor devils make it sure?
The seal is broke, the stone cast by,
And all the powers of darkness fly.

The body breathes, and lifts His head,
The keepers sink, and fall as dead;
The dead restored to life appear,
The living quake, and die for fear.

No power a band of soldiers have
To keep one body in its grave:
Surely it no dead body was
That could the Roman eagles chase.

The Lord of Life is risen indeed,
To death delivered in your stead;
His rise proclaims your sins forgiv'n,
And show the living way to Heav'n.

Haste then, ye souls that first
believe,
Who dare the Gospel-Word receive,
Your faith with joyful hearts confess,
Be bold, be Jesus' witnesses.

Go tell the followers of your Lord
Their Jesus is to life restored;
He lives, that they His life may find;
He lives, to quicken all mankind.

CHARLES WESLEY

Christ is Risen: The world below lies
desolate

Christ is Risen: The spirits of evil are
fallen

Christ is Risen: The angels of God are
rejoicing

Christ is Risen: The tombs of the dead
are empty

Christ is Risen indeed from the dead,
the first of the sleepers,
Glory and power are his forever and
ever.

HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME

LAUGHING FOR LENT

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Laughter reveals the person. When a youngster begins a “knock-knock” joke with a grin, I recognize that he or she is offering me friendship. Wry chuckles, smothered giggles, dry cackles, knowing smirks and forced guffaws are just as telling.

The laughter in today’s Scripture seems out of place during Lenten repentance for renewal. However, if laughter reveals the person, then this passage can be a mirror by which God examines your life and mine.

The story is comical. God in three persons visits aged Abraham with a birth announcement. Abraham is appropriately hospitable, inviting them to stay and rest, to have their feet washed and to enjoy a little bread. Abraham appears flustered. Earlier he ran to his guests. Now he runs to Sarah’s tent to order her to make ten loaves of bread. He runs to his herd and tells his servant to prepare an entire calf for feasting. There is humour in Abraham’s frenzy to prepare a banquet. There’s also humour in his apparent failure to recognize his guests’ identity. Laughing is appropriate.

Sarah laughs next. She overhears a guest announce that she will become pregnant with the child of promise; and Sarah laughs. Hers is not the laugh of slapstick comedy. This is the sober, incredulous laugh of hearing an impossible promise. It’s a sad laugh, maybe even cynical. The time has expired for God to fulfill His promise.

Nine months and three chapters later, Sarah laughs again. She even names her son “He-Laugh” (Isaac). This time, her laughter includes everyone around her, and everyone who hears her story. This is a big-hearted laugh that bursts from Sarah’s belly effortlessly. It’s an evangelistic laugh; it invites everyone to respond to God’s joy-filled grace with overflowing laughter.

On the journey through Lent, when God comes knocking, how are you laughing? Do you laugh with unawareness—not recognizing God? Do you laugh with disappointment, even distrust, because you can’t imagine the Gospel changing your life? Do you laugh with Gospel-surprise, so that everyone around wants to laugh with you?

However you laugh, be honest about yourself. And take heart, because God is visiting you, and offering you life-changing good news.

ANDREW DYCK // *Professor of Ministry Studies at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

YAHWEH YIREH

Genesis 22:1-18

As a child I learned that my parents would provide for me. I remember loading my toys into a moving van and not knowing where I would be playing with them next. While I worried about my toys, my mom and dad made sure I had a house to put them in.

My parents already provided for issues that I had not yet considered.

The word “provide” points us to the central theme of the passage. The one who is named the “Provider” in the story is always the LORD. The LORD will provide (Yahweh Yireh).

Abraham believed that the LORD would provide. In responding to Isaac’s question, Abraham replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (22:8). In Hebrews the faith of Abraham is confirmed, but it also reveals his inability to fully know how it would all be accomplished. “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead” (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham ventured forward believing *that* the LORD would provide, but not certain of *how* He would provide.

The LORD did provide for Abraham. The LORD provided a ram that was offered instead of Isaac. Abraham declared, “The LORD will provide” (22:14). His proclamation endured. At the time the account was written down, it was commonly known among the people that “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided” (22:14).

Think of the encouragement such an account would be for the descendants of Isaac (22:17-18). They existed as a nation because the LORD had provided. They could venture forward with renewed confidence that the LORD would continue to provide.

Do you believe that God will provide? Acknowledging your limited perspective, do you trust that He is already providing? As you venture forward are you looking for how God will provide?

“What shall we say then in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things” (Romans 8:31-32)?

RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH FAITH

Romans 4:13-25

The righteousness of God comes as a gift. Creation eagerly awaits its unfolding like the anticipation of spring's thaw. Here God is active and involved, taking the initiative to overcome evil and release creation from the bondage of decay. Much more than a passive quality or mere state of innocence, God's righteousness is His dynamic right-making activity in the world.

Although God stands above time and place, His righteousness is not timeless and placeless. It is not an indiscriminate positive force in the world, applied equally everywhere and anywhere. Within the human story, God has made for Himself a particular, historic people of righteousness. They embody His right-making ways and exist for the benefit of the world. As a people, they have their own unique heritage and ancestry. But the core of their ethnicity is not blood relation or ancient legal custom. Their ancestry is of faith and their heritage is the promise of redemption.

God initiates this people-forming faith in Abraham. Yet in Jesus, God completes it. The cross and resurrection validate the faith of Abraham and prove it as the consummate faith of Jesus. This faith is the unreserved trust that the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not has the power to do what He has promised. Jesus perfectly demonstrates that in the face of death God can be trusted. Even more, Jesus makes a way for all people to receive the gift of God's righteousness through this same faith. By God's grace, this faith can justify anyone to God's right-making ways and join them to God's historic people of righteousness as children of Abraham. Here no one trusts their own power and control to make the world right, but rather hopes in God's initiative to overcome evil and death.

Lent is an opportunity to rediscover the starting point of this faith and prepare to receive the gift of righteousness. The hope against death requires that death be acknowledged, especially in an age of misguided optimism. Well-meaning folk promote causes, technology and leadership intended to make the world a better place, and there is temptation to believe that evil can be overcome this way. The world will be made right; that is sure. But it will only be through the cross-embracing faith of Jesus, and it will come as a gift.

JESUS LOVES

Mark 9:30-37

Back when I was teaching French in a California secondary school, my best student decided that she would test her academic boundaries as well as her perceived position of privilege. On one occasion, Jamie (name changed) came to school high on LSD. Her comment about my choice of fashion, “Wow, Mr. Chow, that’s quite some funky paisley tie!” as well as her dreamy, slurred speech and glassy eyes were telltale signs that she was tripping out.

I was heart-broken, and deeply disappointed. Here was one of my most gifted students, and it seemed like she was flushing her academics down the drain!

In the staff room, other teachers had commented to me that they had not seen Jamie in their classes on a regular basis. When I mentioned that Jamie had consistent attendance in my class, they wondered out loud what made the difference? I replied that I prayed for my students each day. I knew some of their backgrounds, and that Jamie had a particularly difficult home life.

As a teacher, I remember thinking about how Jesus welcomed the “little children” to Himself. He didn’t pass judgment, nor did He treat them as objects. I vowed that, try as I might, I would regard my own students in the same way. In my naïveté, little did I know who would walk through my classroom doors, carrying both gifts and baggage in tow!

