



2018 Lenten Devotions

Written by pastors of the
Alberta – British Columbia District

“The Road to Restoration” - Introduction

Just last fall, we celebrated the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. It was on October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In the first thesis Luther wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Lent is a season of repentance, calling us to reflect not only on our sins, but especially on Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins: His passion, His suffering and death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead.

A year ago, pastors in our Alberta - British Columbia District wrote this series of Lenten Devotions to address the very issue that Luther mentioned in his first thesis. The purpose of the devotions was to make resources available to members of District congregations to guide people to a deeper understanding of God’s Word, especially regarding confession and forgiveness. The same devotions are offered again this year.

Each week of Lent, two specific themes will be dealt with, using stories of Bible people and passages of Bible truth. It is hoped that these devotions will take us all on “The Road to Restoration” – which is nothing less than the road to the cross of Christ, where forgiveness and reconciliation both begin and end.

You are invited to join us on this road during Lent. On this journey, may God lead us corporately to true humility, authentic confession, ready and full forgiveness, and complete restoration and reconciliation with both Him and each other... all for the sake of the Gospel.

I Have Sinned - Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018

"Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'"

2 Samuel 12:13

"Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight." – Psalm 51:4

King David – a man after God's own heart – sinned grievously. It all started with the Tenth Commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife..." He did. He coveted Bathsheba. But his sin didn't stop with coveting. He moved down the list to the Sixth Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." He did that, too. Unfortunately for him, his adultery with Bathsheba led to an unplanned pregnancy – a problem that won't go away. Then he connived to break the Eighth Commandment, hoping to deceive Uriah (Bathsheba's husband) into believing that he was the father of his wife's child. When that didn't work, David had to resort to breaking the Fifth Commandment ("You shall not kill") so as not to lose face publicly.

God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin. (You can read more about the whole story in 2 Samuel II and 12.) When David was challenged with the truth of what he had done, he boldly and bravely confessed his sin - to Nathan, but more importantly to God. (Psalm 51 is a penitential psalm penned by David after his adultery with Bathsheba, and after Nathan opposed the king for his sinfulness.)

Confession, acknowledging one's sin, is the first step on the Road to Restoration... with the person we have sinned against, and, more importantly, with God.

These Lenten devotions will point to sins no less grievous than David's. Various sins will be singled out. Like ancient Nathan, these devotions will serve as a prophet calling us to repentance, calling us to confess "I have sinned against the Lord," - whether that be bitterness, resentment and holding a grudge, or failures to love our neighbour, or grievous moral faults like those of David.

But these devotions will also lead us along the Road to Restoration. "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation," was David's plea later in Psalm 51. That is our plea, too, both individually and corporately as a church body. God has answered that plea in the person of His Son, Jesus, who IS our salvation. The Road to Restoration is ultimately the road to the cross, where Jesus died to win the victory over our sins, and the death and punishment they deserve. The Road to Restoration does not end until we have walked past the tomb and peered in to see that it is empty - God's certain sign that, in Christ, we have been restored... now and eternally.

Prayer: Have mercy on me, O God, for my sinfulness, and for the sake of Your Son. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

God May Relent – February 15, 2018

"God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish." – Jonah 3:9

Usually when we read from the Book of Jonah, our focus is on that run-away prophet who fled from God's missionary call, who endured the storm at sea, who was swallowed by a great fish, and whose name identifies that Bible book. Jonah was no saint, and if we want to focus on a theme of repentance, we could certainly talk about Jonah futilely fleeing from the presence of the Lord, and about his change of heart from the belly of the fish: "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress."

But there is another sinful character in the story that deserves our attention - the entire city of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh were to be the intended audience of Jonah's call to repentance, "for their evil has come up before me," says God at the outset of the story. That evil included such things as plotting against the Lord, wanton cruelty, prostitution, materialism, and arrogance - sins identified also in Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh.

When Jonah heeded God's second call to cry out against the great city of Nineveh, the message reached the king, and it had God's intended impact. The king issued a decree for everyone in the city to be clothed in sackcloth and ashes, and to observe a fast, with the hope that "God may... relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

Yesterday was Ash Wednesday, a similar day of repentance for us. Some of our sins - like materialism and arrogance - are no different from those of the ancient Ninevites. Other sins are more contemporary, like addictions to work, pornography, drugs or alcohol, technology, leisure or pleasure.

By the decree of God Almighty, we all, whether "king," "noble" or "common man or woman" are urged to "call out mightily to God" praying that "God may... relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish." In Jonah's time, God honoured the true repentance of the Ninevites and did not overthrow the city. God has also deflected His righteous anger over our sins, heaping the punishment for those sins onto His own Son, Jesus. In fact, Jesus once compared Himself to Jonah - Jonah being in the belly of the fish for three days, Jesus being in the belly of the earth for three days until He rose from the dead. The phrase "so that we may not perish" is much more meaningful to US Christians in John 3:16 - "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him SHOULD NOT PERISH but have eternal life." We have a gracious God, who for the sake of His Son, has relented and offers us His free gift of eternal life.

Prayer: Holy God, when our willful sins lead to Your righteous anger over those sins, look at us through the redeeming work of Your Son, and forgive us so that we do not perish. Amen.

Forgiven Much... Loves Much - February 16, 2018

"Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much." – Luke 7:47

In His teaching and in His personal interactions, Jesus gave several examples of lavish forgiveness. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, that servant was initially forgiven of an unpayable ten thousand talent debt. In John 8, Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, even when everyone else was ready to stone her to death. In Luke 19, Jesus brought forgiveness and salvation to the hated, cheating chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, for he, too, was a son of Abraham.

In Luke 7, Jesus' dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee was, in the opinion of Simon, rudely interrupted by a sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment and with her own tears of repentance. He was offended that Jesus would even allow this woman to be near him, let alone to touch him and take up his attention. "He would know... that she is a sinner."

But as with all who are troubled by their own sinfulness, she was the one who knew she was a sinner, and somehow she knew that Jesus was the one who could do something about it. She expressed both her personal repentance and her love for Jesus in her action of anointing. That prompted Jesus' parable about the two men whose monetary debts were forgiven. He pressed his host for the "moral of the story" – who will love the moneylender more?

Simon was not theologically naïve, and he answered correctly. Then, just as the prophet Nathan applied a parable to King David saying "You are the man," Jesus also applied His story to Simon's response, concluding "Her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." To the woman, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

When we recognize the many sins in our own lives, the person to unashamedly go to is Jesus – the Forgiver, the Redeemer, the Saviour. He is God's grace... in person! Like the sinful woman, our faith [in Jesus] has saved us. We can go in peace, and in love... great love!

Prayer: Gracious God, give us the spiritual discernment to recognize our own sinfulness, the humility to come to You in repentance, and the faith to receive Your full and free forgiveness... for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Have Mercy on Me - February 17, 2018

*“But the tax-collector stood at a distance... and said,
‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’” – Luke 18:13*

Jesus’ parable of the two men who went to the temple to pray highlights two different attitudes to prayer and to life. The Pharisee’s posture, attitude and words point exactly to the phrases Luke used to introduce the parable – one who was “confident of [his] own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.” The Pharisee stood up. He “prayed about himself.” He compared his morality to that of “other men.” (God, keep us from such attitudes and such prayers!)

In contrast, the tax-collector humbled himself – he didn’t look up to heaven, he beat his breast, and he honestly and simply prayed, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Think of it this way. Every person demonstrates “good” and “bad” in his/her life at various times and occasions. If sins cling on to our lives like clothespins pinned to the bottom of a long sleeve, then we could picture both the Pharisee and the tax-collector going to pray with one sleeve hanging with clothespins (sins) and the other sleeve empty (representing good deeds). The Pharisee looked at the empty sleeve side of his life – the good deeds of fasting and tithing – and went home with all of his sins still clinging on to the other sleeve side of his life. The tax-collector looked at the clothespin sleeve of his life, and could only conclude, “Look at this mess I have made of my life. God, I’m a sinner, have mercy on me, forgive me.” God is a God of mercy, He did forgive, and – in the words of Jesus’ conclusion – “this man... went home justified before God.”

In Hebrews 12, the writer calls on us to “throw off... the sin that so easily entangles (clings on).” How do we do that? We do it in the same way as Jesus illustrated in the person of the tax-collector – by humble repentance and authentic confession: “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Whether our sins are the blatant ones that everyone recognized in a tax-collector, or whether they are the proud and arrogant (and sometimes hidden) ones that Jesus pointed out in the prayer, posture and attitude of the Pharisee, the only way to get unentangled from our sins is to come to Jesus to be justified. Hebrews 12 continues, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..., who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame...” It was on the cross that Jesus squeezed every sin-clothespin of ours, taking it from our lives – completely, eternally. That was His joy that was His gift that was His grace. You are justified before God!!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when sin entangles us, lead us to humble repentance and authentic confession, and give us the joy and peace of Your mercy and justification. Amen.

Broken Trust – February 18, 2018

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” - Ephesians 5:21

“Till death do us part.” I spoke those words when I got married. Those words were spoken in the presence of God, my family and friends, and of course in the presence of my beautiful bride. I meant those words. I really did. Through the thick and thin of our 24 years together, I vowed to always be there for my wife. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since I made that pledge. I’m not going to lie. Sometimes its been smooth sailing while at other times the water has been much more turbulent! Here’s a question for you. In a marriage, what happens when someone doesn’t fulfill their part of the bargain? I think we all know what happens. It’s inevitable that over time this kind of action or inaction can erode the trust between husband and wife. When we continually fail on some level to fulfill the promise “to have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer”, the relationship climate over time can change to point where it is downright chilly to say the least. I’ve been guilty of climate change in my marriage. There are times I’ve given the silent treatment. I’ve been guilty of not listening with a sensitive ear. I’ve even been tempted to stop caring all together when things weren’t going my way. I don’t know about you but I can be very self-centered. I can be so devoted to “other things” instead of the significant ones whom God has given me... so much so that I can be emotionally unavailable to the ones that I love the most.

Thankfully, God gave me a spouse who has almost always managed to break through to me when it matters most. She’ll ask, “Are WE okay?” I can think of times when the climate in our marriage has gone unchecked for a while and the warmth and trust was eroding and my wife had to lovingly confront me on things I’ve needed to acknowledge and work on. Sadly (but thankfully for me) she had to be the one to take the lead on occasion because she recognized that the climate in the relationship had changed from warm and open to cold and closed off. I think our marriage is still thriving because of that “mutual submission out of reverence for Christ” that Paul writes about to the Ephesians. It has allowed the relationship to get back on track when it has gone off the rails. It has allowed for health and vibrancy to take hold again. What to do when trust is broken? It’s not if but when it happens in marriage. It can happen in big ways and small ways but make no mistake it does happen “till death do us part”.

When you think about the relationships in your life, please remember this. Because of Christ’s good and perfect work in His life and death and resurrection, we know that even when our relationships cool and trust is eroded or even broken, God is faithful. He is ALWAYS faithful. He is always trustworthy. In submission, He gave His life so that we would fully live now and eternally. In life and death, our Lord is always holding up His end of the bargain. And because He does, we can know that although our marriages are far from perfect, we are indeed perfectly forgiven!

Prayer: Thank You, God, for being faithful and trustworthy. Lead us also to be faithful and to work toward renewed relationships when trust is broken; for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Unfinished Business – February 19, 2018

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." - John 21:16

One of my favourite stories in the New Testament is the one where Jesus re-instates Simon Peter. Do you know the one? Have you wrestled with the depth of love that Jesus demonstrated to Peter especially after Peter denied even knowing His Lord in one particular evening, not once, not twice, but three times! I'm not saying I would be any better. Plus, if I was Peter, I'm sure I could think of all kinds of excuses that could justify my behaviour on that night which undoubtedly had to be one of the most stressful nights of his life. Peter, despite his best effort and intention denied knowing His Lord. He disavowed any connection with Jesus. Hey Peter! Aren't you a follower of Jesus? Peter says, "No!" Hey Peter! You aren't connected to that Jesus guy, are you? Nope. Hey Peter, I'm pretty sure I saw you in the garden tonight when Jesus was arrested. Wasn't that you there fighting off the authorities? A third time, Peter says, "No way!"

