

Lenten Devotional 2018

Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship
Community Mennonite Church
Raleigh Mennonite Church
Shalom Mennonite Congregation



Cover image Ash Wednesday © Jan Richardson

Wednesday, February 14

Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day

I work at a shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Every day I am reminded again of the limits of love - simply because those limits are made so visible. Many of the single mothers who come to our doors are fleeing abusive relationships – whether physical, verbal, economic, or sexual. All of them love their children but some of them are struggling so profoundly with their own trauma, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, or mental health needs that they are not able to give their children what they need. The parents and the kids create strong bonds with each other while they are here – but there is also frequent conflict between friends and neighbors. The love is so visible and yet the brokenness is so visible as well.

Yet the mothers who come to us are not just homeless because of harmful intimate relationships but also because of harmful economic relationships. Many people who come to our doors are homeless because of low wage jobs without family sick leave, skyrocketing gentrification and healthcare costs, and a punitive criminal justice system that continues to hurt people throughout their lives. 95% of the families who come to our doors are people of color. Every day I'm also reminded of the Cornel West truism "Justice is what love looks like in public" and how even my progressive hometown of Durham fails to love enough to make justice happen for these mothers.

For the first time since 1945, Ash Wednesday intersects with Valentine's Day. We have the opportunity to reflect on how Lent can help us to reflect on the brokenness of our own ways of loving – our partners, our children, our friends, our neighbors, our economic relationships. Little is known about St. Valentine. One legend is that he was imprisoned for refusing to worship false gods, gave his testimony from prison, and healed his jailer's daughter. Another legend is that he secretly married couples so that the husbands wouldn't have to go to war – that he strengthened couples' relationships and therefore was able to interrupt the violence-dealing ways of the empire.

This Lent, let us examine the false gods in our own lives that keep us from loving each other well. Let us recognize how we are trapped in broken systems and testify from those places. Let us strengthen our relationships with our close communities (whether that includes housemates, spouses, children, parents, church members ...) – and let us do so in ways that subvert mechanisms of structural violence. Let us remember that love of enemies is a part of St. Valentine's story, too – and let us learn to seek the flourishing of those who wish us harm. May this Lent be for us a shelter – where the discipline of seeing brokenness opens a door to healing that brokenness, too.

Rachel Taylor
Raleigh Mennonite Church

Thursday, February 15

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
in ages to come.*

*Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?
Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"*

The religion of my youth defined sin as anything an individual did that was against the will of God. Sometimes referred to as "missing the mark," regular altar calls provided opportunities for repentant sinners to weep, mourn, recommit our lives to Christ, and beseech God to pour out his spirit on us again. Joel's call to holy fasting, repentance, and sacrifices found in our text today were all central to that theology.

Later chapters of life led to a radically deconstructed theology where fear of God's holy wrath was replaced with a celebration of God's radical love – a love for all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, economic standing, etc. Notions of sin were thrown out as antiquated, manipulative tactics to keep churchgoers in line with the patriarchy and I began seeing the work of faith not as an individualistic obligation to moral purity, but rather as the communal work of justice for those seeking to follow Jesus. My current faith community is a beautiful community of Jesus followers who are seeking to do the work of justice. And I am grateful. And I celebrate.

Lately, however, I'm feeling the need for some altar calls.

The Old Testament prophets, Joel included, call us to repentance, not because of our own individual foibles, but our communal abandonment of God's shalom. If sin is about missing the mark, of abandoning the heart and message of God, of failing to follow in the way of Christ, then we have some repenting to do, but according to Soong-Chan Rah, the Western concept of sin is inadequate to describe the shame, sickness, and pain caused by injustice and oppression. We need to do more than repent; we need to heal. And healing requires acknowledgment, repentance, and a willingness to make things right.

Many faith communities have taken up God's call to do justice in the world. In his book, *Prophetic Lament*, Rah asserts that it is not enough to do the work of justice without also acknowledging and repenting, i.e., lamenting, of our sins of racism, heterosexism, ableism, materialism, sexism, and xenophobia, just to name a few.

Lent is an appropriate time for us to engage in deep repentance and lament

- for our part in the genocide of people who originally inhabited the land we claim to own;
- for our enslavement of people forced to come to this country in the bowels of slave ships;
- for perpetuating systems of oppression that, while we perhaps didn't create, we certainly continue to benefit from;
- for the violence against gender non-conforming folks or those who choose to love outside of the boundaries of traditional marriage and our silence in the face of such violence;
- for the perpetual dehumanization of people who do not look or act like us and for using our religion to justify and support those practices.

May we heed Joel's call to holy fasting, repentance, and sacrifices once again.

Rend our hearts, oh God. Consecrate our assemblies. May we return to you.

Kathy Evans
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Friday, February 16

Isaiah 58:1-17

*Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations
of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.*

*If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests,
or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride
upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage
of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

Recipe for Human Flourishing

We usually think of Old Testament Scriptures regarding the practices of fasting and Sabbath-keeping as primarily rituals to be kept in order to be in right relationship with God. However, in this passage, the Lord (through Isaiah) gives Israel a good dressing down for pretending to honor God AS IF they were acting righteously (v.2). God's strong words here are reinforced by Jesus in the New Testament.

The Israelites ask God:

Why don't you **notice** when we fast with bowed heads and lie around in sackcloth and ashes?

Jesus says:

Don't be like the hypocrites who fast **to be seen** of others. (Matthew 5:16)

Rather than refraining from eating food to get attention for some self-serving purpose, the Lord emphasizes that acceptable fasting requires the Israelites to refrain from:

- fighting and quarrelling
- perverting justice for the oppressed
- hoarding food, clothing, and shelter for themselves

In other words, fasting was to be done with the aim of helping others, as in the story of Esther when she put her life on the line to ask for God's help to save her people.

In the gospels, Jesus says:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43)

“Blessed are the merciful” (Matt. 5:7)

Give to everyone who begs from you and wants to borrow from you. (Matt.5:42)

As to the Sabbath, the Lord reprimands the Israelites for serving only their own interests rather than the original purpose of keeping it as a special day to recognize their relationship with God by giving respite to all, including themselves, their animals and slaves (Ex. 31:12-13).

Jesus, likewise, views the Sabbath as a day to serve others by giving a woman respite from crippling bondage (Luke 13:11-17), healing a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), as well as a lame man (John 5).

The gist of the Isaiah passage, along with the words and life of Jesus, indicate that other-centered practices of fasting and Sabbath-keeping ultimately result in human flourishing all around. In Isaiah, the rewards are noted with such life-giving images as light, a watered garden, riding upon the heights, rebuilding, repairing, and restoring.