Jesus loved so freely, yet He displayed uncommon patience with those whom He was trying to teach, namely, His own disciples. The time was approaching, and as He was on His way to Calvary, dropping hints about the future, and giving His closest friends signs of hope, the disciples were bitterly arguing about who was the greatest. Can you hear His audible sigh? I wonder if Jesus felt heart-broken and deeply disappointed? I wonder if Jesus thought: Why are they not getting it?

In order to better illustrate His words, Jesus takes a child, and tells His disciples to be open to who will join the Way. Don’t make judgments. Don’t fight over who is better, or who has more wisdom, or who has the highest position of honour ... this is what the rest of the world fights over.

As we continue to turn towards God during the second week of Lent, may we remember how Jesus loves—without judgment, reservation and without hesitation. For He loves all people—even those who fight for recognition, place and honour.

I TELL YOU THE TRUTH

John 5:19-29

Many who identify with the Christian faith increasingly apologize for that very same faith. Less than a year ago, Reverend Gretta Vosper, an emerging leader in the United Church of Canada, published a book entitled *With or Without God*, in which she argues that all references to Jesus and the resurrection should be excised from the Christian faith and replaced with a renewed sense of optimism and belief in the human spirit.

Ms. Vosper is not expressing anything new. She is simply saying what many church leaders have believed for years: that there is a fundamental problem with the Christian faith and, to put it bluntly, that problem is the New Testament portrayal of Jesus Christ.

With all due respect, the Jesus of the Bible is a tad embarrassing. For instance, He talked a great deal about truth. Not just *your* truth or *my* truth, but *absolute* and *overwhelming* truth.

That some Christians may wish to eliminate Christ altogether or find refuge in some politically correct view of Jesus is not surprising. Nothing new here. Who Christ is, our Christology, is and has always been the major battlefield of the Christian faith. Everything else is small potatoes.

As comfortable as that may be, to believe that Jesus was only a great moral teacher is simply nonsense. C. S. Lewis put it most succinctly: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher but a lunatic, on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg" (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [HarperCollins Publishers, 2001], 52). "Either he [Jesus] was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else he was, and is, precisely what he said. There is no middle way" (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* [HarperCollins Publishers, 2001], 11-12).

On the third day, Christ arose from the dead, proving that He indeed was who He claimed He was. Christians should be the most joyful people on earth.

ATTENTION!

Exodus 19:1-25

Two weeks of Lent have come and gone. Two weeks of intentionality, of giving up and pursuing the desire to establish new habits that take us beyond the forty days leading to Easter, habits that disciple us more into the Christ followers we are called to be. Two weeks have come and gone of listening. Are we hearing? Does God have our attention?

Our reading today takes us to a central event and location in the Old Testament. The Israelites, newly released by God from the slavery of Pharaoh have learned much and are continuing to learn. They are in the Desert of Sinai and have set up camp in front of the mountain. And God has grabbed their attention with ferocity. Hear the noise; there is thunder and lightning, the blast of a very loud trumpet (19:16). Such a display is so intense that the people tremble. In this passage there is a haze of smoke, its smell fills the peoples' nostrils and the presence of the LORD overwhelms them.

God is getting the attention of His people, and more importantly He is reminding the attentive that they are to tremble in His presence. They are to fear Him with a holy reverence. In the following chapter God clearly lays out His expectations of His people through the Ten Commandments, which will prepare them to live out the life He has called them to. Attention is a prerequisite to an obedient response.

If we continue into the New Testament, Hebrews offers a picture of the significance of this mountain encounter both for the Israelites and for us (Hebrews 12:18-28). The letter states that we enter the presence of God freely because we have a mediator. We approach the presence of God, with reverence and fear but also with freedom because we are restored through Christ. We are no longer strangers to the promises of God but we have claim to them. We live in the reality of God's promises fulfilled in Christ.

So are we attentive? Are we listening and giving ourselves a chance to obey? God passionately calls for our attention. The God of cataclysmic noise in Sinai took the familiar form of humanity and walked this earth. Does the sheer power of such a humble act cause us to tremble and to listen?

In this time of Lenten meditations, how is the presence of God filling us with awe? Where may this attentiveness be leading us by way of obedience?

SUNDAY REST

Come, you faithful, raise the strain
of triumphant gladness!
God has brought forth Israel
into joy from sadness,
loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke
Jacob's sons and daughters;
led them with unmoistened foot
through the Red Sea waters.

'Tis the spring of souls today:
Christ has burst his prison,
and from three days' sleep in death
as a sun has risen.
All the winter of our sins,
long and dark, is flying
from the Light, to whom we give
laud and praise undying.

Now the queen of seasons, bright
with the day of splendor,
with the royal feast of feasts
comes its joy to render;
comes to glad Jerusalem,
who with true affection
welcomes in unwearied strains
Jesus' resurrection!

Neither could the gates of death,
nor the tomb's dark portal,
nor the watchers, nor the seal
hold you as a mortal:
but today, among your own,
you appear, bestowing
your deep peace, which evermore
passes human knowing.

JOHN OF DAMASCUS

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God,
who of your tender love towards
humanity, sent your Son, our
Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon
him our flesh, and to suffer death
upon the cross, that all should
follow the example of his great
humility; Mercifully grant, that
we may both follow the example
of his patience, and also be made
partakers of his resurrection;
through the same Jesus Christ our
Lord. Amen.

BCP

NO OTHER FOUNDATION

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

The believers in Corinth had a lot going for them when Paul first arrived and planted the church. They had vision and passion because of the strong foundation Paul had instilled [2:2-4; 3:10]. However, somewhere along the way this church had lost their foundation. They were putting their faith in leaders rather than Christ (1:12). This is why in this passages Paul focuses on “those who build,” God’s servants who are leading His church and building on the foundation that Christ laid for us (3:10).

Paul uses the imagery of a building, yet focuses very little on the building itself, he turns the reader’s attention to the kind of materials Christian workers are using, which include: preaching the cross for salvation, building up believers and living a Christian life that reflects what is being preached (3:12-13). Both the purity and depth of Christian teaching and a life exemplifying what is preached are critical for the kind of building materials that will stand the test of fire on the day of the Lord’s judgment. In our passage, Paul acknowledges that others have built on this foundation (Apollos and Peter), but warns the new leaders of this church not to stray from the foundation that was laid, through the work Jesus did for them on the cross [3:21-23].

We don’t have to look far in our contemporary churches to find similar issues, people putting their faith in the wrong places and leaders straying away from foundational truth. Every builder who builds for God must be careful as to how he or she builds. Every person who professes faith must be careful who they ground their faith in.

Our churches and their leaders need to be prayed for more than ever. During this season of Lent, while we dedicate ourselves to fasting and repentance, take the time to pray for our leaders, they struggle just like anyone else trying to live their lives for Christ Jesus. Also, reflect on your own faith journey. Are you living the life that Christ has called you to? Is your building material strong enough to stand the test of fire? The answers to these questions may help you focus on the foundation that has been laid for you—Christ Jesus.