Stop for a minute and think about this. Can you imagine doing that to your best friend? Your kids? Your spouse? Maybe on our worst of days, I guess we could imagine throwing a friend under the bus (it's just a figure of speech). But impetuous Peter (he was at times, wasn't he?) had walked with Jesus and heard his Kingdom teachings and seen His life changing miracles only to turn on Him when He needed his friends most. Peter broke a bond. A trust. Jesus had been there for Peter in so many ways over the last three years teaching, serving, and walking together but now Peter couldn't and wouldn't hold up his end of the deal when he promised Jesus. Remember Peter's declaration? Peter was recorded in Matthew as saying, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. Let's press pause on this story for a second.

Isn't it great when you know someone has your back, when someone supports you and encourages you along the journey of life, when you can count on someone to be there when you need them the most? Here's a personal question for you. Is Jesus that person for you? I hope so. He certainly was for Peter. You see, Jesus was forsaken not just by His closest friends but by the Heavenly Father himself left to suffer on the cross for your sins and mine. Crucified, Jesus broken body was hastily placed in a tomb. On the third day, Jesus became alive again conquering our feared enemies death and the grave. The story doesn't end there. Jesus had some unfinished business to attend to when he walked out of the tomb alive. What to do with Peter? He lovingly confronts Peter. Do you love me unconditionally Peter, you know, how I love you? Peter sheepishly answers, Jesus you know I love you like a brother. You know I have deep affection for you. Three times Jesus asks, "Do you love me with an unconditional kind of love?" While Peter certainly did care for Jesus, Peter couldn't honestly say that He loved Jesus unconditionally. Peter's love was conditional. It had a limit and he had clearly demonstrated that limit on the night Jesus was betrayed. But with each truthful and loving question by Jesus to his friend Peter, Jesus opens the door wide to a renewed relationship with Peter. Even though Peter was hurt, Jesus wanted him to learn a life giving lesson that day. In my own words, I think Jesus was saying, "I've got your back. I always will. No matter what. Never forget Peter, my love for you is selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional." May God grant you the assurance of His love too.

Ripped Off! – February 20, 2018

*“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” - John 10:10*

Have you ever been ripped off by Jesus? I have. Just once though, thankfully! Let me explain. My wife and I were working at a Christian inter-denominational school south of Mexico in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala for one year. Michelle was a sixth grade teacher. I taught Physical Education to the entire student body and Grade 8 math. Before the academic year could even begin, much work had to be done in order to prepare the school facilities and its beautiful outdoor playground and sports field. Administrative office space was just newly built and needed some paint and furnishing. The grassy soccer field was overgrown and the grounds had been somewhat neglected over the summer. Various things needed to be repaired. The list of things to do was long and extensive and long enough, in fact, that the entire administrative and teaching staff was commandeered to get the school in shape before we could welcome a single student to the new academic year.

As part of my contribution, I took on some of the outdoor yard work since part of my classroom included the soccer field. The grass was thick and long but the mower blade was old and dull. Without a sharp blade, I wasn't sure I was going to make any progress towards getting the field and yard back to a playable condition. I had an easy choice to make... “Work smarter, not harder” someone told me so I removed the blade from the mower to get it sharpened. It was that or cut the long grass with a sickle!

Joel, a friend of mine, offered to walk with me to a shop in town that could sharpen the blade. Speaking Spanish, Joel greeted the shop owner and asked how much to sharpen the mower blade. “¿Cuánto cuesta?” The nice man quoted us “diez”. That's 10 quetzales (Guatemalan currency), a fair price in our minds considering that amounted to about one U.S. Dollar. We left the blade with the kind man and returned later. Joel handed the man 10 quetzales. The shop owner shakes his head from side to side and says, “No, no,” and he emphasised the words, “*diez dólares!*” In case you are not bilingual, the now not-so-nice man wanted 10 dollars... 10 US Dollars for sharpening the mower blade. Not happy at the supposed misunderstanding, Joel insisted the man accept our original deal. Indicating our displeasure, Joel, upset, asks the man's name. He responded flatly, “Jesús” . In case you are not bilingual, that's Spanish for Jesus! No joke. Joel pressed the man further for his dishonesty and reminded the man that his deceitful actions did not fit with the good name of Jesus! It's funny now. It wasn't funny then. Jesús ripped us off. Trust was broken. We left the sharpened mower blade with the man never to return. Don't worry, the grass did get eventually get cut after we found an extra blade we in the maintenance shed. Here's a tip, if you are ever in Quetzaltenango, don't go to the shop owned and operated by Jesús.

Have you ever been ripped off? Even by one who bears the name of the Christ. What I mean to say, “has a Christian ever done something to hurt you?” How did you respond? Was money involved? Have you ever been ripped off so much so, you are not sure if you ever could trust that person again?” Yeah? Me too. You spend enough time around Christians, one or two or more are certainly

bound to let you down. You are not alone. I don't know much but I do know this. You and I have the real Jesus. Never forget you have Jesus. Not Quetzaltanango's Jesus'. You have heaven's Jesus. He will never let you down and He will bring healing and forgiveness to every and all situation where you have been hurt and treated badly. Thieves steal. The Saviour gives life. A life full of truth and grace and blessing. As you are reminded of the abundant life Jesus earned for you this day, may you honor the name of Jesus in all you say and do. May you "fear and love God that we may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks." (Luther's explanation of the 2nd commandment)

Responsibility to Forgive (Joseph) - February 21, 2018

"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them." - Genesis 50:19-21

Friends, you and I have a responsibility. In fact, we have many responsibilities. In all the areas of life to which we have been called, there has been a "burden" placed upon us to do what we have been called to do to the glory of God, and the good of our fellow man.

This is to reveal itself in both faith and love. St. Paul teaches in Galatians 5:6 that "...only faith working through love" counts. We are called to trust in God, and to express this faith in love towards one another.

The patriarch Joseph was a man with massive responsibilities. God had raised Joseph from slavery, captivity, and the prison house to second in command of all Egypt. He had further responsibilities as a husband and father. He had responsibilities as a son and brother.

This last set would have been difficult, because it would be hard to act in love towards those who had harmed him. After all, his brothers were responsible for him being in Egypt in the first place. They had acted in jealousy, condemning him to servitude, and lying to their father about it.

As you recall, a famine came upon the whole region, but the Lord had prepared Egypt for this through visions and insights to both the Pharaoh and Joseph. They had plenty of grain stored away. The brothers go to Egypt with the consent of their father to purchase supplies. Unaware of it, they make the purchase from Joseph. He has a responsibility to make them "pay." He in effect implements "restorative justice."

He eventually reveals himself to them. They move to Goshen. Then their father, Jacob, passes. They fear Joseph's wrath that he was perhaps holding off for the sake of their father. They plead with him for mercy. He has it for them, for faith in God compels him in the direction of forgiveness. He says to them: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them." (Genesis 50:19-21).

God speaks kindly to us, even though we do not deserve it. Through His Word made flesh, who went to the cross as our substitute, we are forgiven. Like with Joseph, it is our responsibility, challenge, and honor to forgive our brothers and sisters when they sin against us. We do so in faith and trust in God, who after all has promised to make everything beautiful in its own time (Eccl. 3:11).

Prayer: Help me to fulfill the responsibility I have as one forgiven in Christ to forgive my brothers and sisters from the heart. Amen.

Responsibility to Forgive (Deacons) - February 22, 2018

“Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty” - Acts 6:3

The reason that it is often said that “it just isn’t fair,” is because often life just isn’t. We are not always treated fairly. Sometimes this happens by those who are in spiritual authority over us.

You see, the church in this world often finds itself torn. On the one hand, it is a heavenly kingdom, sometimes referred to as the “Kingdom of God’s right hand.” Still, it presently is in the world, which is God’s earthly kingdom, sometimes referred to as the “Kingdom of God’s left hand.” The Church exists to preach the Gospel, but in order to do so, it purchases buildings, pays salaries to its preachers, and does works of charity.

In Acts 6, the tasks before the Church were heavier than what it could handle. In their works of charity, the Greek widows were receiving less than the Hebrew widows. This was not right or fair. They had a responsibility to treat everyone fairly.

The problem was that the Apostles were too busy to be able to give that specific work the attention that it deserved. The answer was to appoint Deacons to attend to this, leaving them to focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer. The church was called upon to: “...pick out from among [them] seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom [they would] appoint to this duty” (Acts 6:3). The problem of unfairness was alleviated as they adopted a new structure, separating we might say, ecclesiastical duties from administrative duties.

When something unjust arises in the church, the responsible thing to do may be to evaluate what factors led to this, and seek to change how we operate so that it doesn’t keep happening.

I hope that the Greek widows didn’t hold a grudge for what had happened, and the unfair treatment they received. They too had a responsibility to accept the admission of the disciples that they needed the help of deacons, and forgive the unjust treatment they had received. They could hope for things to start getting better. They could move on too with the church and her mission.

If the church has treated you unfairly, it can be called on that. It can express repentance through making changes to its structure. We don’t have to separate ourselves from it. Instead, we can forgive, and move on.

How wonderful that our whole reason for being in a church is the forgiveness of our sins that we have received in Christ. Since God has so forgiven us through faith in His Son, we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, forgive one another.

Prayer: Lord, may we seek to forgive injustices committed against us, even by the church, since we are forgiven of our sins by Christ our Lord. Bless our church as it seeks new structure, which possibly will make more distinction between ecclesiastical and administrative duties. Amen.

Responsibility to Forgive (Doing our Duty) - February 23, 2018

*"So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say,
'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" Luke 17: 10*

Ephesians 4:32 tells us: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." This is one of many passages in Scripture that make it clear that you and I are to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving.

This does not come to us easily or naturally. As the sinners that you and I remain, we don't like to be this way, especially towards others who have not treated us in a kind or tenderhearted manner. To them, we respond with resentment, bitterness, and grudges. We might even seek to even the score.

But Jesus challenges us in the Sermon on the Mount, saying: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:46-47). Clearly, our Lord calls us to do "more."

Not in our own power, but in His, we can do "more." We can forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart when they sin against us. It is nothing for which we deserve thanks and praise. It is simply our "duty."

We might say that we have the responsibility to forgive. It's not an option for the baptized child of God, washed from sin in the atoning blood of Christ that He shed for us at His cross. How can one forgiven do any other?

Jesus taught in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" "That is why we seek to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. It is because God in Christ has forgiven you and me.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to fulfill my responsibility to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving, doing more than what I can in my own strength do towards others who have sinned against me. I thank You that I am forgiven through faith in Christ, my Savior. Amen.

Responsibility to Forgive (Preach the Word) - February 24, 2018

*“As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering,
do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” - 2 Timothy 4:5*

In his letter to Timothy, St. Paul has a lot of instructions for this young pastor. He calls it a “charge.” It’s like a “load” placed on the back of a beast of burden. It would be Timothy’s burden to carry. He was to have a ministry of the Word, teaching and preaching Jesus Christ, - born, crucified, risen, ascended, and returning. There would be times and places when people would want to hear it, and rejoice in the message. There would be times and places when the people would have no interest in it. Regardless of the times, Paul gives him the responsibility to “preach the word.”

You may not be called to be a pastor, but still, as a Christian, God has extended to you a call. You have some “ministry” to fulfill. You may not be so gifted or called to preach Christ with your “words.” However we certainly can all preach Christ in our actions.

What is an action that you can take so that you can do the work of an evangelist and fulfill your ministry? It may be to testify to Christ’s forgiveness to the world. You can do this in your own deeds, as you extend forgiveness to others.

Are there people in need of your forgiveness? Though the situations that caused the offense were not pleasant, nonetheless, they give you an opportunity to fulfill your ministry. You can glorify God as you extend the forgiveness that you have received in Christ towards those who have sinned against you.

Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Allow others to see the light of Christ as they see it shining through you.

It may seem like a “burden.” However, with Jesus in the “yoke,” the weight is easy, and the burden light (Mt. 11:30).

Prayer: Dear Lord, like You did with Timothy, help me to always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill my ministry. Help me to show the world your forgiveness, as you enable me to forgive others. Amen.