In this Lenten season, I invite you to ask with me:

How can I fast from my own stinginess and self-centeredness in such a way as to be more life-giving?

How can I keep the Sabbath with a more God-centered view of renewal for others as well as myself?

Esther Stenson
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, February 17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

A gift... Paul emphasizes that reconciliation is a gift from God: not a transformation that we ourselves need effect, but only open ourselves to. In 5:21 he reminds us of God's previous gift, in which humanity's sins were laid upon Jesus and in consequence we were offered salvation: a lopsided transaction if ever there was one. Now in our own time God is again offering us an enormous gift of grace, one we have done little to merit but can yet receive.

This is the moment to be reconciled with God... The quote in 6:2 is from Isaiah 49:8. Today, Paul urges us, is a good day to begin turning ourselves towards God's grace. In this season of Lent, surely he is right.

Together in Christ... For Paul, the church planter, reconciliation with God and doing God's work are not solitary monkish pursuits. We are to be "ambassadors," to show others the way to Christ through the steadfast righteousness of our own conduct. Living together in community, our patience and love can serve as a testimony to the broader world beyond the church. In this way we can share in God's work.

Expect hardships... Beginning in 6:5 Paul catalogs a daunting litany of challenges and abuses that a Christian may suffer, presumably much of it autobiographical. Much has changed in two millennia: clearly we are unlikely to face beatings for our faith, or imprisonment, or death (as is thought to have befallen Paul). But we do still face afflictions and hardships, small and large; if we bear them well we can still be ambassadors for the Christian life.

Paul writes beautifully of the perverse, unexpected fruits of such hardship: to "have nothing, and yet possess everything." One wonders how much we as Christians today have lost over those same two millennia, as the faith evolved from fervent minority to conventional belief. Would we be better Christians, could we be more closely reconciled to God, if doing so was harder, riskier? Perhaps we should in some sense try to welcome our own personal hardships, or at least to search for opportunity in them: chances to respond to our personal crosses in ways that help us serve as ambassadors of Christ.

And collectively: with the enthusiasm of a convert, I relish Mennonites' long history of willingness to face criticism for our beliefs, to stand before draft boards as conscientious objectors, as has been done within living memory. Collectively, we do have some claim to living true to principle without regard to cost. And (perhaps with the naivete of a convert), I hope that where belief demands it we can continue to face and engage the many injustices of today actively through our churches with humble but steadfast righteousness, even against power or convention, so that by our deeds we can serve together as ambassadors of Christ.

Bob Harris
Community Mennonite Church

Sunday, February 18

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

"Every living creature." This passage repeats these words like a litany. That repetition almost blinded me to the strangeness of its inclusion. God makes a covenant not just with Noah and his descendants, but with "all flesh that is on the earth." We see this elsewhere in scripture, from God's profession of concern for Nineveh, "in which there are...many animals," to Psalm 104, which details God's delicate attention not only to the survival of animals, but also to their joy—like the sea monster "Leviathan" which God formed to "sport" in the sea. Noah, his family, and all the animals have just stumbled out of the Ark into an unrecognizable landscape—fresh, green, and full of bones and blood. At that moment, when God promises never again to overwhelm human violence with divine violence, God makes a universal covenant that extends from Noah to the dove that brought him the olive leaf to the Leviathan that never ceased from its sporting in the sea.

Sometimes I think of the God of nature and the God of covenant as being different. The first one sets up abstract laws that govern the universe, the second one establishes a relationship with Israel and journeys with them through history. The beauty of this passage for me is how it shows these two Gods to be the same God. God makes a covenant with every living creature. God actively sustains every living creature. And in love God commands us also to set aside our own warbows and safeguard the lifeblood of every living creature, ourselves included. Earlier in this chapter as part of this same covenant, God concedes that humans may eat meat but commands them not to eat "flesh with its life, that is, its blood" and to refrain from killing other humans. What is it about blood that makes God command this? Is consuming blood always violent? Is blood too holy to digest?

In a surprising recurrence, it is precisely through this covenant with all flesh that we Gentiles are permitted to follow the Messiah of Israel. In Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem grafts Gentiles onto the people of God on the terms of this "Noahide" covenant. The Gentiles won't be asked to follow the Torah in its fullness but will instead only refrain from several things including, once again, blood.

In a way, then, to be a Gentile follower of Jesus is to be rebaptized into God's universal covenant with every living creature. When this rebaptized community of creatures gathers around the communion table, we eat the flesh and drink the blood that is truly the life of the world. What a strange reversal! As Christ meets us at that table and in the world, he overwhelms our violence with a flood of divine love—that same love which every day sports with sea monsters, shelters scorpions, and shepherds humans.

Lord, help me know your love for me. Transform my violence into love for the creatures around me.

Nathan Hershberger
Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship

Monday, February 19

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

"The kingdom of God has come near. *Metanoia!* Believe the good news!" After Jesus's baptism, the Spirit descended on him. A voice from heaven pronounced blessing on him, establishing him as God's anointed son, and then immediately, he was placed in the wilderness where he experienced a time of testing, giving him the credibility to fully enter and speak into our human condition. After emerging from the wilderness, his first sermon throughout Galilee centered on the word, "*Metanoia!*"

Metanoia, in most of our English Bibles is translated as "Repent!" Repentance: "to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life; to change one's mind; to feel sorrow, regret, or contrition." Perhaps for many of us, the first things that come to mind when we hear the word "repent" are hellfire and brimstone preachers. Maybe we think of the feelings of regret we have when we do something wrong. In general, I don't like the word "regret" very much. I try to live my life in such a way that I recognize that God is able to transform even my past decisions into events that can work for God's purposes.

Metanoia is not about appeasing God for our sins so that we can avoid the fires of hell. It's not even about feelings of regret for the things that we've done.

Metanoia is best understood in the definitions of "repentance" above that touch on our *mind* and on "dedication to the amendment of one's life." *Metanoia* means "a transformative change of heart." Rather than "repentance," "conversion" and "reformation" might more appropriately approximate its connotation. Archbishop Richard C. Trench suggested that it expresses, "that mighty change in mind, heart, and life wrought by the Spirit of God." It involves both the *mind* and the *heart*, and is manifested in a changed *life*.