LIFE-THREATENING VALLEYS

Psalm 84:1-12

I remember reading this Psalm when I was going through a wretched time in my life. My husband had been diagnosed with advanced kidney cancer, and we didn't know if he would survive. In the waiting time between diagnosis and surgery, we hovered between life and death. It was a "Lentish" time, as we seemed to be walking our own road to Jerusalem, fearful of the suffering ahead.

Some of the words in this Psalm resonated with me. I remember longing for God, because I was in so much turmoil, "My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD..." (84:2). However, all the references to happiness seemed out of place for me. I wondered: Is this a case where the Scripture doesn't fit the situation? So I turned the page, looking for something that applied more directly?

But this Psalm is precisely about the road to Jerusalem. When it was written, people would regularly make pilgrimages to Jerusalem in order to celebrate religious festival days. There was a deep joy with going to Jerusalem, the centre of worship for the LORD of hosts.

It's an extremely hot and dusty walk to Jerusalem from the various corners of the country. Israel is a semi-arid country. During the 1100s a whole army of European crusaders was defeated at Hattim (near Capernaum) because they ran out of water. Without water the people perished.

The road to Jerusalem goes through dry and barren valleys—life-threatening valleys. Our Psalm talks of "the valley of Baca," which means "weeping."

The promise in the valley of Baca is not, "Just hang in there, you will get your reward in Jerusalem." The promise is that the desert places are filled with water: from within (tears), from below (springs) and from above (rain). There is water everywhere and the heart is a highway.

For my family, God did provide every good thing for us on a life-threatening journey. It wasn't a happy time, but God gave us what we needed.

I think of Jesus walking to Jerusalem, to His death. Did He recite this Psalm? "Behold ... look on the face of your anointed" (84:9). It was a dry and barren road of tears for Jesus. But somewhere in the highway of His heart, there flowed a spring of love for all people. We are thankful in Lent that "The God of gods will be seen in Zion" (84:7).

IDENTIFY YOURSELF!

John 2:13-20

When I was a child, the images of Jesus portrayed Him as gentle, meek and kindly. There was the image of Jesus with several children sitting on His lap, and the words “let the children come unto me” printed somewhere on the page. Or there was the image of the boy Jesus in the temple courts, calmly discussing Scripture with the long-bearded rabbis. And I wondered how He could do this for three days running? Today’s twelve-year-olds might only accomplish such endurance at a video game tournament!

But in my adolescent years, a stronger, more assertive Jesus emerged for me. John’s account of the temple cleansing changed my perspective. In the Gospel’s rendering, Jesus was deliberate and clear about His mission. But what was Jesus doing and saying with this event?

On the eve of the Passover, in every observant Jewish home, the head of every family collected the leaven and conducted a general cleansing of the home. Following the customs of His day, Jesus was cleansing His Father’s house in preparation for the Passover. As Jesus cleared the temple courts, a Messianic claim rang out as He called the place “my Father’s house” [2:16]. The Jewish leaders immediately asked Jesus for a sign to verify His claim because the Messiah was expected to show Himself through many signs.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus did perform many signs—signs that spoke of His true identity. When John send word through his disciples to Jesus asking Him if He was the expected Messiah, Jesus told the group to report back to John what they had heard and seen: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (Matthew 11:4-5). The curious Jews at the temple cleansing had evidence of Jesus’ miracles performed while at the Passover feast [2:23], but doubting hearts would not believe. We’re told that even some of Jesus’ disciples doubted His claims until after the resurrection [2:22].

During this season, as we reflect on the historic events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, let us put aside any doubts we may have of Jesus’ identity as the true Son of God—Saviour of the world!

FOOLS *FOR* CHRIST, BUT WISE *IN* CHRIST

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

"The message of the cross is foolish..." (1:18).

Paul, the author of this statement, knew exactly what it was like to believe deeply in something he later saw to be foolish. In his earlier years, he was known as Saul, a man who was greatly convinced that he knew what was right and he was willing to act on those convictions. Saul saw Christians as foolish and dangerous. As a result, he helped to kill as many as he could.

But Saul had a profound experience that changed the way he thought. God spoke to him. What once seemed wise was revealed to be foolish and what once seemed foolish was revealed to be wise.

Frederick Buechner describes Paul's conversion this way: "Everything he ever said or wrote or did from that day forward was an attempt to bowl over the human race as he'd been bowled over himself while he lay there with dust in his mouth" (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 129-130).

One of the reasons I appreciate the Lenten season is that it helps me step away from approaching life on autopilot, which tends to have me rely more on my own understanding than on God's. Lent is a tool that helps me to course-correct—to reprioritize. And I begin to rely on God again.

During Lent I want to recapture a sense of the foolishness of the cross, the absurdity of worshiping a God who chooses to die, the bizarre notion of covering a device used to kill criminals in gold and wearing it around a neck, and the utter folly of knowing that what the Bible says is true and still being tempted to rely on something other than God.

Like Paul, I want to capture a sense of what it means to be a fool for Christ's sake, but wise in Him (4:10). I want to be bowled over by God. It doesn't have to be as dramatic as Paul's roadside encounter, but I hope as I move through Lent into Easter I will come to a new and deeper understanding of who God is. I want the scales of misunderstanding to fall from my eyes.

And I hope you do to.

BLESSED BE GOD

Ephesians 1:3-14

These twelve verses are actually one gloriously long run-on sentence! If they were not the inspired words of God, the teachers among us may be tempted to pull out our red pens and correct it. While our translators have divided these words into multiple sentences and, in most cases, into two paragraphs, they are to be read as one breathless, passionate expression of what God has done for us in Christ.

The expression speaks of blessing God, praising God, because He has blessed us “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3). Do spiritual blessings sound like pretend blessings? Would we prefer a blessing we could see, touch, taste, drive or deposit? Truly these spiritual blessings are even better, because they begin now and stretch into eternity.

The Apostle Paul lists several of these spiritual blessings for us.

Blessed be God, because *He has made us holy and blameless before Him*. Notice that this is His initiative. He chose us for this very reason. This is especially amazing if we consider how unholy and blameworthy we are.

Blessed be God, because *He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ*. We were alienated from God and we would not have a family to care for us, but in an act of love and grace, we are brought into His family. That is what God has done for us. Not only has He made us holy, He has adopted us as His dearly loved child. We have the full rights and privileges of daughters and sons.

Blessed be God, because *we have redemption through His blood*. He has bought us back. He has delivered us by paying a price. Not only are we unholy and alienated, we are in bondage. We are on the slave auction block, and He lays down His life to purchase us back.

Blessed be God, because *we have the forgiveness of our sins*. He restores our relationship by casting our sins into the depths of the sea. He reconciles us to Himself.

Notice how relational all of these spiritual blessings are. They all invite us to draw near to God—to know Him. We are separated from God, but He has cleared away all that stands between us. We are guilty and blameworthy, but He makes us holy and blameless. We are alienated and orphaned, but He adopts and redeems us.

Eleven times we are told that all of these spiritual blessings come to us “in Christ.” If we believe in Jesus, if we trust in Him as our Redeemer, Mediator, Saviour and Lord, we are in Christ.