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve Apostles

- February 25, 2018

"When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick." - Luke 9: 1, 2 [Read: Luke 9:1-6, 10]

One of the most wonderful things that God has given to us as His people is the privilege of being a part of His mission for the world. We get to proclaim His Good News of sins forgiven in Jesus. In this text from Luke, Jesus is sending out His apostles to tell everyone that the Messiah who was to come, is now in fact here. He would break the bonds and shackles that Satan had inflicted on people, and bring healing.

The apostles went out into the world around them to bring this message and Word. Jesus gave them a great opportunity to be a part of His plan of Salvation that goes out into the world. They are now accountable to Jesus regarding what they proclaim and teach. So are we.

One of the things we don't like to do, or have a hard time bringing ourselves to do, is to go out and proclaim the Good News, preach the Gospel and share our faith with others, especially in the public sphere. It's uncomfortable. It brings to the forefront all of our fears and anxiety, so we would rather just remain silent and say nothing. Existing only for the sake of ourselves isn't what Jesus is getting at when he commissioned his apostles or as he sends us out today. We have a great message to share. We truly do have Good News that is for all people.

This isn't a message that we conjured up ourselves. The Gospel is that Jesus Christ has taken all of our sins, fears, anxieties, apprehensions, and died with them on the cross; nailing them and leaving them there. He has dealt with all that has separated us from our Heavenly Father. He has given us true healing, eternal life and eternal salvation. This is the Good News we bring out into the world, not a message of our own making, but one that Jesus gives to us to proclaim on His behalf. In Baptism we are given the Holy Spirit, who opens our mouths and proclaims Christ to the nations. For as St. Paul says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me." So we are sent, not alone but with Christ himself, to give His Word that never returns empty and the Word always accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent.

Prayer: O Lord open my lips and let my mouth declare your praise. You have redeemed me from this body of sin and death and given me eternal life and healing. May your Spirit continue to Work in my life to let me share your Gospel to world around me. Amen.

The Dishonest Manager - February 26, 2018

“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” – Luke 16:13

[Read: Luke 16:1-13]

The parable of the Dishonest Manager is a challenging one, especially in the world today. It is a pointed reminder of what we really should be striving towards in our lives. The manager in Jesus' parable is crafty, shrewd, and goes to great lengths to make sure that he will have a more pleasant exit out of his position as a manager. He gives each of the people who owed his master something a very good deal, a steep discount on what they owed. This manager is far more concerned with the hospitality and the good reception that he wants to receive now. Jesus points to something different, and far greater.

For many of us today we have indeed been entrusted and blessed with an abundance of extra wealth. We are not just living hand to mouth but are also able to put away for tomorrow. We can and really do become more concerned with things right now than with what actually has lasting substance into the future. Jesus points out in this parable the contrast between *unrighteous wealth* and *true riches*. True riches...that's rich. Jesus is sharing here once again that the real riches of this life have nothing to do with wealth or even the pursuit of it. It just isn't going to last. The true riches of this life is that of the Word made flesh, the Gospel, the Good News of sins forgiven through Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection is for every single one of us and through what he accomplished on Calvary's Cross He opens for us an eternal dwelling with our God forever. This is the lasting riches that Christ desires to share with each of us.

We, you, cannot serve two masters as Jesus says. Even as a servant of God you will and are tempted to turn your eyes and desires, to strive after the riches of this world as your motivation for living. Jesus warns against this as it cannot last in the end. Look to the true riches that God wants to give you. The riches that last, because in the richness of Christ, you have been given an eternal home with him. You have been promised that this body of sin that you possess will one day be done away with and you will be raised incorruptible and perfect. Death itself no longer holds any hold on you. The riches of the Gospel, that your sin has been forgiven, means that eternal life and the resurrection is yours, today and everyday.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, send your Spirit to turn my eyes always to you, that I may pursue your true riches. Forgive me when I fail and I desire the wealth of this life above you. Strengthen me and enable me to see in your Baptismal promise that you now dwell in me, have rescued me and will bring me to you in your eternal dwelling. Amen

Moses Delegating to Leaders - February 27, 2018

"Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone." - Exodus 18: 17 [Read: Exodus 18:1-24]

Burdens, burdens, burdens, burdens and more burdens. Responsibility. Looking after and caring for others, knowing that you have been entrusted with their care or put in a position of authority of them. This is an incredibly draining thing. Moses has been sitting with the people of Israel all day to judge their disputes and to give them the law of God. That doesn't sound so bad. However, there is a lot of them, not just a small group but an entire nation. That is a lot of people. Moses is worn down with their cares and concerns, judging between people. So he receives some unsolicited but very good advice from his father-in-law, which is essentially: You need help, you can't do it alone. As a result, Moses delegated parts of his responsibility to qualified individuals to help lessen the burden that he faced. He couldn't do it alone.

This is something that we all have faced at one time or another, the burden of great pressure and responsibility. The feeling that you've got to do it all. Maybe the weight of the world seems to be solely on your meek shoulders, and its crushing and pushing you into the ground. One of the beautiful things that God has blessed people with is other people. People who care about one another, who bear each others burdens. God has even given us a place where such people gather, the church. Those who are His people. Part of the Christian walk of faith together is burden sharing. You don't have to do it alone. You can't. As you are apart of the body of Christ, the church, allow others to come alongside of you to help lift the weight you carry. Whether it be concerns, health issues, stress, work, family, friends, whatever it may be, God has placed you with people who will walk with you so you don't have to do it alone.

As you struggle with whatever burden it is you are carrying, look to the one who carried your biggest burden Himself. Look to Jesus who carried your burden of sin upon Himself to the cross and nailed your sin to the tree and left it there. Look to His empty tomb, the resurrection promise, that what he did on the cross for you means that you too will rise with Him. He cared for you in a way too deep for words, as he died for you, carrying the impossible weight of sin for you. Cast your burdens on Jesus, as He will give you rest.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for how, in your divine love for me, you carried my sin to the cross and left it there. You have unburdened me with the gift of faith in your promise that I am your forgiven child. Help me to share my cares with others who you have placed around me so that together as your family we will walk in love. Help me also to see and care for all who are around me. Amen.

Investing Our Talents – February 28, 2018

Read: Matthew 25:14-27 The Parable of the Talents

God gives each of us talents, gifts and abilities. He entrusts us with the responsibility to invest them in service in His kingdom. He wants us to use our talents, to bring blessing to others by sharing in word and in action the kindness of His love in Christ Jesus.

A man gave three servants a different amount of talents. It's easy to focus on the talents, the amount and quality of each and forget our responsibility to use them. We can take pride in them, as if we got them ourselves, when in truth they are the gift of God. We can feel a false sense of humility and set aside the investment of our talents, because they seem lesser than the talents received by others. Both miss the point.

God gives us talents because He loves us. Whatever we may think of our talents in comparison with others they are a sign of God's love; to be received with humility and invested faithfully. We use our talents not to compete with others, but to express our love for God, who has given all of us equally the riches of His love in forgiveness and eternal life for the sake of Christ Jesus.

A man gave three servants a different amount of talents for the same purpose that they would use them in His affairs. Two servants expressed their love for their master by using their talents in his interests. Both brought a return on their investment. Their investment of His talents was a sign of their love in response to His love. As St. John said of our relationship with God, "*We love because He first loved us.*"

The wicked servant brought no return, he refused to invest the talent given to him. He did this because he did not love his master, thinking him hard and cruel. We know our Master in a different way, not as cruel and hard, but as loving and kind. He gave Jesus to be our Saviour. He opened our hearts through the word and working of the Holy Spirit, to believe in Him as our Lord. In Him we receive the wealth of God's love in mercy, forgiveness, peace and eternal life. Because He loves us, we love Him. Because He loves us He has entrusted us with talents to use in His service. We invest the talents He has given us in service in His kingdom, because we love Him.

Prayer: Thank you heavenly Father for the riches of your grace in forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Thank you for the talents you have given us, a sign of your love. Bless us to invest them in service to you and to others, as a sign of our love. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Who Do We Serve? – March 1, 2018

Read: Mark 10:17-22

Jesus said we cannot serve God and mammon (the things of the world). Do we possess the things we own? Or are we possessed by them?

A young man came to Jesus with a simple, yet infinitely profound and eternally important question: *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* There is no question more important than our eternal state of being. We have asked it ourselves and heard it asked by others. The jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Barnabas, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”* We know the answer, it is as simple and succinct as the question: Paul said, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”*

But, something stood between Jesus, salvation and the young man; his money. Actually, it was not the money, it was his relationship with his money. There is nothing wrong with money or any form of worldly wealth. We need money to live in the world. Money is a gift of God necessary for life in the world. What stood between Jesus and this man was his love of his money.

Jesus looked at the young man, loved him and said, *“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* If Jesus asked us to sell everything we possessed and give it away, would we be able to follow Him?

Whether we like it or not, the answer is “no.” We are by nature sinful and naturally and tenaciously cling to the things of the world we can touch and see, especially money. We fear the loss of our money. We are angry when our money is lost, or taken away. That is who and what we are by nature. But Jesus loves us as he loved the young man. He gives the Holy Spirit, who through word and sacrament opens our hearts to believe in Him as our Saviour. He gives the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and to create within us a new nature that loves Him more than it loves anything in world, a nature that counts everything as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Him.

We must live in the world and so we need money. But we also live with God in Christ and so we count the benefits of following Jesus as more valuable than all the wealth in the world and more important than all our money. He gives what money can never buy, forgiveness and resurrection to everlasting life. We follow Him in faith and serve Him with our money.

Prayer: Lord God grant that nothing separate us from Your love in Christ Jesus, but gladly forsake all our possessions and follow His call. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Treasure for Time and Eternity – March 2, 2018

Read: Matthew 6:19-21; 33

What images come to mind when you hear the word “treasure?” Gold bars stacked in a vault, locked behind four foot steel walls? The crown jewels of England encased in bullet proof glass to protect from thieves. The Mona Lisa encased in a climate controlled case to defend against the elements? As Jesus said, earthly treasure needs to be protected from moth, rust and thieves. Even pirates bury their stolen treasure to guard it from people like themselves.

What do you treasure in life? Treasure can be more than silver or gold and precious gems. Treasure can be an object that you associate with a departed loved one. Treasure can be the laughter of your children or grandchildren at play, spending time with your spouse. Treasure comes in many forms. We have heard the saying, “You can’t take it with you.” It means that when this life comes to a close all our treasures will pass from our hands into the hands of others. There is nothing wrong with treasuring the things of this life, be it worldly wealth or human relationships. They are the gift and blessing of God. Yet we treasure them with the understanding that they are for time and that we need a greater treasure for eternity.

There is no greater or more enduring treasure than the Kingdom of God and the Righteousness of Christ our Saviour. Jesus said, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.*” We seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, because He is the source of every treasure in time. He is the source of the greatest treasure, the gift of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life in Christ our Lord.

When our time comes, every treasure we have received will be returned to Him who gave it; except for one, the righteousness of Christ our Saviour. We treasure every good gift of life in view of the greatest treasure which endures forever, the love of God, life and salvation we receive from Him for the sake of Jesus our Saviour. Treasure for time and for eternity!

Prayer: Gracious God thank you for every treasure of time received from the bounty of Your love. Bless us to use our treasure to Your glory and when the time comes, enable us to return them to you with thankful hearts, knowing something better is yet to come. Bless us to value above all else the treasure of knowing Jesus as our Saviour and for the riches that endure forever, forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. In His Name. Amen

Contentment – March 3, 2017

Read: I Timothy 6:6-10

What would you do if you suddenly received a windfall of one million dollars? Granted a million dollars doesn't go as far as it used to, but it is a significant chunk of change. Most people would love to receive a huge bonanza of money. People who do may quit their job, go on an extended vacation and buy expensive toys. We imagine money would change our lives and it would, but not necessarily for the better.

Receiving a sudden windfall of cash can be as devastating as suffering a huge financial loss. It changes the way we look at life and even affects our relationship with God. People who strike it rich often lapse into laziness, become spendthrifts and burn through their money in no time flat, often ending up poorer than they were at the start. The way we look at money is important in our lives and in our relationship with God. Contentment comes not from money, it comes from God.