Metanoia, for me, calls to mind Romans 12:2. Mennonites are quite familiar with this particular verse—especially the first part. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Our tradition has historically emphasized the first (negative) command of non-conformity. But in Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Mark, he emphasizes the second (positive) command: the *renewing* of our minds. *Renewing* suggests an action that is ongoing; a continual transformation whereby the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism stirs our hearts and our minds to continually seek "what is good and acceptable and perfect." When we cease to continually renew our minds, we can no longer be transformed, and we are no longer living lives of *Metanoia*.

Matt Hunsberger
Community Mennonite Church

Tuesday, February 20

Psalm 25

To you, O Love, I lift up my soul!

*O Heart within my heart,
in You I place my trust.*

*Let me not feel unworthy;
let not fear rule over me.*

*Yes! May all who open their hearts
savor You and bless the earth!*

*Compel me to know your ways, O Love;
lead me in your truth,
for through You will I know wholeness;
I shall reflect your Light
both day and night.*

*I know of your mercy, Blessed One,
and of your unconditional Love;
Forgive the many times I have walked
away from You.
I seek your guidance, once again,
I yearn to know your Peace.
Companion me as I open to your love, your way!*

*Yet, all too often glorious gifts of Grace,
of Love and Light,
are veiled by my busyness.
May I bow before You;
that I might choose
the way of love and truth.
May I live in your abundant love!*

*Adapted from Psalm 25, Psalms for Praying: An
Invitation to Wholeness, by Nan C. Merrill*

While meditating on this version of Psalm 25, the line, *all too often glorious gifts of Grace, of Love and Light, are veiled by my busyness*, caught my attention. How often am I preoccupied, not bothering

to realign myself with the ordinary sacredness of life? Outward pressures and demands will always be present, busy seasons are unavoidable at times. But, do I also tend an interior stance of deep openness to the Source of life? This psalm is a beautiful invitation to live wholeheartedly, despite life's demands. Juicy words like savor, seek, yearn, and bow invite us to pause and pay attention.

Sometimes, I wish Lent wouldn't follow Christmas so soon in the church calendar – there's too much richness packed into the winter season, but writing for Lent in January helped me see my December folly, the times I've been veiled by busyness.

I got overwound last Christmas. Being on a farm and following the natural rhythm of seasons makes me want to lie fallow in winter, hibernate even, rather than jump into holiday frenzy. Not the frenzy of meaningless hype, rather too many activities seeped in family events, lovely services, and a smorgasbord of soulful Advent readings. I resisted as usual, then got pulled in. I choose too many wonderful activities and online retreats. By December's end, I felt over-stimulated.

Meditating on this Psalm was balm for my soul. Don't we all rush from good intention to great activity, from church to work, to leisure and social media, not settling deeply into a spiritual practice or pausing to see the sacred in our encounters? We live accelerated; the lack of space and depth, combined with the pressure we put on ourselves becomes soul draining. This is our veil, our real busyness.

Reread the Psalm. Pause to welcome this moment with all it includes, the wanted and unwanted, and be willing to receive any gifts of grace and love. Imagine being engulfed by Infinite Love.

Sharon Landis
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Wednesday, February 21

I Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Here is a text to ponder deeply. Peter's cosmology is foreign to our thinking. There is much here that we don't understand. Who were the "spirits in prison"? Where did Christ go to "make [his] proclamation"? And what did Christ "proclaim"? Was it good news about God's longstanding "patience"? Or was it judgment on those who "did not obey"? How were the residents of Noah's ark "saved through water"? And how do the waters of baptism now "save" those who enter into them? There are more issues here than fit into a brief Lenten meditation.

But in spite of our questions, this text still speaks profound and powerful truth into Peter's world and into our own. Peter brackets this text (3:18 and 3:22) with two central proclamations:

1) Christ, the "righteous" one, has "suffered" for the "unrighteous," namely for all humankind, scrappy, violent, rebellious. The irony here is massive; and injustice abounds. But there is purpose here as well, divine purpose. Jesus undergoes this "suffering" precisely in order to "bring [us] to God." That is, God's reconciliation strategy vis-à-vis rebellious humankind runs directly *to* and *through* the unjust

"suffering" of Jesus, who was "put to death in the flesh" by the malice of organized religion and the violence of empire.

2) But Jesus' unjust death is not the end of the story. Far from it. This same Jesus, "put to death in the flesh" both *by* and *for* rebellious humanity, is the very one whom God vindicates . . . unmistakably, powerfully, with ultimate and cosmic impact. God "resurrects" Jesus, makes him "alive in the spirit," ushers him "into heaven," seats him at God's "right hand," and "subjects" all the powers of the universe to him. Here is God's ultimate and irreversible answer to the rebellion of humankind and the death of Jesus

But if God's salvation strategy provides the all-crucial framework here (3:18 and 3:22), the heart of this text (3:19-20 and 3:21) focuses on God's salvific work within human lives. Two things are clear:

1) God has been working throughout history to "save" humankind. God calls humans "patiently" and persistently away from rebellious "disobedience" and towards faithful "ark-building." God "saves" those who respond faithfully to God's call. And in God's divine irony "salvation" comes to God's faithful ones precisely *through* the very "water" that once threatened their lives.

2) God is still at work "saving" God's people "through water." This time, however, it is the water of baptism. There is no magic here. This is not the Pool of Bethesda, with its quasi-magical healing for the first person to reach its roiled-up waters (cf. John 5:2-7). By no means. The human act of entering the water of baptism is, for Peter, the counterpart to Noah's "ark-building" faithfulness, the human means by which we "appeal *to God* for a good conscience," or in other words, call on *God* to save us. And the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will never let us down. Thanks be to God!

Dorothy Jean Weaver
Community Mennonite Church

Thursday, Feb. 22

Matthew 6:1-4

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

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

This passage is telling me the importance of intention in works of piety. The passage is speaking of the act of giving in particular, but I imagine the centrality of intention would apply to prayer and fasting as well.

I’m interested in the relationship between a change of heart or attitude, and a change of behavior or action. Does a change of action bring about a change of heart or is it the other way around? This passage suggests - in classic biblical paradox! – both.

In order to give well, I must first be conscious of doing it for a particular reason. Clearly, giving to be seen and praised by others is not a good reason, at least not if I am wanting to be faithful and Christ-centered. Giving to relieve suffering in another seems much closer to the mark, and I think

this is a good reason to give. However, while I can see how my giving helps others, I can’t really say it is enough to actually relieve any suffering. In fact, there are entire schools of thought that argue against giving as an effective way to alleviate hunger. “Give a man a fish and he eats today, teach him to fish and he eats for a lifetime”.