A LATE-NIGHT CONVERSATION

John 3:1-15

When my husband and I were first dating, I was in a perpetual haze. Yes, we were falling in love and there was romance. But I think the fog was a result of the many wee-morning-hour talks on the phone. The hands of the midnight clock seemed to tick past just a little slower as we chatted on and on.

I love late-night conversations—the hush of the world around, the weight of the hour, the dim lights. The spoken word seems to take on more substance and meaning at that time.

The late-night conversation recorded in John 3 doesn't disappoint. Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Daylight has vanished and idle chatter among neighbours has ceased.

Like many nighttime discussions, there are probing questions and challenging answers.

Nicodemus knows that Jesus is a great teacher who comes from God. But Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter, driving Nicodemus to recognize a deeper truth: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (3:3).

Jesus invites Nicodemus to enter a new world of faith where Jesus isn't just a great teacher—He is God incarnate, the everlasting Son of Man who has come with dominion (cf. Daniel 7:13–14), salvation and miraculous transformation.

Jesus urges Nicodemus to think beyond laws to a new reality. He asks Nicodemus to open his eyes to the kingdom of God in the here and now; to experience the Spirit at work in powerful and mysterious ways, blowing through the valley of dry bones and bringing them to life (Ezekiel 37). Jesus asks Nicodemus to enter a new world where things might not always make sense, but God is indeed active.

For Nicodemus, this clandestine conversation with Christ changes his life. We meet him again at the foot of the cross—in broad daylight for all to see—in the humble posture of a disciple, helping prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39).

As we continue to ready ourselves for Easter, what kind of conversations will we have with Jesus? What surprises will His Spirit whisper in our ears? And will we allow His words to change our lives?

SUNDAY REST

Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
 Blessed morn of life and light!
 Lo, the grave is rent asunder,
 Death is conquered through His might.

Christ is risen! Hallelujah!
 Gladness fills the world today;
 From the tomb that could not hold Him,
 See, the stone is rolled away!

Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
 Friends of Jesus, dry your tears;
 Through the veil of gloom and darkness,
 Lo, the Son of God appears!

Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
 He hath risen, as He said;
 He is now the King of glory,
 And our great exalted Head.

FANNY CROSBY

I will extol you, my God and King,
 and bless your name forever and ever.
 Every day I will bless you
 and praise your name forever and
 ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be
 praised,
 and his greatness is unsearchable.
 One generation shall commend your
 works to another,
 and shall declare your mighty acts.
 On the glorious splendor of your
 majesty,
 and on your wondrous works, I will
 meditate.
 They shall speak of the might of your
 awesome deeds,
 and I will declare your greatness.
 They shall pour forth the fame of your

abundant goodness
 and shall sing aloud of your
 righteousness.
 The LORD is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger and abounding in
 steadfast love.
 The LORD is good to all,
 and his mercy is over all that he
 has made.
 All your works shall give thanks to
 you, O LORD,
 and all your saints shall bless you!
 The LORD upholds all who are falling
 and raises up all who are bowed
 down.
 The eyes of all look to you,
 and you give them their food in due
 season.
 You open your hand;
 you satisfy the desire of every
 living thing.
 The LORD is righteous in all his ways
 and kind in all his works.
 The LORD is near to all who call on
 him,
 to all who call on him in truth.
 He fulfills the desire of those who
 fear him;
 he also hears their cry and saves
 them.
 The LORD preserves all who love him,
 but all the wicked he will destroy.
 My mouth will speak the praise of the
 LORD,
 and let all flesh bless his holy
 name forever and ever.

PSALM 145, ESV

THE SERVANT AND THE SON

Numbers 21:4-9

Ever notice the blue *Star of Life* on the side of an ambulance with the image of a snake on a pole at the centre? Taken from Greek mythology, the image is called the *Rod of Asclepius* (he is said to have healing powers). Today's passage is also considered a source of origin for this serpentine image. Snakes were sent into the Israelite camp, and many people died. Their immediate response was, "We sinned ... pray for us!" Moses prayed and, by the LORD's instruction, provided a remedy for the poison.

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, they lived" (21:8-9).

"Look, and live!" Moses told his people. In John's Gospel we read that the Son of Man would be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness (John 3:14). The reference refers to Jesus raised up on Calvary's cross. The correlation between the two descriptions is remedy. On the one hand, Moses faithfully provided a temporary *remedy* for the Israelites. On the other hand, Jesus provided a permanent cure for the world. The difference for the writer of Hebrews is that Moses was a servant *in* God's house, "but Christ is faithful as the Son *over* God's house" (Hebrews 3:6a). Moses bore witness to what was coming—Christ the fulfillment.

Although I have never had a snakebite, I'm pretty sure the remedy has progressed from the Mosaic bronze snake to some sort of modern, prescriptive medication. Yet our remedies are still a shadow; still temporary fixes for our momentary troubles. As with the Israelites, we find ourselves in a hurting world, with pain and brokenness, and an awareness that we have sinned. Praise our Saviour, Jesus Christ because His remedy is not temporary!

Together with the author of Hebrews, we "fix our thoughts on Jesus," our remedy (Hebrews 3:1). Hold firmly, then, to your confidence in the Son and to the hope in which you glory (Hebrews 3:6). Amen.

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3:16-21

These are the most extraordinary words ever uttered in the history of the world. But I realize all too well that for most people, these words have no traction. For some, the words are just too familiar and so have lost their power to amaze and inspire. For others, their earth-shattering significance is hidden under a veil of self-delusion and indifference.

The notion that God loves the world is unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the ancient world, the gods did not love anything or anyone. Human beings were no more valuable than insects. Humans had been created to serve the gods. Period! Men and women were truly cosmic orphans “without hope and without God in the world” [Ephesians 2:12].

The gods of old may have vanished from western culture, but the ideologies of death and chaos they incarnated certainly have not. Ultimately, we do not worship statues of wood or metal; we worship ideas. We also have our ideologies of chaos. The myth of evolution has robbed human existence of all ultimate significance. Postmodernism is aggressively and gleefully negating the very possibility of meaning and purpose. Secular humanism is viciously eroding the very notion of intrinsic human worth and dignity.

The problem is not just that bad ideas destroy cultures and civilizations. They also destroy the souls of men and women. When I was a teenager, I was one of those who did not understand the words of the Apostle John. I was truly without hope and without God—a lost soul in a sea of meaninglessness. Providentially, I met a pastor who honestly explained my condition and offered me the only cure there is for the illness that afflicts every single one of us. My encounter with the living Christ changed my life. The resurrection of our Lord is the promise that I too will live on for all eternity. I will be forever grateful.

THE HANDIWORK OF GOD

Ephesians 2:8-10

There is a man who played electric guitar for years in our Sunday services. During the other days of the week he can be heard reliving classic rock tunes with his band at local venues. When the average person looks at his guitar they see a beat up, well used, dented, slab of wood that should be sitting in a pawnshop somewhere for a hundred dollars. However, for the studied eye, it is an original 62 Fender Stratocaster that would sell for over ten thousand dollars!

In today's passage the Apostle Paul says: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (2:8-10).

As we look toward Easter we are reminded that we have been saved by grace through faith and not through anything we have done. Therefore, we don't have anything to boast about. Many people embrace the truth of verse 9 (and they should), but many also fail to embrace the truth of verse 10 that we are God's *handiwork*. This word is *ποίημα* (*poiema*) from which we get the word poem. When Paul tells us "not to boast" it is in respect to earning our own salvation through work, not in respect to our intrinsic value and purpose.