Paul warns not against money, but against the love of money, saying it is the root of all kinds of evils. The problem lies not in money, but in the way we see it, use it and how we value it in terms of our relationship with God.

Money is simply a vehicle through which we access the things necessary to sustain and enhance life in the world. Money is a means through which God blesses us with His love, giving us daily bread to meet our physical needs. Money is an expression of God's love, but it is God and not money whom we love.

What would you do if you received a bonanza of money? How would you react if you sustained a financial loss? How would either of these affect your relationship with God? These are important questions we should all ask ourselves. Wealth can cause us to forget God. Losing our money can lead us to blame God and feel bitterness towards others.

We remember God is the Lord and Giver of Life. He loves us and carries us through times of plenty and times of hardship. He has given Christ to be our Saviour and promised that in Him nothing in life and not even death will be able to separate us from His love.

In time of loss the prophet Habakkuk prayed: *“ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, though the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”*

Prayer: Lord God bless us that we be content in your love in times of plenty and in times of want. In wealth and in want enrich us always with your steadfast love in Christ Jesus that endures forever. Amen

Being Trustworthy - March 4, 2018

Read: Luke 16:10-13

Trust-building is very difficult because we have experienced the failures of others to honour their word and that experience colours everything we do from this point on.

Luke 16:10-13 gives us a clear description of the human condition: we all serve more than one master. Although our text points to money, it is really about not trusting in anyone else and money is trustworthy to an extent – it will not run away from you on its own. Because it does not have volition of its own, people use it and as a habit, money is elevated to the place of God.

Although our text speaks of money, it is we ourselves that we raise to take the place of God and when we do, we fail because our true nature is one of falsehood. During New Year, many of us make resolutions of grand proportions only to find ourselves lacking resolve a few months later to continue. If anything, we should be betting on people to fail us more than the fact that they are trustworthy. That is how the world operates – we are untrustworthy until we are proven to be trustworthy.

Through personal knowledge, you know who among your friends and associates and family are trustworthy and who are not. And as long as we live in this fallen world, we must keep that in mind. It would be foolhardy to trust a complete stranger with your house or children or anything you value. And this applies to Christian friends also. You have no control over the trustworthiness of others. For their blessing, you may counsel them to build their trustworthiness as a way for their life to grow. But if they do not listen, you can do nothing.

As opposed to the trustworthiness of others, you can build your own, or rather, God can change your nature and rebuild your trustworthiness. As a Christian, that work began with Christ and it is ongoing. We see the fact that God has honoured his word (promise to save) at grave personal suffering (suffering and death of the Son), and he blesses even when we are rebellious and unfaithful, so that we know his divine judgment as absolutely trustworthy. So what choice do we have: God who is trustworthy or my “self” who is not.

Our text today points out a benefit that many neglect to notice: if we are faithful in small things, we will be entrusted with more... and more as we prove our trustworthiness. The parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14ff) comes to mind immediately. This is true of the world and this is true of the Lord. If you are faithful even in very little, your employer will trust you with more and more and your income will rise in a corresponding manner. The more you are faithful, the more the Lord will entrust into your care (in this case, pay is of a lesser consequence) but the joy of harvest – the joy of seeing family and friends blessed by the Lord will be infinitely better.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I repent of my own unfaithfulness and my short-sightedness. Help me to see eternity while I live in this world. Amen.

Trustworthy Stewards - March 5, 2018

Read: Matthew 25:14-30 and I Corinthians 4:1-5

Since we are unable to affect the trustworthiness of others, the only trust we can build upon is our own.

There was a photo-copier seller (a company now under investigation by the RCMP), who sold copiers to charitable organizations. They would lease a machine to an organization at high costs and in turn make an equivalent donation to the charity to offset the cost of the copier. The last thing this company did was to lease machines at extremely high costs and then sold these leases to a finance company. Then the principals would take what cash in the company and flee the country. So now, finance companies hold the leases, which are high and without a corresponding donation, these leases become unsustainable. This company has taken some years to build trust in these charitable organizations and then in one move, has made off with millions of dollars.

This company has built up trust and then has heartlessly abused this trust. Can we avoid this kind of abuse? I don't think so. The only way to avoid it would be to possess the ability to read the intentions of people's heart against their will. Obviously, we lack this ability. However, from our perspective, these people who have deceived others for the sake of money are incredibly short-sighted. For a measly few million dollars (or even hundreds of millions of dollars), they have given up their peace and are proceeding down a path of mistrust and misery. God will repay.

An example of God's repayment comes from a list of God's most beloved people. Let us consider Jacob, who was beloved of the Lord so that God would give him a second name, Israel. Jacob the deceiver was ultimately deceived (lastly by his sons). God has blessed Jacob with much and yet God has been just so that Jacob would suffer for many years thinking that his favourite son, Joseph, had perished. Out of God's teaching of the prideful Joseph, reunion and forgiveness was to be had by all involved. People who pursue money would in the end hurt themselves and it is God's grace that we don't suffer more.

That is why we must understand that we are being stewards of something far more important than money (regardless of the amount). When we take God's view of the world and of people seriously, God will teach us to be trustworthy stewards. Paul understands it rightly that we are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Corinthians 4:1)" If we are unfaithful, people will die and their suffering will never end. And it is God's grace that we understand the mystery of God's forgiveness through his Son. The faithful response would be to proclaim this grace with both word and deed.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, by your death and resurrection, you have opened the door to God's kingdom for us. Help us to practice faithfulness so that we may be faithful as your brothers and sisters. Amen.

Above Reproach - March 6, 2018

Read: 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Who can be above reproach? If everyone else is a sinner like me, no one is above reproach.

In order not to make us lose hope because the goal is too far and point us in the direction we should go, Paul defines “above reproach,” as “husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, able to teach,” etc. Again, we see the fact that this “servant” is faithful in small things as in managing his own house so that he might be faithful in caring for God’s church.

A pastor cares for God’s church in various ways but always it is to seek the care of God’s people and the growth of God’s church. God gives gifts to the church by supplying people with various gifts and it is through these people with these varied gifts that the church is both blessed and grows. It is not the pastor’s job to do everything (though at times, it is necessary when the congregation is small), but it is to use whatever gifted people there are to do what God wants the church to do.

Our overseer sees the various members of his own family grow and entrusts to each a growing responsibility. And each member will use his gifts and the overseer must trust in that member to do what is entrusted. Parents often fail when they keep responsibility from those who are ready (as well as entrusting too much before their time). Pastors too must trust in their members in their calling and responsibility without interference. With each growth in faithfulness, more is entrusted.

For the reason that caring pastors would always be looking out for the people and helping them grow, people who are discerning, will always be attracted to these caring pastors. An example that we all know: Jesus as our Good Shepherd. Jesus welcomed all sinners and they knew that he loved them. Even enemies of Jesus, Pharisees and Sadducees flocked to Jesus because they knew that Jesus desired their good. Of course, we know that those who are secure in their wealth will have no use for God because they are secure in worshipping that false one.

1 Timothy 4 continues to make plain that there will be some who will reject the faith and will reject faithfulness. Again, that is beyond our ability to change. All that God requires of a good steward and a good servant is training people to focus on the Lord and his way. God, who is absolutely trustworthy will complete the rest.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to focus on you and train others to follow your beloved Son, Jesus, who saved us by his death and resurrection. Help us to see all else is chaff in the wind. Amen.

Parable of the Sower and the Weeds - March 7, 2018

Read: Mathew 13: 24-30

You don't have to look hard these days to discover that we are living in a world that is filled with conflict. There is conflict between nations, there is conflict between political parties, there is conflict between spouses, between parents and children and there is conflict in the church. Conflict in the world can be understood, but conflict in the church is a different story. Jesus tells the Parable of the Weeds to explain why there is conflict in His kingdom. According to Jesus there are a couple of reasons for conflict in the church.

First there is an enemy. Satan is the enemy of God, His children and His church. He will stop at nothing to stir up conflict. The Parable tells us that Satan came and sowed the weeds while everyone was sound asleep. It was a common practice in ancient warfare to destroy your enemies crops. Our response to Satan destroying our crops is to be alert as to what he is up to. Nothing will blind our spiritual perception faster than tolerating sin. We must be aware of what is going on in the world around us and we also need to be aware of what is going on in our churches. Where sin is being tolerated, then weeds are being sown and there will be a harvest of conflict.

The second reason for conflict in the church is that there are weeds in our congregations. Jesus said not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will be saved. The weeds that enemy armies sowed in the ancient world were known as bearded darnel. If this plant was consumed it would result in dizziness or nausea. Darnel looks very much like wheat until it is ripe, that's why no one knew anything was wrong until the harvest. The owner knew that his servants could not infallibly distinguish between wheat and these weeds so they were ordered to be patient to ensure the safety of the true wheat. For us, our human judgement is faulty and so God asks us to be patient and let Him be the ultimate judge. The old saying, "Good things come to those who wait," is applicable to this situation. Paul writes in I Thess. 5: 14, "And we urge you brothers to be patient with everyone." In order to deal with conflict appropriately we must be perceptive as to the true source of the conflict. We must also patiently wait for God's judgement in His timing because when we get impatient and rush things we make a mess of them.

The darnel is only able to pretend to be wheat for so long before it's true identity is revealed. Our Lord calls us to continue to proclaim eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. He calls us not to sit as judge and jury of others, but rather to treat all with the same selfless love He showed to us in dying our death on the cross and let Him sort it out in the end. Jesus told us, "Therefore, keep watch because you do not know what day your Lord will come."

May the Lord keep us faithful in proclaiming His love to all until He returns...amen.

Patience In Suffering – March 8, 2018

Read: James 5: 7-10

“Patience is a virtue,” suggests the old adage. Yet when we pray for more patience what do we get? More affliction!! It is interesting that at the beginning of James' epistle in chapter 1: 2 he says, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” That doesn't make sense to our rational human ears does it? Whatever could he be speaking about when he says we should rejoice in suffering? Well, he goes on to say that the trying of our faith gives way to patience and patience is a good thing.

And now as James draws near the end of his epistle, he returns to this subject of patience by encouraging us to be patient as we wait for the coming of the Lord. He calls us to steadfastness for the long haul, and in doing so we learn that patience is not passive but active. There is a story of some Christians who were so looking forward to the return of Christ that they were gazing up toward heaven when their pastor gave them this good advice, “He who is always looking into the sky bumps into things.” There needs to be a certain practicality in our patience that does not neglect everyday service to the Lord. Unfortunately we always want God to act right away. We pray and we want Him to give us our hearts desire as soon as possible. We believe His promise to return and take us to Heaven but we want Him to come back right away so that we don't have to suffer and die. We are like the kids in the back seat yelling, “Are we there yet?” Instead of praying for God to work out His will in His own way in His own time we want it all and we want it now. James gives us the example of a farmer in verse 6 saying, “See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” Similarly, confidence for us in Christ's return leads us to patience.

And consider this. As we wait for the Lord, we join together with the Church in every age. “How long Lord?” they asked throughout the Old Testament. “How long Lord,” has also been the prayer of the Church in every generation since Christ ascended back to heaven. But if the Lord seems to be delaying it is because He is merciful. Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3: 8-9, “But do not overlook this one fact beloved that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfil His promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance.” You see, Jesus came into this world to seek and save the lost. God's desire is that all people would come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour. For you and I that means that while Jesus delays in His grace, there still remains time for our loved ones to come to repentance and faith...and that's a good thing. And so we wait patiently together, knowing that when Jesus returns it will not be one moment too soon or one moment too late...it will be at just the right time like it was the first time when He came in a manger...amen.

Patience As a Virtue – March 9, 2018

Read: Colossians 3: 12-17

Living in peace...isn't that what everyone wants? Consider a family. It is the ultimate small group where everyone knows everything about each other. In a family, you know what people like and what they don't like. Sometimes we share bedrooms and we all share the same bathroom. Any time a group comes together like this, personalities emerge and conflict is inevitable. The same is true for our church families. When people come together you can be sure that there will be times when feelings are hurt, fights are started and grievances are aired. Perhaps that is why the Apostle Paul encourages us, "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." As Christians we should understand this. We have been brought to peace with God in Christ so we should also want to make peace with others.