If the goal of our Lenten disciplines is personal spiritual formation, rather than economic justice, then the reason for giving has to have something to do with me, the innermost part of me. I believe I give in order to practice loving others, to practice seeing Christ in others. I also give as an act of emptying my life of things other than Christ. It’s a symbolic emptying, for certain, but symbols can have power.

Giving for show is really the opposite of giving for inner emptying and formation. The public attention and praise I would get for public giving would almost certainly block the inner transformation I am seeking.

The reward that God gives for giving with right intention is a cleansed and refocused perspective on myself and the people around me. I can see Christ in them, in me.

So I deliberately set my intention for giving on inner transformation, I give in a way that does not attract attention, and I experience God in me in a new way – a change of mind leads to an act that leads to a change of heart.

Sue Cockley
Community Mennonite Church

Friday, Feb. 23

The New Covenant ~ "a poured out life"

A number of years ago, a trip that took us back to Michigan (my state of birth), also provided us the opportunity to visit Mackinaw Island, an island where motorized vehicles are outlawed or kept to a bare minimum. Horse-drawn carriages dot the landscape and bikers and hikers are seen throughout the trails and roadways. Wayne and I "tested" our biking skills, which had long lay dormant. We rented bikes and biked around the island. Half way around, we stopped along the shoreline simply to enjoy the sunshine, the gentle breeze, the water lapping at the shoreline and the pure beauty surrounding us. As I sat on one of the lakeside boulders pondering life and love, a question emerged. "God, what is this love that you have invited me to?"

Life has taught me a lot about what love is not. And, I believe our culture portrays a pretty shallow definition of love. Self-centered motives (it is so easy to deceive ourselves) can often get in the way of God's kind of love. In the Apostle Paul's famous description of love, he defines love more by what it is not than by what it is.

"Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

As I slid off the boulder, the question that had come was waiting to be answered. My eyes were drawn to the pebbles that lined the shoreline. Somehow my eye did not rest on the many but on a singular, small pebble, not bigger than a nickel, shaped like a heart. As I picked it up, I saw that there was a streak of red running through the middle of it. "Yes," I thought, "the kind of love Jesus demonstrated was a suffering love--a love that was willing to give up everything else--a love poured out for the good of all humankind."

That little rock, a reminder of the kind of love Jesus offers, is on my kitchen windowsill. I am so grateful I have experienced God's love and grace in large measure. That little rock is also a reminder that Christ's suffering love, demonstrated in a "poured out life," is also an invitation to live in the way of Jesus. There is no way that I can live in the way of Jesus on my own. So, my work is to stay connected daily to that source of love in a way that somehow, in some way, Christ's love might flow through me to the people that I meet everyday.

Kathy Hochstedler
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, February 24

I bind my heart this tide (HWB 411)

Text: Lauchlan Watt, 1907

Music: J. Randall Zercher, 1965

A hymn for yesterday's and tomorrow's pieces on covenants. Lauchlan Maclean Watt (1867-1957) was a Scottish minister and writer who served as a chaplain in the Great War and the moderator of the Church of Scotland. His 1907 book of poetry, *The Tryst: A Book of the Soul*, is a mix of mediocre verse and worthy ideas. But in one poem there, "Christ's Thrall," the writing catches up with the thought:

I bind my heart this tide,
To the Galilean's side,
To the wounds of Calvary,
To the Christ who died for me.

I bind my soul this day
To the brother far away,
And the brother near at hand,
In this town, and in this land.

I bind my heart in thrall
To the God, the Lord of all,
To the God, the poor [one's] friend,
And the Christ Whom he did send.

I bind myself to peace,
To make strife and envy cease.
God! knot Thou sure the cord
Of my thralldom to my Lord.

J. Randall Zercher wrote the tune UNION for this text in 1965, when he was choir director at Hesston College, and it appeared in *The Mennonite Hymnal* and in the current *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Even the hymnal of the Church of Scotland has adopted Zercher's tune for this text after trying a few others that didn't work.

Jeremy Nafziger
Community Mennonite Church

Sunday, February 25

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

One might think my greatest struggles are physical challenges after neurosurgery for a tumor. I have those too, but my greatest struggle is with identity. At first I saw my tumor as a mere injury. I would "bounce back" after a patient wait. Optimistic, I tolerated the post-surgery inabilities that redefined me—daily dizziness, constant tiredness, and embarrassing memory losses, to name a few. It would be many descents into depression—a typical response to medical trauma—before admitting I might never be the *me* I was. Eight years hence, I still cringe calling myself "disabled." I still ask how to live life after *life*.

I am sure Abram and Sarai did not worry about distinguishing Social Security from Social Security Disability, nor the implication of name changes to Abraham and Sarah on Federal forms. I am sure, though, they worried about life after life. In their

nineties, they became parents. Then, covenanting with God, they faced an issue that reverberated into New Testament times—circumcision. Abraham fell "on his face and laughed" at the prospect of life after life.

Lent can translate into a variety of personal rituals. For some, it is quiet contemplation, solitary reading, or certain abstinences. Lent for me is another kind of "loosening." It had been Lent when I sank into my first post-surgery depressions.

I did not grow up in church, nor had encounters with them been good. I might have quite a testament to how I arrived in the Mennonite community I know today, but fast-forwarding to after brain surgery, Lent is when I learned what having a religious community truly meant. While I grappled with an identity with disability—life under new Federal laws for which I even got a new ID card—peeled away was another barrier ingrained from past negative church experiences. Life after life depressed me; church life uplifted me.

Some God-changed lives come with name changes. Later in Genesis Jacob is renamed to Israel. Jesus renames Simon to Peter. The Holy Spirit renames Saul to Paul. Jacob's wrestling ends with both a blessing and a disability—the limp from which later Israelites create a tradition of abstinence from eating the thigh muscle of meat.

In an interview with Krista Tippett for "On Being", the actor, Martin Sheen—whose name is also Ramon Estevez—shared his experience during communion in a Catholic church. He did not claim to be a practicing Catholic but related how he felt "embraced" by communion with others. He explained how he introduced himself to strangers he joined to receive the sacraments. "I'm Ramon, called Martin, your friend.... And I'm with them." My personal ritual during Lent is communicating: "I'm Zinith, not who I was but still your spiritually journeying friend, and I'm with you."

By Zinith Barbee
Raleigh Mennonite Church

Monday, Feb. 26

Mark 8.31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The cows follow each other around our farm. Generally this results in nothing worse than muddy tracks where the grass has been worn away by heavy hoofs. But when the fence fails, the cows' following habit can be a real nuisance.