Like the average observer who only has the eyes to see the worn guitar, but fails to recognize the true value of the 62 Strat, we too often put more stock in how others or we see ourselves versus how our Creator sees us. Such a perception often leads us to a belief that we should beat ourselves up (a twisted interpretation of *not boasting*), in order to bring more glory to God. The beauty of an instrument does not take away from the glory of the Creator or the player.

The Master is purchasing the masterpiece that He built. He has bought it to display it, and also to play it. Therefore, we are created for good works that God has prepared for us. This is for His glory and for our joy.

WASH AWAY ALL MY INIQUITIES

Psalms 51:1-12

I ran in a Spartan obstacle race for the first time this past fall, and in addition to “not getting hurt too badly,” my main goal was to finish the race and be exhausted when I crossed the finished line. I wanted to know that I gave it my all and did not hold anything back. No doubt, there were likely many others who had the same goal that day.

I wonder, though, why it is sometimes so difficult for me to have that same level of determination and relentlessness when I confess my sin to God? Instead, when it comes to personal confession and repentance, I am quite adept at being selective, rationalizing my actions and even prioritizing my sinful thoughts and behaviours into levels of significance.

What I am not good at is using the two-consonant, common noun that the Psalmist uses in verse 9 (verse 11 in MT): *q/*. Used only once in the entire Psalm, *q/* simply means “all” or “every.” Not some. Not many. Not even most. “*All* my iniquity” is the phrase that is used. Although the particular sin of adultery may have been the trigger point for the Psalmist’s timeless confession, David recognized that *all* of his iniquities needed to be blotted out. Only then could his next desperate plea be realized, “Create in me a pure heart” (51:10).

On one of my bookshelves sits a multi-volume Bible commentary from 1841, and the “Practical Observations” about Psalm 51 are insightful. “The real penitent will be deeply humbled and afflicted; but [he or she] will not sink into despair ... [he or she] longs to have the whole debt of [his or her] sin cancelled, and every stain cleansed ... but the hypocrite always has some secret reserves, and would spare some favorite lust.”

As you reflect on your experiences of Lent so far, have you been keeping “some secret reserves” from God? If so, do not hold them any longer! Confess them to God. Make it your goal to finish Lent and experience the beauty of Easter by holding nothing back; relentless confession will open the door to unimaginable grace!

GOD GAVE

John 3:14-21

God gave. He gave life instead of death and salvation instead of judgment. When did this giving begin? God gave at the time of creation. God the Father, Son and Spirit were all in the beginning, all giving, All-Giving.

God gave. He gave of Himself with the gift of embodiment as He became human. Coming to humans, again and again, always coming. Breaking through the ordinariness of life.

God gave. He gave the gift of salvation, eternal life and kingdom-of-God citizenship, which begins now, not later.

What is required? Moses raised that pole with the snake for all to see—all who *would* see, that is. And all who took that moment to lift their eyes knew that they had been saved, even those who had been bitten by the serpents around them.

Many children have obtained points at camp or badges at Sunday school for saying or singing John 3:16. Many roadside travelers have also been challenged or offended by the words of John 3:16. These words have been used to instill fear into the hearts of wayward boys, girls, men and women. But, by doing so, we miss the love. God gave His Son because He loved.

God gave. He gave light instead of darkness. Everyone who raises their eyes to the face of Jesus is saved from condemnation, judgment and death. Salvation starts the very moment a person lock eyes and give their “yes” to God.

In this fourth week of Lent, the offer is there for all who choose to raise their eyes to the raised body on the cross. No glittering image there—only Jesus. As we draw closer to the cross, as we offer our gifts of prayer, fasting and giving may we do so because this is how God loved the world—He gave.

I OBJECT!

John 12:1-11

Our text today contains two objections—one from Judas and one from the chief priests.

The scene is Bethany, the hometown of the second-chance-man Lazarus and his two sisters Mary and Martha. The Passover is near. The controversy around the prophet from Nazareth is growing. A plot to kill Jesus has been hatched and everyone is on pins and needles, wondering whether He will show up.

But instead of preparing for the Passover, Jesus is at a party. And at the party, something scandalous happens—Mary cracks open a flask of pure nard, douses Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. It's a scene of pure extravagance, intimacy and devotion.

Judas objects. The issue, ostensibly, is the waste of money. Couldn't the money have been given to the poor? But there is also a tone of embarrassment behind Judas' words. Surely Jesus can't condone such an overt, impractical and *public* display of affection? Is Jesus worthy of such extravagance?

Later, the chief priests learn that a crowd is gathering at Bethany to see this walking miracle, Lazarus. And they object. They fear the theological and political implications of the masses turning to Jesus. They are worried about the loss of control. They are worried about a God who could really bring a person back from the dead.

Two objections: *Is Jesus really worth it? Won't this get out of control?* These two questions are still with us twenty-odd centuries later.

In the midst of a secularized culture, we who follow Jesus sometimes look a little like Mary—wasting our energy, our time and our affection when all of these could be better spent elsewhere. Couldn't we please stop dwelling on this religious quackery and use some of our collective energy for the greater good?

And in the midst of a church culture, we who follow Jesus sometimes sound like those who were so threatened by Jesus. We worry about the loss of control, we worry about theological precision and we find this Jesus to be a deeply threatening and unpredictable presence in our lives.

The last words belong to Jesus: "Leave her alone, her worship is not wasted" (12:7-8). To the chief priest's fury, Jesus offers only silence—a silence that echoes later on in an arrest, a trial and a crucifixion. The silence is finally broken beautifully on the cross where Jesus whispers, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

SUNDAY REST

"But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip. King David said this about him:

'I see that the LORD is always with me.

I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.

No wonder my heart is glad,

and my tongue shouts his praises!

My body rests in hope.

For you will not leave my soul among the dead

or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.

You have shown me the way of life,

and you will fill me with the joy of your presence.'

"Dear brothers, think about this! You can be sure that the patriarch David wasn't referring to himself, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David's own descendants would sit on his throne. David was looking into the future and speaking of the Messiah's resurrection. He was saying that God would not leave him among the dead or allow his body to rot in the grave.

"God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just

as you see and hear today. For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said,

'The LORD said to my Lord,

"Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies,

making them a footstool under your feet.'"

"So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!"

ACTS 2:23-36, ESV

Holy and true is the Son in all His ways!

Image of the invisible God,
eternal Word who was made flesh,
conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary
to be Servant of all and Lord of all.

Made like us in every way, yet without sin,

He suffered, was crucified and buried,
and was raised to new life on the third day.

Savior of the world,
who loves us with an everlasting love,
who reveals the fullness of the Father,
who intercedes for us His followers,
and calls us to be His witnesses
until He returns in glory to judge the world.

Blessed be the name of the LORD!
Blessed be the name of the Father,
the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
one God forever and ever! Amen.

MENNONITE BRETHREN CONFESSION OF FAITH
LITURGICAL READINGS

WHAT LOVE! WHAT POWER! AMAZING GRACE!