One of the key verses in this passage from Colossians is verse 15, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body we were called to peace." Because we are sinful, pride filled people, every relationship we have will break down on some level. In order to have peace, Paul gives us some good advice to think about. He says, "If one has a complaint against another, forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you." The concept is simple, forgiven people forgive each other. We all blow it and so every relationship is dependent upon forgiveness asked for and forgiveness granted. It is the basis of our relationship with God and it is also the basis of our relationship with each other. He goes on to say, "And be thankful." We are to be thankful to God for the people that He has put in our lives. When we disagree with someone it is good to ask ourselves if we would really be better off without that person in our lives. You might be tempted to think that your life would be better without them but the truth is that God has given them to us for a reason. As believers we understand that everything we have is from the Lord and that we are to be thankful for everything He has given us, and so we also include in that prayer of thankfulness everyone He has put in our lives. It's very hard to be mad at someone when you are praying for them so, "Be thankful."

Paul closes this passage on peace by saying, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." The way that we can love as He loved us, forgive as He has forgiven us and be truly thankful for all the people God has put in our lives is to dwell in the Word of Christ richly. Not sparingly, but richly. To hear the Gospel and then apply it to our lives and live it. I John 4: 7 says, "Beloved, let us love one another for love is from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. This is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, so ought we also to love one another." And so, when we are grounded in Christ, then our relationships will be more selfless instead of selfish and we will live in peace...amen.

Genuine Love – March 10, 2018

Read: Romans 12: 9-18

Love is a hard thing to define, it's kind of like nailing jello to the wall. It's the kind of thing that you recognize when it is there, but you can't really define it. Love is something that is best observed. For example, most people say that the Book of Acts is full of love, yet the word love is never mentioned in it. What that book does is describe many acts of love by the Apostles and the early church. If anyone ever showed their love for others through their actions it was Jesus. When He washed the feet of the disciples He was showing them that He loved them, and setting an example for them of how to love others. When He fed the multitudes He was demonstrating loving compassion. And of course we know about His greatest demonstration of love...Calvary!! If we want to learn how to love others all we need to do is read about Jesus in the Gospels.

In this passage from Romans, the Apostle Paul fleshes out for us what that Christ-like love looks like in the life of a believer. "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour." Those in Christ's family should strive to bring honour to God instead of dishonour and also to bring honour our brothers and sisters in Christ even ahead of ourselves. If we could strive for this we would have far fewer disputes and come closer to achieving the peace that Jesus modelled so perfectly for us.

Paul continues, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." My Grandmother used to say, "Idle hands are the devil's playground." When God's people are engaged in mission and service they don't have time to fight with each other. By serving the Lord we show that we love Him and others. The truth is God doesn't need our good works, our neighbours do. That is how we serve the Lord, by serving others. That is how we show our love for the Lord, by loving others. So, be fervent in zeal and service to the Lord. Verse 12 continues, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." All of these things describe the active life of a believer. Rejoicing in the hope of eternal salvation that we have in Jesus Christ; being patient when we are being persecuted and marginalized, and instead of lashing out, praying for our enemies and doing good to those who hate us as Jesus Himself demonstrated perfectly for us as He went quietly to the cross to die for our sins. When we patiently suffer for Christ we join Him in His suffering. When we love and forgive others, we are showing the love of Christ that is in us, not to earn our salvation but as a result of it. We love because He first loved us. "And now these three remain: faith hope and love but the greatest of these is love."...amen.

Emotional Healing – March 11, 2018

“Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure. But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping and I was almost gone . . . For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness. . . .” (TLB) - Psalm 73:1-3 [Read: Psalm 73]

Let’s journey for the next three days through Psalm 73. This precious psalm invites us to walk through an emotional journey of healing. The psalmist is emotionally distraught when taking time to compare himself with those around himself. The emotions of fear and worry, coupled with severe doubts and a lack of trust in the goodness of the Lord are almost overwhelming. The emotions of envy and pride are used by Satan to attack the very center of being for the psalmist. What is he to do?

The psalmist begins by writing with the words: *“Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure. . . .”* A wonderful, beautiful statement of faith! But immediately he shares his deepest desperate concern for himself: *“But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone . . . for I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.*

How many times have we been like Peter when he was walking toward Jesus on the water. When he takes his eyes off Jesus, then fear, worry and doubts begin their attack on his mind. The psalmist has taken a few moments to look around and see the wicked prospering, and he envied them – he didn’t envy their wickedness but he envied their prosperity despite their wickedness. Is God fair, he asks? Am I out of the center of God’s will that He is blessing the wicked and not me? Shouldn’t I be the one who is blessed because I seek to faithfully follow Him and honor Him with my life? Can I trust in the Lord when I don’t understand what he is doing?

The answer is yes! Our God is always trustworthy. We can treasure the words of Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV) . . . *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.”* Even Jesus said: *“Do not worry . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”* Matthew 6:31-33 (NKJV). The more we spend time with the Lord in His Word, the more he unfolds his love, grace and wisdom to us, giving us the confidence that He is in control, and we are simple called upon to trust and obey.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I too, am sometimes like the psalmist, looking around, watching and wondering as the wicked prosper. Take away my envy, healing my emotions with your love and grace found in Jesus my Lord and Savior. May my life and my confidence be in Him. In His holy Name I pray. Amen.

Emotional Healing - March 12, 2018

“When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their end.” . . . “You hold me by my hand. You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory (NKJV).” - Psalm 73:16, 23-24.

We continue our journey today and tomorrow through Psalm 73. This wonderful psalm invites us to walk through times when we don't always understand the ways of God. The psalmist has looked at the ways of the wicked and had seen how they prospered. He looked at the faithful and sees the emotional challenges they face. Is God really more interested in the wicked? The psalmist shares his emotions with us in verse 16: *“When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me – Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their end (NKJV).”* The psalmist understood that their end would be destruction (v.18-19), but his end would be in the hands of his God . . . *“You hold me by my hand. You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory (NKJV).”* (v. 23-24).

Emotional pain is so crippling. Worry and fear destroy us from within. One can see this turmoil of the psalmist in reading Psalm 73, but one also sees a healing solution to his emotional suffering. 1) He admits to himself that he is fearful and worried. He does not have to pretend. The Christian way is one of complete honesty. We don't attempt to wave a magic wand over our fears and tell ourselves we are not afraid. 2) He really wants to understand. He turns to the Lord for his answers: *“I went into the sanctuary of the Lord. . .”* 3) He surrenders his emotions and confusion to the Lord. *“God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.”* We too are reminded that Jesus is always wanting us to cast our burdens, fears, worries, and confusion on to Him. 4) We remind ourselves, as does this psalmist in his own way, . . . that every fear, every trouble and worry has been defeated by the One we follow – Jesus Christ. As the hymn writer (C. Austin Mills) writes in his hymn: *“And He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarried there, non other has ever known. . .”*

Prayer: My dear Father in heaven, help us again to today to understand how loving and caring you are for each of us. Fill us with the presence of your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and give us again your healing and peace, for we pray this in Jesus' holy Name. Amen.

Emotional Healing - March 13, 2018

“Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart. He is mine forever. Those who desert him will perish, for you destroy those who abandon you. But as for me, how good it is to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do. (NLT) - Psalm 73:25-28

We continue our third day going through Psalm 73. This psalm sees the psalmist emotional battle in understanding the ways of God. The psalmist has looked at the ways of the wicked and had seen how they prospered. He has looked at the faithful and sees the emotional challenges they face. Is God really more interested in the wicked? No. God loves his people dearly and doesn't want the enemy to have victory in any of their lives. Today we look at three additional steps in gaining healing from fear and worry:

1) It is always important to understand that the thing that is causing fear or worry is never as bad as the fear itself. The psalmist was quite fearful because of the way God allowed the wicked to prosper. It seemed so unfair. Yet, for the psalmist, it meant that he must keep the center of his life intact – his faith in God. He was being called upon to not focus on the wicked, but on God's purpose and plan for His followers. As Christ's followers today, we are justified by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ and His work for us on Calvary's Cross. This is at the center of our life in Christ. That is where God calls us to live each day our life for Jesus, faithful and true.

2) We direct our attention to Jesus. Whatever holds your focus holds you. If Jesus gains your attention, He will gain you. When times of fear and worry vie for your attention, then deliberately turn your attention to Jesus. We are called upon to fill our mind with faith, hope and love in Jesus. Perfect love drives out fear. A hymn writer (Helen H. Lemmel) wrote these wonderful words: *“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace.”* That's what the psalmist did. He turned to the Lord. We too turn our eyes toward Jesus.

3) Face today with faith, not fear and worry. Ask God to help you in this area. Remember, that, *“Into every life a little rain must fall...”* I love the psalmists closing words: *“It is good for me to draw near to God. I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all your works (NKJV).* Instead of fear and worry, the psalmists focus is upon declaring the greatness of our Lord. This too is our calling. Today I too will face today with faith and tell the world about our Jesus.

Prayer: My dear Father in heaven. Thank you for giving us Jesus. He has become our everything and our all. Cast out and heal us from all our fears and worries, and give us forgiveness from our sins, and the presence of your Holy Spirit, that we might live now and forever proclaiming the wonders of Christ's love to our world. With deepest thanks in His Name we pray. Amen.

Zacchaeus: Wrongs Made Right – March 14, 2018

Read: Luke 19:1-10

John's Gospel is often the one that depicts an extended personal interest story: Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3, the dialog with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, the man born blind in chapter 9, and Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11. But Luke's Gospel also features a well-known personal interest story - Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus.

We know the details: the story takes place in Jericho; Zacchaeus was a rich (and probably cheating) chief tax collector; because he was a short man he climbed up a tree to see Jesus; Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. A couple of less significant details are noteworthy.

Zacchaeus received Jesus joyfully. He didn't see Jesus as a threat, or as the morality police. He welcomed Him into his home for some meaningful conversation. We aren't privy to the content of that conversation, but we do know that, at the end of the visit, Jesus called Zacchaeus "a son of Abraham" implying that Zacchaeus had come both to faith in Jesus, and to salvation.

Perhaps just as important was what that new faith led Zacchaeus to do. Instead of being driven by the accumulation of wealth, Zacchaeus demonstrated charity ("the half of my goods I give to the poor") and reconciliation ("if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.") The expression of charity might have been somewhat impersonal - just making a sizable donation to the Jericho Food Bank or to the local chapter of the Salvation Army. However, by definition, the expression of reconciliation needed to be more intentional and personal.

Zacchaeus had, by his own admission, cheated people in terms of what they were to pay to the Israeli Revenue Agency. For example, his records may have shown that Moishe owed ten denarii, but Zacchaeus required that he pay twelve denarii, slipping the extra two denarii into his own pocket at the end of the day. Or perhaps he took commission from the junior tax collectors who were working under him. In either case, to restore the injustice done, Zacchaeus would need to research which citizens (or junior tax collectors) he had cheated, seek out every one of those people, and repay them fourfold, according to his own promise. It was the practical way that his newfound faith in Jesus needed to be lived out. It was the God-pleasing way for reconciliation to take place. It was the only way for the wrongs he had committed to be made right. It was the Jesus-way to restore friendships with fellow citizens, friendships that had been tarnished by his greed.

What a beautiful, Scriptural model for reconciling relationships that have been undermined by our own sinful actions - greed, pride, selfishness, bitterness, grudges, etc. Like Zacchaeus, God calls us to seek out, one by one, those whom we have wronged, and to make things right. That's making the rubber of our faith meet the road of daily life.

The closing words of this story - Jesus' words - make the Gospel clear: Jesus "came to seek and to save the lost." That was Jesus' mission on earth - to reconcile you (sinner that you are) with God. He came to do that by His sacrificial death on the cross - God's grace and forgiveness and salvation that is applied to every individual (including YOU) who, like Zacchaeus, is a faith-full son or daughter of Abraham.

Prayer: Holy God, You have reconciled me to You by Jesus' death. Thank you. Amen.