If we're honest, humans and cows aren't so different. We tend to follow each other, too. Maybe it's something in the milk.

This text tells of an argument between Peter and Jesus. Even from the beginning of the story there's little doubt about who's in the wrong. (Hint: not Jesus.) Jesus' response to Peter in verse 33 drives to the heart of the dispute: 'He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!"'

Jesus is correcting Peter but his rebuke is also a reminder. 'Get behind me' doesn't mean 'get out of my sight'. Jesus isn't turning his back on Peter in contempt or disgust. Rather, Jesus is repeating the invitation he made when he first met Peter: follow me, that is, get behind me (Mark 1.17).

Jesus makes this clear when he repeats the phrase in his next sentence. 'If any want to become my followers', Jesus says—literally, 'if anyone wants to be behind me'—they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and—again—must follow. Jesus concludes with a synonym of 'get behind me' lest we miss the point: who we follow matters.

Peter's problem is that he's gotten behind the wrong ideas. Instead of following Jesus he's let hunger for earthly power and prestige lead him into green-seeming pastures. Jesus herds Peter back by reminding him of his earlier decision and of the consequences of his choice: 'What will it profit [you] to gain the whole world and yet forfeit [your] life?'

Jesus asks the same question of us and offers the same invitation: Come, get behind me. Don't be bullheaded. Don't follow the herd. That grass may look greener but don't be fooled. The way of the cross is a path of abundant, verdant, ever-growing life, life ripe for the eating.

We'd be foolish to turn our backs on that.

Ben Beachy
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Tuesday, Feb. 27

Psalm 22:1-31

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”
Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me
you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen
you have rescued me.*

*I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
From you comes my praise
in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth
bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.*

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words
of my groaning? I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

It is hard for me to read the anguish as Psalm 22 begins, and not hear the cry of a broken, bleeding man hanging on a Roman cross in excruciating pain (Mark 14:34; Matthew 27:46). Were these words written just for Jesus?

But I know they are much older—a thousand years older, if this is indeed a psalm of David. Did he write it fleeing for his life from King Saul? How often have Israelites cried out to Yahweh since then, and did not get an answer? How often do some of us today cry out for help, and the heavens seem closed?

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew continue alluding to Psalm 22. *I am a worm and not human; scorned by others and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads* (vv. 6-7). How well these words fit with the scorn of the watching crowds in Mark 15:29-32 and Matthew 27:39-44!

The torture continues in vv. 14-15: *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaw*. For a man who had been awake all night, beaten with leather straps studded with metal tips, and now pierced with nails through hands and feet—what better description than this in Psalm 22?

Even more specific is 22:16-18, where the author is encircled *with a company of evildoers...and they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots*. Was dividing up an executed prisoner's clothing a common practice for all those centuries between the writing of the psalm and Jesus' crucifixion? It must have been, unless all four Gospel writers made up the story or copied from each other! (See Mk 15:24; Matt 27:35; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:24.)

We are fortunate to have such raw emotions expressed in our scriptures. Psalm 22 reminds us of our humanity and how hard it is to trust when God is not responding. The author of this psalm wavers between accusing God for being absent (vv. 1-2, 6-8, 14-15, etc.), and then emerging with praise in verses 22-31.

Note that both Luke and John omit Jesus's agonizing cry from Psalm 22:1-2 because it does not fit either of their plots. Luke presents Jesus as confident in God's presence and even looking out for others, such as the dying thief and the watching women. For John's supremely ironic plot, Jesus's being lifted up on the cross is his *glory*, part of his way back to God (see Jn 12:32).

Reta Finger
Community Mennonite Church

Wednesday, February 28

Matthew 6:5-15

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“This, then, is how you should pray:

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’*

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

I'm grateful that we have instruction from Jesus about prayer – public and private -- in addition to the stories of how Jesus prayed, which are scattered throughout the gospels.

Public praying must have been a problem, even back in the early days of the Jesus movement. In our country the right to pray “on the street corner,” and in other public settings has been a public debate from time to time. Jesus doesn't seem to need his followers to display their devotion by praying out on the street corners – or even aloud in the synagogue for that matter.

Jesus said, *“When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that is the only reward*

they'll get.” (Common English Bible) So, Jesus said that if we pray with many words--putting our piety on display--that is the extent of what we will get. Our egos will get the attention they need and want, but as far as God goes, She likely will just be smiling at us lovingly . . . waiting for us to get over ourselves.

How then should we pray? The endearing sense of Jesus' instructions (verses 6 and 8) is that God is always present . . . God sees us . . . God knows all about us and therefore knows exactly what we need. We don't even need to be able to put it into words. So, the most I have to do is go to my room, close the door, and be still, inviting God to work in me, and with me.

Centering prayer

(<http://www.contemplative.org/contemplative-practice/centering-prayer/>) is a prayer practice that reflects Jesus's instructions about how to pray. Because this is a prayer of no words -- learning how to detach from our over-stimulated “monkey minds” -- God works in that secret place within us, where even we don't understand all that is going on. Thomas Keating, a Centering Prayer teacher, wrote this . . .

The way of pure faith is to persevere in contemplative practice without worrying about where we are on the journey, and without comparing ourselves with others or judging others' gifts as better than ours. We can be spared all this nonsense if we surrender ourselves to the divine action, whatever the psychological content of our prayer may be. In pure faith, the results are often hidden even from those who are growing the most . . . The divine light of faith is totally available in the degree that we consent and surrender ourselves to its presence and action within.

After instructing his disciples about not being showy about their praying, Jesus said, “Pray like this.” What we call The Lord's Prayer (verses 9-13) is beautifully simple, but demanding as well. It's the forgiveness part that often catches in my throat. Lord, have mercy on us all.

Jane Hooper Peifer
Community Mennonite Church

Thursday, March 1

Romans 4:13-25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

This passage felt like a bore to me at first, exactly the kind of logical case that Paul builds (if, then...) that makes me flip away, looking for the imagery of Jesus' parables, the Psalms, the prophets—anything but another discussion on faith, righteousness, and salvation. But then Paul evokes the story of Abraham, and I am caught.

Abraham knew the facts, felt the mockery of childlessness in the face of a promise to be the father of nations, in the face of his lifetime of sacrifice and struggle. "He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead and that Sarah's womb was also dead." And yet in spite of that—or perhaps because of that—Abraham did not waver. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations."