Matthew 21:12-17

Gentle Saviour, meek and mild
Comes to earth a little child;
But as a man, the tables turn
He comes across a little wild.

When at the temple face to face
The money changers He gave chase;
The sheep, the cattle, and their masters
All quickly fled, as if in a race.

"My Father's house is not a market;
A place of prayer is much more like it.
Destroy this temple and in three days,
I'll raise it up to the Father's praise!"

And when it happened as He foretold
His disciples recalled His words of old.
He chose the cross to take our place.
What love! What power! Amazing grace!

GIFTS FROM U2 AND GOD

Acts 2:14-24

“Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21). Why? Why is salvation available only to those who respond by calling on the Lord Jesus for rescue?

It's not that God doesn't know how to give gifts to everyone. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that our Father in heaven “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

Clearly, the gift of salvation is a different kind of gift. It requires a request. When the people were *cut to the heart* at Peter's statement that they were responsible for the death of the Messiah, they asked, “Brothers, what should we do” (2:37)? Peter replied, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (2:38). The gift of salvation flowing from Jesus' death and resurrection requires an individual response.

Why? If God is loving and merciful, why does the gift of eternal life not come automatically to every human whether they respond favourably or not?

Do you remember last year, when the world-famous rock group U2 gave a copy of their new album unsolicited to millions of people with iTunes accounts? Some people got upset. Instructions were given for how to delete this free album from one of the world's most popular singing groups. Is that story relevant here?

Perhaps the answer is found in an earlier story. In Luke 19 Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem saying, “If you ... had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace ... Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will ... crush you to the ground ... because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:42-44). From the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:16-17) until now, God is determined to honour human free will.

Our theme verse underlines the missionary call of Acts 1:8. Because God gives humans free will, salvation comes only to those who ask. In order to ask, they need to have enough information to ask (Romans 10:13-15). Jesus died on the cross and rose again so that we can receive eternal life. How is the need for an individual response to this good news focusing your energies today?

SAVIOUR AND JUDGE

John 12:44-50

“Judgment” is hardly a popular term today. Contemporary culture seems to view it as primitive and dangerous. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks about judgment in His final words to the public before His death and resurrection.

The Gospel narrative reminds us that there is a judgment in the past and a judgment in the future—a no to sin and a yes to life. If we forget one or the other, we fall into a trap.

People are judging one another all the time—on the basis of their waistlines, their looks, their age, their clothes, their references and their résumés. I don’t think there has been a time where people were more evaluated than today. So, how are we to cope?

As followers of Jesus, we are to remember that our sin is in the past. It has been nailed to the cross. As a result, we can be honest about our sin, shrug it off and step into the newness of life that Christ offers. For we are told that Jesus came to redeem the world [12:47]. Because God gave up Jesus for us, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus [Romans 8:1]!

In the knowledge of this truth, our capacity to forgive others grows because we acknowledge that we do not have the right to judge others. There is but one Judge and we are not Him. In wanting to follow the initiatives of Jesus, we too can work towards redeeming the world by calling out injustice when we see it and showing mercy to those in desperate need.

We do all this out of gratitude because we have been loved—we have been saved. Jesus says: “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” [12:45]. So carry on through this Lenten journey knowing that the One who made you, knows you truly and loves you completely.

A NEW PATH OF SELF-GIVING FOR OTHERS

Philippians 2:1-11

In many ways we are like sheep. When left on our own we pursue the same old paths that lead to the same worn pastures. However, the insightful shepherd carefully manages his or her flock, leading them to feeding areas and places of refreshment for the benefit of both the sheep and the land on which they feed. Rarely will sheep pursue a new path on their own, even one that is for their benefit. They need to be led by their shepherd.

The Apostle Paul challenges us to walk a very “unnatural” path based on the example of the Good Shepherd—a path of service, humility and self-abasement. But how difficult that is! Doing nothing from selfish ambition, in humility considering others better, looking at another’s interests first and having the same mind as Christ Jesus who “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (2:7). These behaviours are the antithesis of what we naturally pursue. But perhaps we, like sheep, need to be reminded that our first (comfortable) choice, is not the one that leads to life.

Jesus had it all: equality with God, kingly power and heavenly riches. Everything. Yet He rejected the popular view of kingly power. And in doing so, He didn’t grasp, for personal advantage, the benefits that were rightfully His. Rather He chose a different path—a path of emptying Himself.

Much theological debate has been had over the concept of Christ “emptying Himself.” What did Christ give up? Did He become less than God? Did He temporarily relinquish His divine attributes during His earthly ministry? While having their place, such questions can also miss the mark. Perhaps Paul’s point is more basic. As the ultimate example of servanthood and humility, Christ emptied Himself. He poured Himself out, giving Himself away with selfless abandon. Such is the character of God, as it is revealed in the mindset and resulting activity of the Son of God. As Gordon Fee puts it, “God is not an acquisitive being, grasping and seizing, but self giving for the sake of others” (Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 211). From Paul’s perspective this is how divine love manifests itself in its most characteristic and profuse expression.

Easter reminds us that Jesus not only leads us in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake, but also calls us to be like Him. What personal ambition do we need to lay aside today? In what ways do we need to look to the interests of others over our own today? Who are we called to serve today? “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (2:5).

GRUMBLING

Philippians 2:12-18

It may be that the most insidious sin that creeps into the life of Christ's disciples is ingratitude. Complaining about the weather, the traffic or the wait at the doctor's office seems inconsequential when compared to the big picture of salvation. We rarely think twice when we complain about the person who overlooked us in the foyer at church or the chairperson who failed to ask us to sit on the missions committee. Ingratitude is one of those "little" sins, the kind that goes unnoticed in our own lives as well as in our church communities.

What makes ingratitude so sinister is that it's quiet, unobtrusive and it slowly becomes a way of life that is set against God. As part of his appeal for unity in the church, the Apostle Paul urged the Philippians to "Do everything without grumbling or arguing" [2:14]. The Greek term Paul uses for grumbling, as in 1 Corinthians 10, alludes to the Israelites murmuring against Moses and against God as they wandered in the desert. Instead of trusting in God, the Israelites allowed a mood of complaint to swiftly turn their hearts away from God. Their mistrust and dissatisfaction threatened to destroy the very social fabric that provided the security and flourishing they so desired. Paul is concerned that in a similar way the Philippians have put the unity and witness of God's people at risk because they have allowed a mood of complaint and petty rivalry to seep into their midst.

At the heart of grumbling is the belief that what we have isn't good enough. Often times our ingratitude towards God comes in varying disguises: maybe we call it "constructive criticism," or a concern for spiritual fulfillment. However we choose to mask it, when left unchecked, ingratitude will destroy our communities and leads us away from God. That is why Paul urges the Philippians to do everything without grumbling. For gratitude is a defining marker of God's children. If we are to live in grateful dependence on God we must fix our gaze in the right direction.

As the season of Lent calls us to examine our lives in light of Christ's death and resurrection, let us see clearly that God has provided everything we need and more in Jesus. When our communities are shaped by gratitude then we will be known for who we truly are, the children of God.