A Guilt-free Offering – March 15, 2018

Read: Matthew 5:21-26

In Matthew 5 - part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount - Jesus takes us under the surface of some of the Commandments. He says:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely...' But I say to you, 'Do not take an oath at all...'"

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder...' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment."

In this last case, with respect to the Fifth Commandment, Jesus goes on to paint the hypothetical picture of a person - YOU, really - offering his gift at the altar, but then feeling a pang of guilt because he/she has wronged someone else, and that wrong hasn't been addressed.

Jesus doesn't say that the gift will be unacceptable as an offering, but He does imply that you will be unacceptable as the giver of the offering... until your heart is right, until your relationships are right. No matter whether you are angry with your brother or your brother is angry with you over unresolved disputes / sins, that anger is akin to murder, and that is SERIOUS!!

Jesus' wise counsel for offering a guilt-free gift at the altar is to "leave your gift there," "be reconciled / come to terms quickly," and "then come and offer your gift." Anger, grudges, bitterness, disputes - these are not things that God wants our hearts to bring to His altar. Each Sunday - before we come to the altar for the Lord's Supper, or before we offer our tithes and gifts - we normally have an opportunity to come clean with God, in confession and forgiveness. God's desire is that we also come clean with our brother/sister, so that our hearts can be guilt-free. Making the effort, taking the time to reconcile with that brother/sister - that's getting under the surface of what Jesus means as He teaches us the intent of the Fifth Commandment, so that we are not liable to judgment and to the hell of fire.

Our brother, Jesus, went to the Heavenly Judge to plead for us and for our forgiveness and salvation. He offered His very life as the gift on the altar of the cross. He, Himself, has taken the judgment, the punishment and the penalty for our sins, no matter how big or small they are. He has paid every last penny so that we will be His for all eternity. Reconciliation with God through Jesus, enables us to offer our gifts... guilt-free.

Prayer: Lord God, may we truly know that our hearts are guilt-free, thanks to Jesus' offering of Himself on the cross of Calvary, and may our own offerings be guilt-free as we come with hearts and relationships that are reconciled to others. In Jesus. Amen.

Broken Down Hostility – March 16, 2018

Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

In Ephesians 2, Paul does a masterful job of fleshing out the unity that two previously hostile parties have in Christ. In our era, we have heard of situations where Jewish people have been oppressed and persecuted and tormented. In the first century Roman Empire, Jews and Gentiles were not exactly friends. This hostility had a long-standing history, and it wasn't just the fault of the Gentiles. In 73 A.D., the famous siege of Masada (overlooking the Dead Sea) and the killing of the Jewish occupants of that fortress was one example of Gentile violence toward Jews. However, the Jews had ostracized Gentiles by segregating them in the temple (there was a special court of the Gentiles), and by strict cleanliness rules against Gentiles, and even the early Church did not universally approve of the mission to the Gentiles.

So, when Paul, writing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Ephesus talks about that alienation - Gentiles were once separate from Christ, far off, strangers to the covenants, without hope, and without God - he glues those two often opposing groups together in Christ, who "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross..."

Then Paul pulls out all kinds of terms and images of that unity: "fellow citizens," "members of the household of God," "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone," "joined together," and "built together."

There is no room in Paul's theology of the church for hostility or disunity. Cultural or ethnic distinctions are not so evident in our day. Even if your congregation is a gathering of mostly one ethnic group, or a group still comprised of the several families that started the congregation 100 years ago, one only needs to look at the clergy roster or the languages worshiped in at some of our city congregations to realize that following Christ is definitely a cross-cultural phenomenon. Paul talks about Jesus being "our peace."

That peace is not meant to be just between cultural groups. It also has interpersonal implications. When disunity or hostility occurs - and it will... we are all sinners - God desires that the reconciliation that took place on the cross (think Amazing Grace!) would find its way sincerely and truly into our lives. God wants there to be peace between His children in the church, so that they can honestly say they are fellow citizens, members of the household of God, joined together in Christ, the cornerstone. He is our peace!

Prayer: God of all, we are genuinely thankful for all those from many cultures who have followed Christ. May any divisions that we still bear be broken down in Christ so that the diversity in the Body of Christ would be a true blessing to all; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reconciled to Be Reconcilers – March 17, 2018

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Perhaps you have heard it said of the patriarch Abraham (in Genesis 12) that he was blessed to be a blessing. In 2 Corinthians 5, St. Paul makes this thought Christ-centered and uses a different term to convey a very similar idea. He says, in essence, that we are reconciled to be reconcilers.

In the paragraph from vv. 17-21, he begins and ends with the Gospel. Verse 21 - one of my 'top five' from the entire Bible - says: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." (NIV) Verse 17 describes the same truth in different terms: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." (Oh, and the Gospel is in the middle, too - God is "not counting men's sins against them!" (v. 19)

We are made right with God, we are new spiritual creations - thanks to Christ who died innocently bearing our sins. That's the Gospel! We are reconciled to God through Christ - not through any merit or worthiness of our own.

But the fact that we are reconciled is not meant to be a dead end idea. As Christians, we don't just bask in God's grace and wait for His gift of heaven. The God who has reconciled us (and the whole world, too!) to Himself through Christ has given us the privilege and obligation of now being the instruments in His hands to spread the message of reconciliation throughout the world:

God "gave us the ministry of reconciliation." (v. 18)

"He has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (v. 19)

"We are Christ's ambassadors... making His appeal... Be reconciled to God." (v. 20)

We, who are recipients of divine reconciliation, are now those who are heralds of that reconciliation to others. And not just heralds, either. We are called to be active reconcilers, not just telling people how (in Christ) they can be reconciled to God, but also working toward true reconciliation in our sin-tarnished relationships with others. When someone is reconciled with God, that relationship is a new creation. When someone is reconciled with us, that relationship is a new creation.

Both of those new-creation, reconciled relationships are things that please God immensely. Truly we are... reconciled to be reconcilers.

Prayer: Almighty God, our hearts are grateful that in Christ You have reconciled us to Yourself and made us new creations. Give us joy in being Christ's ambassadors, that others, too, might know and believe in the sinless One who became sin for us; in His name. Amen.

Ordinarily Miraculous – March 18, 2018

But his servants came near and said to him, “My father, it is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. - 2 Kings 5:13, 14

Thanks to much of Christian television, many people have developed a mental image of God as showman, sending his magicians and illusionists to amaze and bewilder. They are certain that any healing that God make work in our lives must be accompanied by pyrotechnics and flamboyance or there can't be any real substance in what God does. Blessedly for you, the opposite is true! Almighty God works healing and wholeness not through flash but through very ordinary and simple means. The general Naaman was suffering from a horrible disease, leprosy, for which there was no cure and would lead to a slow and gruesome death. When he was sent to the prophet of God for healing, he wasn't given magic words and powerful theatrics. Because of this he refused to believe that such mundane methods could manufacture a miracle. Yet, the Lord worked through Naaman's servants to call Naaman to the ordinary Jordan that he would “Wash, and be clean” and he was, though not by the waters themselves but by the Word of God through the prophet.

You too have been healed and made whole through water and word in the font of Holy Baptism. There Jesus himself, through these ordinary means performed the great miracle of washing you and making you clean. You were restored from the sin, for which there is no human cure and would lead to eternal death. The Lord himself didn't use magic words and powerful theatrics, but his own Word combined with ordinary water.

It is this wholeness that leads us to seek wholeness with those around us, a wholeness centred upon our wholeness through Christ, where we who are forgiven, forgive others that our relationships may be made whole. Not through magic words or powerful theatrics but through the ordinary words, “I forgive you.”

Prayer: O be our great deliv'rer still, the Lord of life and death;

Restore and quicken, soothe and bless, With Your lifegiving breath.

To hands that work and eyes that see Give wisdom's healing pow'r

That whole and sick and weak and strong May praise you ever more. Amen. (LSB 846 v.3)

Which is Easier? – March 19, 2018

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." - Mark 2:9-11

[Read: Mark 2:1-12]

Many of us in our vocations have been trained to identify and address immediate needs. Medical personnel assess and triage patients and address the most severe injuries first. Police assess situations and identify plans to deal with the sources of conflict. Teachers are taught to assess their students in order to address a student's primary educational challenges and concentrate on them to set a foundation for future learning.

We see Jesus doing the same thing in our reading, yet Jesus' assessment seems to differ from ours. Seeing the paralyzed man before us the temptation would be to address his need for physical healing. But Jesus has assessed the situation and determined a far greater need. Having assessed this need Jesus addresses it immediately forgiving the man his sins. But Jesus' assessment and response receives a cool response, "who can forgive sins but God alone?" Interestingly the people have failed to assess the situation properly and therefore fail to see that they have answered their own question. At times in our lives we also fail to assess a situation with a fellow believer. We fail to see the real need in a situation and therefore fail to provide the proper response. In any conflict or crisis that we face the primary need is forgiveness of sins. Whether someone has sinned or been sinned against, the forgiveness of sins is the primary response. When someone is sick or dying, the forgiveness of sins is the appropriate medicine. The same Jesus who forgave and healed the paralytic is the same Jesus who bore sin, sickness, and sorrow to the cross. It is there that not only our sins were nailed to the cross but also our depression, cancer, and sorrow were hung. In Jesus' resurrection all of these were left in the tomb as he himself was raised.

Thus on the last day, that you may "know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" He will say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."

Prayer: Still your children wander homeless; still the hungry cry for bread;

Still the captives long for freedom; still in grief we mourn our dead.

As, O Lord, Your deep compassion Healed the sick and freed the soul,

Use the love your Spirit kindles Still to save and make us whole. Amen (LSB 848 v.2)

Sanctified and Blameless – March 20, 2018

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

The word “sanctify” has a powerful meaning. It means both “make holy” and “set apart.” It is the word used to describe people and items chosen to be part of the worship of Almighty God. For this reason, St. Paul’s use of sanctify in our verses to describe you tells you something important. This blessing “may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely,” is a particular plea on your behalf that God himself would make you holy and set you apart for his purposes. This he does by the Holy Spirit as Luther writes, “but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

Almighty God has indeed sanctified you: made you holy and set you apart, in himself. If that wasn’t enough, he also keeps you in the true faith. This is what St. Paul means when he says, may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless. Even as our Lord through his work and holy baptism has sanctified you, made you holy, set you apart, he continues through his word and Holy Supper to strengthen and preserve you in the true faith unto life everlasting that you may be kept blameless.

Despite this assurance, how common is it for us to doubt, to question the truth of this, especially as we consider our own sinfulness and weakness. We still sin daily, our body still ages, our mind still forgets. These things can easily cause us to doubt Paul’s words, and our Lord’s promises. For this reason, St. Paul writes “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” If our Lord has chosen you, called you by his Gospel, and sanctified you, he will not forget you. No matter what the world, your mind, and your body, might demonstrate, the very truth of the matter is that you are already holy and blameless in the sight of God through the blood of Jesus. Therefore St. Paul reminds you that he who has taken your sin and your suffering into himself will indeed keep your whole spirit and soul and body blameless until He comes again.

Prayer: Monarch of all things, fit us for thy mansions;

Banish our weakness, heath and wholeness sending;

Bring us to heaven, where thy saints united Joy without end. Amen. (LSB 875 v.2)

Hope in the Midst of Loss – March 21, 2018

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." - Job 1:20-21

The book of Job challenges the common human assumption that, if a person lives a good life, then God will prevent bad things from happening to them. For here is Job, clearly identified as blameless and upright, and yet God allows Satan to bring calamity after calamity upon him. This is what real life is like, for bad things do happen to good people. And through this difficult, yet realistic, book of the Bible, God can help us to have hope, even as we go through trials of our own.

To better understand the book of Job, imagine that you are watching a play in which the stage is divided into two storeys. The characters on the top storey can observe all that happens in the bottom storey, but the characters on the bottom story cannot see what is happening in the top storey. Also, what happens in the top storey has an impact in the bottom storey, and vice-versa. Through the book of Job, God is showing us what happens both in heaven and on earth to help us to realize that there is much, much more going on around us than what we see with our eyes.