It reminded me of a conversation in one of my favorite childhood novels, *Ender's Shadow*, where the precocious protagonist, Bean, is struggling to solve a problem that seemed to defy physics. His friend, Nikolai, suggests that maybe there was such a thing as faster-than-light communication. "I don't like to rule something out just because it's impossible," Nikolai said hesitantly.

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." Like Abraham, we know the facts. We know the horrible brokenness of the world, the limitations of our bodies and minds that create weakness, suffering, violence, cruelty, decay, and death. We see irrefutable evidence that people are selfish, that things are getting worse, that love is snuffed out by hate everywhere we turn. We cannot take refuge in laws, or in our own righteousness—these are the rules of the world, and the game is rigged with both wrathful punishments and unpunished transgressions. Like victims of credit card interest rates, we are buried in a debt we cannot pay, yet cannot stop accruing. But God credits hope to us as righteousness, a radical debt forgiveness outside the possibility of society's laws.

"We who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" – this absurd miracle is the seed of our faith, and we must never forget it in all its beautiful impossibility. We are called with Abraham to believe in the impossible and act as if it will come to be. Such is the kingdom of God.

Kaitlin Heatwole
Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship

Friday, March 2

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." That doesn't seem like an obviously wrong thing to say. The first part—it is good for us to be here—seems uncontroversial. The second—let us make three dwellings—seems simply hospitable. But Mark immediately identifies it as another example of Peter's misunderstanding and fear, two things that characterize Peter throughout the Gospel. "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified," a line that gets repeated in Gethsemane (Mark 14.40).

It is a misunderstanding because they do not get to stay. They have to go back down the mountain, back into the world, out of the light and back into the darkness of Jesus' suffering. It is the same thing Peter doesn't get just a few verses earlier when Jesus rebukes him with "Get behind me, Satan."

The voice from the cloud says "Listen to him." Listen to what he just told you: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected... If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8. 31, 34). In wanting to stay on the mountain, Peter is making another attempt to avoid the cost of discipleship. He is talking too much and not listening enough.

Or is he? There is an ancient tradition, recently revived by Richard Bauckham, that claims that the gospel writer Mark was the same Mark that is identified as Peter's companion in I Peter 5. 13 and therefore that in this gospel is Mark retelling stories he heard at Peter's side. And the most direct reference to the transfiguration outside the Gospels comes in in the second epistle attributed to Peter: "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty... while we were with him on the holy mountain" (II Peter 1. 16-18). He goes on to say, "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (II Peter 1. 19).

The connections between the transfiguration and the resurrection are well known. But more important may be the striking differences between the transfiguration and the crucifixion. In one, glorious clothes, in the other, stripped naked. In one, a desire to stay, in the other, the disciples flee. In one, God's presence, in the other God's abandonment. In one, supernatural light, in the other, darkness at noon.

The Peter of the epistles, like the Markan community, were living in the darkness of having taken up their crosses. In that darkness the memory of the light of the transfiguration sustained them. So it turns out that he was listening after all.

Peter Dula
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, March 3

Lord teach us how to pray aright (HWB 350)

Text: James Montgomery, 1818

**Music: *The Brethren's Tune and Hymn Book*,
1872**

Lord, teach us how to pray aright
with rev'rence and with fear.
Though dust and ashes in your sight,
we may, we must draw near.

We perish if we cease from pray'r.
O, grant us pow'r to pray,
and when to meet you we prepare,
Lord, meet us by the way.

O God of love, before your face
we come with contrite heart
to ask from you these gifts of grace—
truth in the inward part;

faith in the only Sacrifice
that can for sin atone;
to found our hopes, to fix our eyes
on Christ, and Christ alone;

patience to watch and weep and wait,
whatever you may send;
courage that will not hesitate
to trust you to the end.

Give these, and then your will be done;
thus strengthened with all might,
we, through your Spirit and your Song,
shall pray, and pray aright.

Another of James Montgomery's many, many hymns is the Good Friday "Go to dark Gethsemane" (HWB 240), in which the speaker asks the listener to go with Jesus to the garden, to the judgment hall, and to Calvary. Each verse ends with an imperative: "learn of Jesus Christ to pray" for the garden; "learn of him the cross to bear" for Pilate's court; and "learn of Jesus Christ to die" for the crucifixion.

This hymn is the interior monologue, perhaps, to the first verse; rather than watching Jesus pray, we're being taught to pray with him. There are some allusions to the garden—"watch and weep and wait," and "then your will be done." But the emphasis is on the discipline of prayer, most interestingly in the three-stanza run-on list of "gifts of grace": faith, patience, and courage.

Jeremy Nafziger
Community Mennonite Church

Sunday, March 4

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

A Sense of Belonging

In the world we live in, we strive to make ourselves noticed, to earn the respect and recognition of those around us. We fight for our rights in the circles to which we belong, investing a great deal of our resources: time, money, talents, influences, living with the constant expectation of earning people's trust.

Life in community provides a sense of organization, structure and the opportunity to build trust. A compound set of responsibilities and privileges, and visionary leadership, are some of the elements which make up a community. But without leadership, a sense of loss can be experienced, like a navigator without a compass. This head group comes to exist and to have meaning from the pledge of loyalty from its members, who in turn, gain their own sense of being.

As members of this society we are a part of, struggle to find the adequate leadership making us shaky as we go looking for the perfect fit that could restore the confidence of having a community that abides by the rules, that shapes us and had given us the sense of belonging and identity we all have relied on. Time and again men and women alike have proven to be not so reliable. But God has proven to be true to his word, as said in Numbers 23:19 (NRSV):

¹⁹ God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

Community, leadership, membership, rules and responsibilities, identity, are some of the themes that give us all a sense of belonging. In Exodus 20:1-17 we find God addressing that very need of the people of Israel. He does it at a moment when the community felt their directional compass was lost and needed assurance from the only form of leadership they knew. Pharaoh was a god to the Egyptians and their visionary leader, to whom they pledged their loyalty and support. This Pharaoh was the same image the Israelites used to make God compete with, to earn their confidence in his leadership and guidance.

To the people of Israel, God portrays himself as The Lord, The God, the head of the leadership team, the warrior, the protector, the deliverer, who demands loyalty and confidence in exchange.

God certainly demands faithful compliance with the very straightforward rules he establishes, and lays out the privileges and blessings that come as a result of simply following those rules.