PLANS FOR RESTORATION AND RENEWAL

Jeremiah 33:10-16

We want to believe in God's miraculous work of renewal, but when desolation is what confronts us on a daily basis our faith suffers. Broken lives offer not only dramatic witness to the pervasiveness of human suffering, but they seemingly call us to question the possibility of change, much less transformation. This is especially true when human actions bring ruin for the agents committing the acts, as well as for others around them. What is there to do in the face of suffering except lament?

The people living in the desolation described by the prophet Jeremiah might have concluded that their situation was irreversible. Even God acknowledged the bleakness of the scene in Jeremiah 33:10—or did He? Actually, Jeremiah records God's words acknowledging what God heard from the people who were in exile, but the sentiments were theirs, not God's. God had plans far beyond the expectation of the people, plans for restoration and renewal.

In the midst of human despair, people forget that God is in the business of doing what humans deem impossible. Human wisdom does not grasp the certainty of God's gracious plan, but God speaks and acts with a definitiveness that rebukes human doubt. Jeremiah records not that God is capable of transforming the barren countryside; rather, he says that "in all its towns there *will* again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks" (33:12, emphasis added). God's plan to restore the land is as certain as the reality of the desolation itself.

In the midst of calamity, it is easy to become overwhelmed by hopelessness and reduce faith to a willingness to believe that God *could* make things different. The hope of the glory of Christ's ministry is that things *will* be different, and not only that, immeasurably beyond what we ask or think. It was inconceivable that God might have a future for the people who languished in desolation. It was inconceivable that the rabbi from Nazareth could bring any good to His hearers.

It is inconceivable that the broken relationships, the horrendous injustices, the flinty-hard attitudes that plague us can change. People don't change. But God changes people. That is what He does; that is what He *will* do.

SUNDAY REST

The Donkey

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born;

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

G. K. CHESTERTON // *[The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (London: Cecil Palmer, 1927), 297]*

We praise and bless you, ever-living God, for the acts of love by which you redeem the world through Jesus Christ our Lord. This day he entered the holy city of Jerusalem and was proclaimed king by those who spread their garments and palm branches along his way. Let these branches be for us a sign of his victory; and grant that we who bear them may always acclaim Jesus Messiah by walking the way of his suffering and cross; that, dying and rising with him, we may enter into your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

BCP

THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF JESUS

Mark 11:1-11

As a young boy I often felt sorry for Jesus every time I heard the Easter story. Jesus was too good a person, I thought, to deserve all the terrible things that happened to Him. In my naïveté, I assumed Jesus was a victim of unfortunate circumstances. But was Jesus really blindsided by events that led to His crucifixion?

Passion week began with Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Many in Jerusalem "spread their cloaks on the road, others spread leafy branches that they cut from the fields" (11:8). Many sang: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest" (11:9)! This royal reception was short lived. As the week unfolded, Jesus' authority was questioned; He was betrayed, denied three times, arrested, condemned and crucified by the end of the week.

Prior to His arrival and triumphant entry into Jerusalem, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples into Jerusalem saying, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately'" (11:2-3). This was no easy assignment. At the time, Jerusalem was bursting with almost two million sojourners who came to celebrate the Jewish Passover. There were people and animals everywhere! Sure enough, the disciples walked into the city and found the colt Jesus talked about tied to a post (11:4-6). What Mark is highlighting here is what he highlights throughout his Gospel—the foreknowledge of Jesus.

In Mark 10:32-24, Jesus, speaking to His disciples, was very specific about His sufferings, death and resurrection as He led the way to Jerusalem. He led the way to Jerusalem knowing Judas would betray Him. He led the way to Jerusalem knowing that Peter would deny Him three times. He led the way to His crucifixion for the forgiveness of the sins of the Pharisees and sinners who hated Him and opposed Him at every turn. He knew, He planned and He accomplished everything! Praise God for demonstrating His remarkable, overwhelming love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)!

DRAWING CLOSE

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

I need to start with a confession (which apparently is a good thing anyway). I don't really like Lent. I like Easter, but Lent not as much. There, I said it, even in a Lenten devotional. It tends to make me anxious and challenges so many things in my life that I don't like to be challenged in, including my patterns, comforts and disciplines (or lack thereof). Some people look forward to it with such anticipation and can't wait for Ash Wednesday to kick it off. I don't get that, as it hasn't been my story. Instead, I typically go days into the Lenten season with procrastinators' guilt for not having really landed on what it is that I'm "giving up for Lent," finding that my "no decision" is actually a decision. But then I'm reminded that Lent isn't just about "giving up," it is about "drawing close" and making room for God. Our text today helps us with our response as we draw close to the God who has done so much for us and frames our response.

Our human striving melts away in meaning and purpose when flooded with the truth of what God has already done. This text reminds us of God's upside down kingdom—how our wisdom and effort are really nothing at all compared to what God has already done for us (1:30); righteousness (being made right with God through Jesus Christ), sanctification (made pure and holy because of the cross), and redemption (freed from the weight and consequences of our sin). This is the hope and promise of Resurrection Sunday that we are preparing for.

Our role, as seen in this text, might be framed as proclamation and testimony. Proclamation by way of preaching and daily conversations that speak of the truth and effects of what God has done in the world, and testimony by way of living and declaring the truth of a transformed life. This is the work of fools. This is the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ that can change the world. This is our response of worship.

A CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Hebrews 12:1-2a

These days we get a bit of a sense of what a great cloud of witnesses might look like. The word “cloud” was a classical Greek metaphor for a large multitude. Today we might think of iCloud and the age of easy access to the multitudes through electronic means. What might that mean for running the good race?

It is not clear whether the witnesses that are spoken of in verse 1 are in heaven or on earth. However, with Facebook, Twitter, Google search, etc. it seems as though anyone and everyone’s life is on display. We are beginning to see the consequences of openness to our lives by countless witnesses known and unknown here on earth.

Sometimes the fruit of the Spirit is revealed and broadcast. Take for example the courage it must have taken for Craig Wayne Boyd on the TV show *The Voice* to sing “The Old Rugged Cross”—one of the most moving renditions I have ever heard—in front of millions of people. Usually the masses expect secular songs, but in this case the multitudes heard the truth of our Lord suffering on the cross for our sins.

By contrast, sometimes “a great cloud of witnesses” is exposed to the dark side of our human persona. Who hasn’t heard of the harm being done to our young through exploitation on the internet? In these cases the cloud of witnesses are being exposed to the dark side of humanity.

We are invited by this passage in Hebrews to be aware that there is a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on.

If we accept the invitation, we may, with the help of the Holy Spirit, throw off everything that hinders us, whether it is a personal habit that does not help the light of Jesus shine, a temptation that will do more harm than good or a sin that encumbers the advancement of God’s kingdom.

For those of us who desire to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” let us be encouraged to be an example online and in life, as we factor in the impact of being in front of a cloud of witnesses while we run our race fixing our eyes on Jesus.

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WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET

Exodus 12:1-14;
John 13:1-17, 31-35

Maundy Thursday commemorates the events on the day before Good Friday when, according to John's Gospel, during the Last Supper Jesus washed His disciples' feet (13:1-11), a job that would normally have been assigned to a servant. After resuming His place at the meal, Jesus instructed His disciples to follow His example as their Teacher and Lord by washing one another's feet (13:12-17), since "servants are not greater than their master" (13:16).