Through our two-storey view, we see in chapter one that Satan makes an accusation about Job to God: that he only believes in God because of the protection and blessings that God has given him. If Satan's accusation is correct, then God is a fool for treasuring and loving Job as He does. By extension, Satan is accusing the whole human race before God. Why should God love us if we only love Him because He protects and blesses us? And for all of us, for at least some of the time, this accusation is true. We are not Job.

But there is Someone who is. Jesus is the one human being who is truly blameless and upright. And yet, in spite of His goodness and purity, everything was stripped away from Him and He was nailed to a cross to suffer and die. Just as God did not forsake Job, but continued to love, support and defend him, so also, because we are in Jesus, our heavenly Father continues to love, support and defend us. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8).

Jesus is our Job. Therefore, we have hope.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, when I experience loss, please comfort me with Your presence. Amen.

Hope in the Midst of Suffering – March 22, 2018

His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. - Job 2:9-10

In chapter two, Job's suffering ratchets up a notch. Before he was suffering emotionally because of the loss of his children, his livestock and his wealth. But now he is suffering physically because God has allowed Satan to afflict Job with painful sores all over his body.

This seems like the worst possible situation in life: to lose your family, your wealth and your health. But it is not. There is something worse, and Job is avoiding the worst of all things with every ounce of strength that he has left. And the worst of all situations is to give up our integrity, curse God and die.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say "give up on God's integrity." For this is always the temptation when we suffer. "How can a good and loving God allow this to happen to me?" we ask ourselves. And because we cannot imagine any just answer to such a question, we assume that there is none, and so we give up on God. But God does not give up on us.

Knowing our weakness and frailty, and the danger we are in, God wrapped Himself in human flesh and absorbed into His own body the suffering that was necessary to pay the cost of forgiveness for all the sins of the whole world. And Jesus' payment was infinite in value, so our sins are more than paid for in full. Now Satan's accusations are meaningless, because God does not believe them and, by faith, neither do we.

The scorecard of God's faithfulness does get tallied up in this life. In this life, we accept both good and trouble from God, because we know that the fullness of restoration and healing, which we wholeheartedly long for, is coming in the life to come. As the prophet Isaiah writes: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

Jesus is faithful. Therefore, we have hope.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, please help me to hold onto You even as You are carrying me. Amen.

Hope in the Face of Death – March 23, 2018

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! - Job 19:25-27

It is very important to take into account who is speaking when reading the book of Job. Job's wife is a voice of despair. Job's friends—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, and later Elihu—are all anchored in a religion of works righteousness and Job refers to them as his "miserable comforters." Their philosophy is summed in these words from Elihu: "[God] repays everyone for what they have done; he brings on them what their conduct deserves. (Job 34:11) The implication is that Job must have sinned to be experiencing such suffering.

But Job steadfastly refused to accept their accusation or lose hope in God.

And Job's faith in God is well-placed. For, in a fore-shadowing of the Incarnation, God comes down from the top storey to the bottom storey. Ignoring the issues raised in the conversation between Job and his friends, God goes straight to Job and points out that "...since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." (Romans 1:20)

God has come down. And Job is satisfied. All he was really asking for in the previous 36 chapters was for God to come to him. And he did.

Just like Job, our comfort when we suffer is that God has come down to us. God the Son came down and took our place on the cross, suffered, died and rose again so that He will always be our Emmanuel, our God-with-us. Jesus is coming again and He has promised us that when He does "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

Jesus is with us, and one day soon He will raise us from the dead. Therefore, we have hope.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, please help me to cling to Your promise of resurrection life. Amen.

Hope When We Are Powerless – March 24, 2018

“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.” (Job 42:2-3)

Human curiosity can be insatiable. Just as soon as we learn one fact, we long to learn another. Our obsession with the internet and social media is evidence of that ravishing hunger to know and explain. And our demand to know is strongest when we suffer. We ask, “Why is this happening to me? Who (besides me) is responsible for this? How are they going to pay for this?”

But sometimes there are no answers to our questions. Sometimes, when we come to the end of our questions, all we have left is God.

Several years ago, one of my children was diagnosed with a serious illness. I am very much a “doer,” but there was absolutely nothing that I could do. I did not agree with some of the treatment that was being prescribed for my child, but I was completely powerless to do anything about that. Worse yet, the broken state of my child forced me to confront the fact that I was broken too. I had been living my dreams vicariously through my child and now my dreams were shattered. I realized that I had not been loving my child as they were, but as I wanted them to be. I was a broken man with a broken child and the only option that I had was to trust that God was going to work through the care that my child was receiving.

I was forced to trust in God alone, and so I did. And God carried us through.

There are things about God that are mysterious. By definition, God is beyond our human understanding. Add in the future, which is also unknown to us, and there are a lot of things that we do not know.

But our heavenly Father gave us all that we need to know when He gave us Jesus. And it is in knowing Jesus, not facts, that we have comfort, courage and strength when we suffer. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)*

Jesus loves us. Therefore, we have hope.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to grow in my hunger for You, for You really are all that I need. Amen.

"The Lord Needs Them" – March 25, 2018

"As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.'" – Matthew 21:1-3

Jesus was literally on the cusp before initiating the week that would culminate His ministry on earth. Before He made His "Triumphant Entry" on what we call Palm Sunday, Jesus had a directive for two of His disciples. We wish we knew which ones, just for the record. Matthew's account focuses on the need for both a donkey and her colt. Hence "The Lord needs *them*." So Jesus told the two disciples to go to the village ahead of them. Again, we're not sure if the village were Bethphage or Bethany. (See Mark and Luke) We are sure of Jesus' need for the colt, the foal of a donkey, to ride into Jerusalem to fulfill the words of the Prophet Zechariah. "Untie them and bring them to me" was Jesus' next instruction. And finally, if anyone raises an eyebrow about taking someone's animals, the two disciples were to say "**the Lord needs them.**"

So what does the Lord need of us, both in following His instructions and our response to them? What was Christ Jesus' Palm Sunday ride all about? He was headed toward Jerusalem and His death on the Cross to pay for the sins of the whole world, including ours, and to bring us complete forgiveness. This is what we need to send to the Lord right away.

Jesus calls our hearts in faith to believe that our mistakes are totally covered by His ride to the Cross and the Empty Tomb. But there is more. The Lord calls us to "love as I have loved you, and to forgive as I have forgiven you." Yes, **the Lord needs them**, not for His sake, but for ours, to be forgiven and to forgive, to be in the Lord's freedom plan. "See, your King comes to you" through forgiveness received and forgiveness given which then sets us free. Amen.

"Your King Comes to You" – March 26, 2018

*"This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:
'Say to the Daughter of Zion, See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" - Zechariah 9:9*

Often an important government official, judge or leader arrived in a town or city sporting a procession with horses and carriages. Such a retinue gained the attention of the people, perhaps wondering what actions the official was about to take. St. Paul reminded the Roman Christians "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?" (Romans 13:3) Kings and judges can bring retribution and even revenge on those who cross them, bringing an "eye for an eye" kind of justice. Is this the kind of king that came on the Palm Sunday? No, a very different "King who saves" arrived that day.

St. Matthew quotes the Prophet Zechariah who described the king who comes to you as gentle, meek, humble and lowly. This ruler does not frighten or demand. Rather these words point us to a leader who will do the right and bring justice by thinking of others, one who brings about justice and mercy in a way that is opposite to how humans usually operate. Our "King who saves" did just this by giving His life on the Cross as restitution for all our debts. The accounts that we could not reconcile are paid in full by the One who is King, Judge and Sacrifice.

Shortly before His ride into Jerusalem Jesus told His followers the parable of the unmerciful servant. (Matthew 18:21-35) In response to the question of how many times to forgive another, Jesus related the way that a "king" cancelled a huge debt owed by his servant. The ruler had hoped that the servant would act in like manner. Jesus concluded the parable with this message. In like manner our heavenly Father calls on us to forgive others from our hearts. On our own forgiveness falls short. With reflection on God's goodness to us, much prayer, and the power of God's Spirit, we will forgive from our hearts, and we ourselves will be set free from the fear of the One in authority, our Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"They Went and Did" – March 27, 2018

"The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others, cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'" – Matthew 21:6-9

Matthew's account of the Palm Sunday events brings with it requests, directions and some notes from Zechariah's earlier prophecy of the colt, and the coming king. The stage was set, the drama ready to begin. There is now a call for action. Jesus was ready for Holy Week to start. The Lord had told His followers that He would need to go to Jerusalem where evil people would accuse and arrest Him, bring about a false conviction, and pronounce and carry out the death sentence on a cross, but that on the third day the Lord would rise back to life. Jesus had "set His face like flint toward Jerusalem" and the healing salvation of the whole world. Remembering the words of Isaiah that He had read to the people of Nazareth, Jesus rode the colt that day in order to "to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." Christ did just that on the Good Friday five days later in a new and striking way, His life as payment for the mistakes of all. The Lord's new way begs for a response.

So the disciples "went and did as Jesus had instructed them." They brought the colt, used their cloaks as saddle material, and "Jesus sat on them." The two disciples were not the only ones who "went and did." The very large crowd in like manner spread their cloaks on the roadway with others cutting palm branches, as the "red carpet treatment" for the King. So there were flung cloaks and branches laid with "Hosanna, the Lord saves" to the Son of David, and the words of Psalm 118:26 "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The crowd sensed that this rider was the King who comes to save.

In the same way we "go and do" our Master's request. We go and do as the Lord Jesus has instructed us, with new ways of thinking and different kinds of actions in the light of the Cross, lives in which we, the sin captives, are set free. Amen.

"Who is This?" – March 28, 2018

"When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'" – Matthew 21:10-11

Our resounding answer to "who is this King who comes to you" is Christ Jesus, the person of hope who died and rose again. Jesus' familiar words in John 14:1, translated in the King James Version tell us: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Hope in God. Hope also in me." The hope that the crowds and the disciples needed resides in God's forgiving, healing, and restoring work through Christ Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross.

A necessary ingredient that both the medical profession and the Christian faith agree on is "hope." Care from physicians, nurses, and staff centers on engendering "hope" so that people heal from their illnesses and return to normal activities. There are many kinds of such "dis-eases," physical, mental and attitudinal. One of the things that can set us "ill at ease" is the "blame game." It has been said that "our national pass-time is running the other person down," pointing the finger at others for all kinds of problems, including our own. We know that every human makes mistakes. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Christ's word from the cross was, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

If blaming is our only way of thinking, there is precious little hope, and a lot of negative energy is expended. But the God of all hope says otherwise. When we are wrestling and struggling with all kinds of issues, we look to Jesus and His words of hopeful direction. "Love as I have loved you. Forgive as I have forgiven you." These are the messages of hope coming from the Cross.

Who is this Jesus? He is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee and our only sure hope. St. Paul summarized hope in the Lord Jesus as follows: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:3-5) We join with St. Paul in his prayer for hope in Christ Jesus in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Amen!

The King Prays for our Salvation-Maundy Thursday-March 29, 2018

Read John 17

On the night Jesus was betrayed, we know that He instituted the Lord's Supper. We know that He washed the feet of His disciples. We know that He taught them to prepare them for His suffering and death. Did it surprise you to see that He also prayed for you and for your salvation? "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may know that you sent me." (vs. 20-21)

And notice how Jesus described the result of His saving work for us: they believe the word of Jesus (by the power of the Holy Spirit), and in believing they are one with each other and with the Son and the Father. Salvation is communion with God the Trinity. Salvation is also community with all who believe in God the Trinity.

In our individualistically oriented world, we often hear people speak about *their* personal relationship with Jesus as if it were just the two of them involved. Yet that is not what Jesus prayed. Jesus prayed for sinful people whom God loved to join Him in His company with the Father and the Spirit. In truth. In forgiving fellowship. In love. In unity. Forever.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when you prayed for us, you truly prayed for *us*. You prayed that we would know you and the Father who sent you, and you prayed that we would be bound together as people believing in you who love each other as you love us. Keep us from putting up any barriers that keep us from seeing other people as those you love. Guide us in the way of your prayer that we may be one as you are in the Father and the Father is in you. Amen.

The King Purchases our Salvation - Good Friday - March 30, 2018

Read John 19:12-30

Jesus is a king. He is the King of kings long promised in Scripture, yet he was not the sort of king people expected. He had no military power to back him, nor was he interested in gaining power or popularity for himself.