God certainly keeps himself relevant through the ages, presenting to us through the scripture, as he did to the Israelites, the same proposition of bold leadership and demanding from us loyalty in abiding by his rules, but enjoying the privileges set forth for us today. This is a way of giving us the sense of belonging we desperately look for in our everyday life experience.

My prayer is that every person who states they are members of the faith community of believers, will show the very things that define a true follower of God, a disciple who reaps the fruits provided by the grace of their leader. The very things that give the sense of belonging, and in turn, serves as testimony and example for others to follow and embrace.

Carlos Madrid
Community Mennonite Church

Monday, March 5

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

There's something wrong about money in John's Gospel. It's a theme that lurks in the background of the story of Jesus, appearing here and there, like in this scene in Jerusalem, with Jesus disrupting the marketplace in the Temple courts, and later with Judas, the betrayer, the man in charge of the common purse—and there's his confrontation with the woman who spends a fortune on precious oil to wash the feet of Jesus: *Wasteful*, Judas says. But to waste money on others seems to be the right kind of economic exchange, a refusal of wealth's desire to take over lives, the way the logic of money, of profits, of greed, of wanting more and more sneaks into everything, into all parts of life, even the temple, even worship. In John 2, Jesus is a one-man riot, vandalizing property, redistributing animals and coins into the crowd, a protest against the marketplace creeping into the Temple.

That must be what's at the heart of Jesus' pious anger—that money (the logic of money, the way money makes us think) has come so close to worship, that buying and selling has wormed its way into how people understand their relationship to God, that the market has colonized the Temple.

Economic exchange is all about turning hard work into money, and using that money to buy something, something needed or wanted, or investing finances for a future, for something we want years from now, a dream to work for. And it's so easy for us to think about God this way—to think of worship as payment to God, to think about faith as an investment, faith as buying the life we want, with the currency of morality, morality as the payment our faith makes to God. Faith, perhaps, as our monthly contribution into a retirement account for eternal life, faith as investments for our future in heaven, to reserve a room with a view.

Economic exchange is our world; it contains our world inside of it; it possesses our lives. We can't escape it—the need to buy this, to sell that, the realities of work and bills, of debts and investments. Money always lurks behind the scenes, always under the surface, perhaps ignored now, but will make its presence known later, in our calculations about jobs and relationships and time.

Money is a force, a power, that grabs us, that consumes us, that colonizes our minds, our thinking, distorting how we see other people, how we receive or reject strangers and foreigners, and, ultimately, how we understand our relationship with God. Soon we start talking about people as being valuable—this person as more valuable than that person, because of a skill they have, because of an educational achievement, because of their family name or their wealth. Soon we start thinking about God as valuable—because of what we think God can give us.

And Jesus will have none of this, when it comes to worship, when it comes to the household of God. So he makes a whip and flips tables, scattering money and cattle and sheep and doves everywhere.

Lent is an invitation to let this Jesus into your church, into your life, into your budget—and to watch him scatter our money into the streets, to discover our liberation in the wasteful abundance of grace.

Isaac S. Villegas
Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship

Tuesday, March 6

Psalm 19

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from
his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.
The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

The first eight verses of Psalm 19 depart from the language of insentience and dominion that much of the Old Testament uses to characterize the natural world. For example, Psalm 8 also extols the moon and stars, but in those verses, the psalmist is quick to classify them (and the rest of creation) as beneath humans, who are only “a little lower than God.”

Psalm 19 offers something different. The heavens *declare*. The skies *proclaim*. The clouds, the atmosphere, and the celestial bodies in our ever-unfurling universe *speak*. In this psalm, the cosmos is not an inanimate thing created to entertain, sustain, or even humble humankind. No, it is portrayed as a living being in possession of knowledge, a creature in relationship with the divine, a body with a voice and something to say.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botany professor and Native American activist, has written about the ways that language influences our relationships with the natural world. As Europeans settled (or, more accurately, unsettled) this continent, they carried with them and weaponized a language that embodied their land-ethic. Kimmerer points out that unlike the tongue of her Potawatomi ancestors, which represents the land and its inhabitants as living beings, “English encodes human exceptionalism, which privileges the needs and wants of humans above all others and understands us as detached from the commonwealth of life.” Kimmerer explains, “We distinguish [humans] with *he* or *she*... We use [the word] *it* to distance ourselves, to set others outside our circle of moral consideration, creating hierarchies of difference that justify our actions—so we don’t feel.”

As American Christians, we have inherited both a language and a religious tradition that have long and dark histories of ignoring, silencing, and even destroying those whom we consider “other.” This is especially true of our plant and animal brethren, the earth beneath our feet, and the skies above our heads. But these traditions need not enslave us. The story that we tell this season—the story of Christ’s death and resurrection—is a story of liberation, of breaking the chains of tradition.

Perhaps David was inspired by that same spirit of liberation when he composed Psalm 19 more than 3,000 years ago. Instead of objectifying the natural world, he used verbs that personified it—what Kimmerer has called “the grammar of animacy.” And what would happen if we, too, chose to use the grammar of animacy this season? What would happen if we committed to speaking of the natural world not as *other* but as *kin*, recognizing that everything in existence springs from the same source of life?

Or what if we set aside time not to speak at all? Join me, this Lent, in these spiritual disciplines: Listening to the sap rising in the trees. Beholding the flight patterns of birds. Attuning to the awakening beneath our feet. Receiving the ancient light of stars, so that we may hear the voice that goes out into all the earth.

Lucy Bryan Malenke
Community Mennonite Church

Wednesday, March 7

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Maybe our God *IS* foolish. Who but a foolish God could love and forgive us, time and again, when we’ve done so many horrible things in God’s name? Who but a foolish God would send God’s own Son to live among us, to feel our pain and die an excruciating criminal’s death?

Today’s passage reminds us how foolish many of our practices and beliefs (based on “God’s wisdom”) can seem to the outside world. For example, the practice of nonviolence. Last fall Raleigh Mennonite hosted the group [RAWtools](#) for “Guns to Garden Tools”, an event focused on nonviolent responses to violence. We had a day that included a worship service acknowledging the devastation of gun suicides, as well as participatory blacksmithing to symbolically turn a gun into garden tools. The event was featured on local news channels and social media.

I generally avoid reading comments posted to social media platforms, but in this case I was interested to see the reactions. One of my favorite responses included this statement, “I sure do pray that this congregation never has a need to defend itself in an emergency situation. It just goes to show you how susceptible people are to believing what they hear without taking a *moment* to apply logic to it.”