The link between the Passover feast that celebrates the emancipation of Israel from Egyptian servitude and the Last Supper is well established in the New Testament. Already at the beginning of the Gospel of John, there are resonances with aspects of the story of God's redemptive action in liberating the Israelites. John the baptizer announces that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29; cf. 1:36) and the Son of God (1:34; cf. 1:49). At the heart of Passover observance is the sacrificial lamb, whose blood serves as a sign, not of the forgiveness of sins *per se* but of protection during the course of the tenth plague when the firstborn of Egypt die (Exodus 12:13). That plague represents just retribution for one Pharaoh's refusal to let Israel, the LORD's "firstborn son," go in order to serve him (Exodus 4:22-23), and for an earlier Pharaoh's institution of a policy of Israelite male infanticide (Exodus 1:15-16, 22). Matthew forges a link between Israel as God's son and Jesus as the ultimate Son of God when, in reference to the return of Jesus and His parents to their homeland after their flight to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rampage in Bethlehem, he quotes the LORD's declaration in the book of Hosea concerning the exodus: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1). Matthew thereby connects theologically God's rescue of Israel with the rescuing action of the one who is named Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

In Jewish liturgical tradition, the Song of Songs is read during the Passover festival. This love poetry is interpreted as an expression of the love between God and His people. God's enduring commitment to the children of Israel is clearly manifested when He liberates them from Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 7:8-9). In that light, it seems fitting that Jesus' "new commandment" to those whose feet He has washed should be that they love one another as He has loved them (John 13:34). Holy Week is surely a time in which to ponder the unfathomable expression of divine love in the person of Jesus, and to follow His lead in demonstrating that love to others.

IT IS FINISHED

John 18:1-19:42

Jesus' end begins by being betrayed. His identity attested to, He's arrested. The Prince of Peace is then misrepresented by His own alliance's violence. The Son of Man is handed over, abandoned and finally denied by His most vital disciple. The Great High Priest is questioned by the least of high priests, and struck by an official for speaking openly: "There is only hope in me." Pompous leaders with malice mean to stay clean, they won't cross the brink of Pontius' palace. They say He's seized because Jesus would see Caesar cease. Inside He's interrogated and berated, yet elevated to the status of King, though Truth Himself is doubted and flouted. Stupefied, the self-righteous, riotous mob cry to see the Messiah crucified. The Passover Lamb ends up passed over for a murderer. God is flogged, given a mocker's makeover, and then dressed in majestic purple while given purple wounds with no dressing. Addressed as innocent by the governor, the government weighed heavy on His heavenly, heaving shoulders amidst shudders. Jesus tried, then crucified, crucified. The sign sings the good news the confused had refused: Jesus "King of the Jews." The Lord forlorn, though forewarned, His simple seamless garment is not torn unlike the temple veil, signifying where harm is meant, peace will prevail. As His vigor dips, the Son of God sips bitter vinegar, but the pain lingers. His lips split to echo the refrain of the Psalm singer, if in a tone diminished: "It is finished." The Life denied, with that cry Jesus died for the blind seduced by Lucifer's lies. But as the prophet had spoken, His legs were not broken, for blood and water left the ground soaking where the spear poked Him, fiercely piercing the Prince. It left soldiers convinced of His death. A despondent respondent, the whole globe is robed in darkness as before creation, and the earth shakes and groans as it takes the Word that atones our salvation.

CAUGHT BETWEEN DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Ezekiel 37:1-3

Can you imagine Ezekiel's scene? The Spirit of the LORD sets you in the lowlands of an immense and desolate valley. Look around. Don't just scan over it all, as if you have somewhere else to be. Look closely. Peer up the ridges of the hillside. Notice the expanse. Gaze over the land from East to West. Notice the coverage. Look to your feet. Notice the detail. Then the LORD causes you to walk through it all. Death is obvious; life is not. Isn't it?

We are at this point in our Lenten journey. We're at the tomb. And God would have us linger here, for we need to experience the awkward silence of death. We must remain at the feet of Jesus in the tomb in order to contemplate all that has happened—His life, His passion, His death and His descent. At this point we weep: "O Lord our God, we will sing to You a funeral hymn, a song at Your burial: for by Your burial You have opened for us the gates of life, and by Your death you have slain death and hell. All things above and all beneath the earth quaked with fear at Your death, as they beheld You, our Saviour, upon Your throne on high and in the tomb below. For You lie before our eyes in a way beyond our understanding: a corpse and yet the very source of life" (Matins of Holy Saturday in *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware [South Canaan: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1994]).

Holy Saturday is the day in which what we see clashes with reality. What we see is the dark tomb and the dry bones. And yet, there is an oddity to the grave of Christ. In reality it isn't a place of darkness and defeat; rather, it's the place of all life and victory. Today is the day we contemplate this paradox. So we must remain caught between the death of yesterday and the resurrection of tomorrow.

We're mourning Jesus' death, aren't we? But our sorrow is grounded in the oddity of Christ's grave and the promise of His resurrection. So, let our sadness be in the knowledge of what is to come. For even Ezekiel was given an idea of what to expect when the LORD said: "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the Word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD'" (37:4-6).

Therefore, hold out the night. Mourn the death of Christ, but do so expecting God will meet you tomorrow with all that He has promised.

HE IS RISEN!

Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, 20-28

The stunning proclamation, “He is Risen,” frantically delivered to the grief-stricken and confused apostles by the women who discovered the empty tomb on Easter morning was summarily dismissed at first as “nonsense.” With one exception: the impetuous Peter who ran to the tomb to check this story out for himself. Peter had had a very rough week—his initial refusal to allow Jesus to wash his feet, his ill-advised knife attack on Malchus, a servant of the High Priest, his emphatic and unequivocal promise to follow Jesus even to death, followed shortly after by an equally emphatic series of denials. Peter is the first apostle to think that the strange proclamation might just possibly be true, and if so, that it would truly be “good news.” Perhaps it was fitting that Peter was the first apostle to meet the risen Lord.

It is hard to imagine the impact of such an incredulous announcement on these first-century women and men, as their dazed disbelief, shock and anxiety was gradually transformed into amazement, hope and the realization that they had witnessed the most momentous event in human history ever to warrant the description of “epic” and “awesome.”

In his letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul who met Jesus in a most unexpected and unique encounter on the Damascus Road, also highlights the significance of the resurrection as the climax of a good-news story: “If Christ had not been raised, then all our preaching and faith is useless” (15:14). The world’s most famous theologian begins his extended discussion of the resurrection by intentionally using a succinct summary of the Gospel, later known as “the rule of faith,” to reinforce his claim of authenticity and consistency that the Gospel he received, and that the Corinthians received through him, is that of the apostles. Such summaries, which culminated in the Apostles’ Creed, were widely used by the early church as the standard against which to test religious practices and theological opinions.

The ecstatic proclamation, “He is Risen,” first made by the women to the gathered apostles, and later boldly declared by Paul to countless others throughout the Mediterranean basin, has for two millennia been repeated by Christian communities around the world, and now belongs to us. How do we recognize that we have seen the Lord, how have we been transformed by our encounter with Jesus Christ, and how do we now make this glorious truth known to those around us?

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