His enemies brought him before Pilate to condemn him as a rebellious rival to the Roman king. Yet Pilate puzzled over Jesus, doubting his enemies' accusations. He was astonished by Jesus' regal acceptance of his predicament. Though he finally agreed to the demands of Jesus' accusers, Pilate had a notice posted atop Jesus' cross that proclaimed him King of the Jews.

What kind of king is our Lord? The kind whose mission it is rescue people from the spiritual tyranny under which we all live. Jesus is the Good Shepherd (shepherd being a title used of kings in the Old Testament – Jeremiah 23:4), who laid down His life for us, dying to break sin's bondage for us.

King Jesus does not lie. When he said from the cross, "It is finished," he affirmed that his work for us was complete. The cross that killed our Lord was also his throne; there he completed the mission he received from His Father. From there the glory of His Father's love for us shines. From there Jesus paid the full price for our salvation.

Prayer: God, we thank you that you sent Jesus to be the kind of King that we need. Help us to let go of our own plans for him, so that we may live in the gift of righteousness that He died to give us. Amen.

The King Rests from His Labor - Holy Saturday - March 31, 2018

Read John 19:38-42

Jesus entered this world a helpless infant, dependent on the care of others; he left it lifeless, his corpse cared for by others. As Mary and Joseph had laid their infant son to sleep on the nights of his childhood, two followers of his, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, laid the body of God's Son to rest in a newly cut tomb for what they sadly thought would be his eternal rest.

Jesus rested. As he rested, his followers mourned for him and for the kingdom they thought to be vanquished. Surely death meant the end of his reign, and the disappointment of their hopes. Yes, the hopes Jesus' followers cherished of Christ's kingship – his victory over Rome and his ascendance to a glorious throne in Jerusalem – lay with Jesus' body growing cold in his tomb. But the hope that God had planned for them and the hope that Jesus had promised them merely awaited its unveiling. Until that bright morning dawned, the King rested from all his labor, waiting for His Father to awaken him.

Prayer: Jesus, we so easily lose heart when life falls short of our expectations. Help us to firmly believe that our disappointments do not signal the overthrow of your gracious reign over us. Help us to rest by faith in Jesus, knowing that he is faithful and will never forsake us. Amen.

The King Lives to Save Us - Easter Sunday – April 1, 2018

Read John 20:19-23

Over the space of three days, the disciples' grief grew into fear. If the Sanhedrin had had its way so easily with Jesus, then none of them could be safe. They barricaded themselves in a room, hiding from the authorities. As the LORD had come to Adam and Eve nervously hiding behind bushes in Eden, Jesus came to His fearful followers, unhindered by the doors they had locked. His words embraced them, confirming those He spoke to them before He died: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

The King lives! From the ashes of false hopes, the disciples witnessed the resurrection of their true Hope. Jesus alive! Jesus triumphant – not over Rome – but over sin, death, and hell. The peace He had promised them He now delivered: peace with God through the forgiveness of sins fully paid for by the death of God's Son. Heaven reached down and set the disciples before their Creator beloved, forgiven and set right in Christ. Heaven sent them into the world with its message of peace: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Heaven has done the same for you.

Prayer: As we walk before you each day, help us to hold your gift of peace in our hearts by faith that fear will not hinder us from rejoicing in you and living at peace with you and proclaiming your peace to our neighbors. Amen.

Restoration: King David - April 2, 2018

Maybe we hear about and even do our own fix-ups, renovations, or restorations to a house, a piece of furniture, a grand old car. There may well be joy and satisfaction in this, but why restore something? It may be done for further use and enjoyment, or possibly out of sentiment and attachment. Let us consider King David's repurposing and restoration.

David had a problem worthy of an opera and poli-sci novel all rolled into one! Take a read through 2 Samuel 12! David had an affair, covered it up with murder, and even used fake news to make himself look the good guy! Yes, all this until the prophet came with a story of Woolley-The-Sheep. David was intrigued by and caught up in the story. In his outrage, as self-professed good guy, David took over the drama from the Prophet, gave it a kingly ending, and thereby caught himself out! The cost was a life, the life of his own infant son. Yet in confession, honest confession, this David, a dad losing his son, was restored but with consequences. The restoration gave us a wiser King, a psalm with words we too may use for repentance and from which we too hear forgiveness (Psalm 51), and a keen insight into the restorative heart of God.

The mess which is David's family life came to open civil war when David did near little when one of his sons abused a half-sister (2 Samuel 13-18). Absalom, an older brother to girl stepped in, plotted revenge, bid his time, and then murdered. The result slides David's family and kingdom into war in the course of which David loses another son, revenge taking Absalom, to death: pierced with a spear when hanging helplessly in a tree. David had commanded that Absalom be spared. Note the cry of David's heart: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (18:33b). A father's heart broke, a father is resorted, a father's kingdom is righted, but at a terrible cost.

Over a long life of repentance and restoration, David would be repurposed for the sake of respect-filled worship, personal self-understanding even as an example to us, and a kingdom from which Messiah would come. We are reminded by the prophets and St. Paul of the Lord's assessment: "I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised" (Acts 13:22-23).

It took the death of another beloved son of David, Jesus, which brings us to reverent worship. It is the death of a beloved son, verified by the thrust of an enemies spear as Jesus hangs on a tree, the cross, that ultimately repurposes and restores David, and you, and me. All this no matter how sin filled our David-like lives may be. This is more than sentiment and attachment, more than re-using and enjoyment, this is a rescue and restoration out of pure love.

Prayer: Thank you heavenly Father that your heart is inclined towards us and that you desire nothing more than our restoration and the restoration of all humankind through the forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross. Amen.

Restoration: St. Peter - April 3, 2018

Peter's name reflects his character. Peter, the rock, is a name that Simon the fisherman receives from his friends because he is rock hard solid and hard rock stubborn! What a name for one of Jesus' closest disciples! This man could be impetuous in one moment and yet strong in confession the next. He could understand what God was doing in Jesus, but could also get it totally backwards.

Peter's first encounter with Jesus is while fishing. After a bad night of no fish, Jesus asked Peter to cast the net out one more time. Even though he thinks he knows better, Peter humours the travelling teacher and thunderstruck by the sudden overflow of fish about to break the nets! Peter's response comes from an ego sharply rebuked and insight into his own soul's condition: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Instead of leaving, Jesus restores the hearts of all present when he says to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:10b). Sin, fear, shame, the true state of the person were directly addressed by Jesus. The restoration of Peter made him a disciple and a follower who would receive further restorative training.

On two occasions crowds leave Jesus because he begins to teach hard even awkward things and when crowds wonder who he might be. As the crowds leave, Jesus asks the twelve: "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:67-69). When the identity question is turned to the core group of disciples, Jesus asks, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29, Matthew 16:15). Here is rock solid Peter! Peter is correct; his confession is sound and solid.

However, as soon as Jesus begins to teach about his coming suffering, death, and even resurrection, Peter rebukes Jesus – as if he knew better. Jesus again cuts to the heart and lets Peter know the rock solid source for that wrong understanding. He said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Mark 8:33, Matthew 16:23). Jesus then expands on discipleship as taking up the cross, following, and gaining life even when losing it. Jesus is taking Peter on a restorative journey.

The critical point for Peter in his discipleship journey comes the night of Jesus' arrest. Peter was warned, but none-the-less denied Jesus three times, even with rough oaths, before the morning rooster crowed. Peter, shaken to the rocky core, wept bitterly. This betrayal is recorded by all four gospels. Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:55-62, John 18:16-18, 25-27. No one can hide from that; Peter, most certainly not.

After the first resurrection accounts, Peter decides to leave Jerusalem, returns home, and starts to fish (John 21), the place of his first encounter with Jesus. The fishing was again poor, Jesus (unrecognised by the fishermen) calls out to cast the nets again, the catch is again huge, and suddenly Jesus is recognised. Instead of yelling in fear at Jesus to go away, Peter exhibits awkward modesty by putting on his outer clothes on, jumping into the water, and going ashore to meet Jesus. Jesus has prepared a fire and is cooking fish. Peter, the crew, and Jesus eat together. This is fellowship and shared love, but Peter is still waiting on less than rock-solid ground.

Jesus asks Peter three questions of love. Peter answers yes each time. With each love questions and yes answer, Jesus increases Peter's restoration and entrusts to him an expanding ministry. The final phrase is confessed by Peter with tears. He has repented, he is forgiven, he is accountable to all, Peter is restored. Peter the rock, is now Peter the mountain of rock.

Peter will solidly and fearlessly follow the Holy Spirit's direction as an Apostle of Jesus' message. Even his famous "Quo Vadis" end to life bear witness not of Peter's perfection, but a life of repentance and humility. His restored life is one of restoration for others as a confession of belonging, to Jesus alone.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let our confession of faith be one of humility as you have restored us at a great price. Grant that the Holy Spirit lead us to confess this with openness to those around us that struggle with the same rocky issues as we do, as did St. Peter. Amen.

Restoration: Paul - April 4, 2018

Saul, known more as Paul, was named after the first King of Israel, an unrepentant man who blindly ignored God. Paul, the soon to be the apostle, was lead through blindness to his own restoration and into the role of ambassador, a reconciler, and restorer.

Paul blindly opposed what God was doing for all humanity through his son Jesus Christ. He was blind though he knew the scriptures through the keen eyes of a topflight academic. Those same eyes that read scriptures and committed them to memory were blinded by a hate for those known as people of The Way (Acts 9:2) – the way, the truth, and the life in Jesus (John 14:6).

Paul stood by approvingly, holding the coats, at the stoning St. Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). Stephen saw Jesus, but Saul saw coats and flying stones. Paul then took signed court orders for hunting down the people of The Way. He went house to house, as in a military sweep, and many believers scattered. Those caught were taken to prison (Acts 8:1-3). Paul's reputation as a determined Christian hunter spread. With the reputation spread fear.

On his final persecution journey to Damascus, not even a city in Palestine, Paul's blindness was met with light. Knocked to the ground, physically blinded by light, Paul heard a booming in his ears, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). Paul is physically blinded for three days, a mirror to his spiritual blindness. Paul fasts and prays and into this darkness Jesus shines the light of faith through a timid disciple, Ananias.

Even though given a vision, Ananias was fearful of visiting Paul and laid this out before the Lord. The Lord's response is direct: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16). Paul is a chosen instrument with a focused purpose, to reach the gentiles with the Good News. Paul's sight is restored and Paul's life is restored. Paul is saved. Paul is filled by the Holy Spirit and directed to a task not as persecutor, but instead, that of apostle-evangelist. He does not make prisoners, but frees prisoners. He is not blindly following the rule of pride as old King Saul but the rule of a life giving eternal King, Jesus.

Throughout the Roman world Paul will fearlessly spread the great news of Jesus: his death for sins, his physical resurrection and our coming physical resurrection. He will do this based on keen insight into the Hebrew testament defending Jesus as Messiah (Acts 9:22, 17:3, 18:28, 28:23 etc). With equal scriptural insight Paul will defend and restore God's intention to include Gentiles in the plan of salvation. This Paul will do on three journeys, lasting several years, far beyond Palestine throughout the Roman world. Following this, and still following Jesus, Paul becomes a prison writer for 25-ish years until finally meeting his death at the hands of the Emperor. Now Paul awaits the resurrection, the full physical restoration, of the dead.

The beauty of this coming restoration is not limited to people, it includes the cosmos as confessed by Paul in a letter written to his friends in Rome as he prepares to meet the Emperor: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Romans 8:22).

With Jesus overwhelming desire for restoration of all people and creation itself, we have been set free. We too have the joy of restoration sealed in us as we are born-again in Holy Baptism. It is this restoration that drives us to share what Christ has done and continues to do so. It is with humility that we share how we are forgiven, reconciled, restored, and sent – boldly or timidly – into this world to live fully as we have the assurance of eternal life.

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, make us bold to proclaim restoration in Jesus even in places it seems unlikely to bear fruit. Thank you that you gave us Jesus in order to reconcile and restore us, and all creation, to yourself. Amen.

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