Of course, as Mennonites we know that our nonviolence stance has actually been considered, discussed, and put into practice for half a millennium. But the commenter is correct that it is not very logical. With the logic of the world, we’re foolish to think that in this age of church shootings, road rage and terrorism, we don’t need to protect ourselves and our children with weapons. We struggle with the wisdom of nonviolent responses ourselves, when we’re faced with millions of people dying and displaced under tyrannical regimes we’d like to see overthrown.

It didn’t seem logical to the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane either. Why wouldn’t Jesus allow them to defend his life, and theirs? Why wouldn’t he mobilize the power of the people, not to mention his own power (which they had seen in action), to rescue them from their oppressors and save the nation? The Jewish people were waiting expectantly for their Messiah, but the way it played out was so senseless and backwards that most couldn’t even recognize what was happening right in front of them!

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... and the wisdom of God.” This passage seems to be telling us that Christ’s living example and death on the cross is to be our compass of God’s wisdom – leading us in directions that may seem foolish. I, for one, am very thankful that this foolish wisdom includes God’s unconditional love and grace extended to us all – even if not one of us deserves it.

Karin Shank
Raleigh Mennonite Church

Thursday, March 8

Matthew 6:16-21

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

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

I met Joe at the Little Grill for breakfast on Thursday, January 25th. Joe ordered a Breakfast Burrito covered in salsa and sour cream. He also ordered hot tea. I ordered an egg and cheese sandwich on rye bread. I brought coffee from home because... well... let's just say, I'm a snob.

Jason: How long have you been regularly fasting?

Joe: That's always the standard question, the first question that everyone asks me, and so, I know the answer right off the top of my head: I've been fasting six months younger than when Jonathan was born. He was born in November of 1986. So, it's been like spring of 1987. It's almost, boy, 29 years (or something like that). Yeah, 29 years, I guess.

Jason: And what's your practice been? Explain your practice.

Joe: In terms of how I do it, you mean?

Jason: Correct. And when? And how often?

Joe: It's normally Sunday night until Tuesday morning. So, I don't eat anything on Mondays.

Jason: Do you drink anything during that time?

Joe: Yeah, I drink juices and teas. I used to drink sodas, but sodas are bad for me. I don't like sodas. I don't like carbonated drinks. Sometimes I'll drink one of those health drinks, whatever they're called. I'll drink stuff but, I don't eat anything.

Jason: Before you go into your fast, or after you come out of it, do you ever eat a lot to compensate?

Joe: Not really. In fact, when I stop fasting on Tuesday morning, I'm not as hungry because the stomach will shrink a bit during the fast. So, I eat less on Tuesday mornings than any other day. And, I don't eat much on Sunday evenings, either.

Jason: You don't build up for the fast?

Joe: No.

Jason: In these 29 years, have you ever forgotten?

Joe: No, I haven't forgotten. Well, ummm, yes I did. Yes, I did one time. It was in the evening. There was a thing at EMU, some kind of event at EMU or a famous person or speaker or somebody that came and afterward they had like coffee and tea and cookies and snacks and whatever, and so I went to that thing and afterwards I started drinking tea and I was eating cookies, and I said, 'Wait a minute, today is Monday. What am I doing?' So, I ate three cookies before I realized it was Monday. I said, 'Oops.'

Jason: So, you read the Matthew 6 passage beforehand, and I want to know do you anoint your head with oil and wash your face prior to fasting?

Joe: Well, I wash my face often. But, I've never anointed my head with oil. I do have oily hair. Does that count?

Jason: And, have you ever looked gloomy while fasting?

Joe: I don't think I have. But, talking about gloomy, here's a story for you: A lot of times I go to MDS [Mennonite Disaster Service] things, and the MDS people think that they have to feed you like crazy, they want to stuff you with food the entire week. It's a challenge to work hard enough so that you're hungry for the next meal. Big breakfast. Big lunch. Big supper. Big everything. So, I don't eat on Mondays and I try to hide it because the cooks go crazy. They think something is wrong or that you are sick. One time the cook came to me during Monday's supper and asked me if there was something that she had done wrong, and I said, 'No. I don't eat on Mondays. I've been doing this for years.' And, she didn't understand it. She acted like it was this really weird thing. So, now I'll try to hide it. I'll drink things. And, I'll make it look like I'm eating, but I'm not actually eating.

Jason: Why should I (or anyone) join you in your regular practice of fasting? Would you encourage people to do it?

Joe: I don't think I've ever suggested to somebody that they should fast. I don't want to put my principles on them. But, people often feel that they should be fasting too. And, some people have tried it for one day and they'll tell me, 'At supper I just had to eat. I couldn't make it.' They'll explain how they felt weak, or light-headed, or this or that. And, I'll say, 'Okay. Fine.' I didn't say good or bad. I was glad they tried it but I recognize that for some it just doesn't work.

Jason: So, on Mondays at the time of breakfast, or lunchtime or dinner time, is there something that you do when you would typically be eating? Sort of replacing the time you would be eating with some other practice? Is there anything that you do?

Joe: Initially, way back when I started, I did more Bible reading and praying because I thought that was a good thing to do, but now I kinda just go about normal life.

Jason: Do you even stop for the meals?

Joe: Yeah, I stop for the meals. I take a break. But, I don't have a good routine of what I do during that time.

Jason: And you haven't filled that time with anything? You don't practice juggling? You're not taking off to go golfing? You're not a ghost writer?

Joe: No, nothing like that.

Jason: How would you say that fasting for 29 years has been beneficial to you?

Joe: Well, it reminds me constantly that there are 3 to 5 billion people in the world who go to bed hungry every night. And, I don't go to bed hungry and I have the option of feeding myself to the limits every day. No problem. And, even though I fast once a week, and even though I have 1/7 less food than I could eat, I'm still not skinny. It hasn't affected my size, weight, or health. I can easily do it and it doesn't affect my health or work or lifestyle at all. So, it just proves that as a country, as a people, as a community we could eat 1/7 less food, we could free up that food, for people that are hungry.

Jason: So, in some ways, this practice of fasting is about mindfulness as well as a statement against excess?

Joe: Yes.

Jason: So, the scripture says that 'people who fast are storing up treasures in heaven.' Do you have any comments about that? Are you storing up treasures in heaven?

Joe: There's a big pile of haloes up there somewhere, I guess. But, I really see it as a principle to live by, and I feel that one day of fasting per week is nothing compared to what other people experience every day. It's an expression of solidarity.

Jason: Final question, are you glad that we met at the Little Grill on a Thursday morning instead of a Monday morning?

Joe: Yeah. That was kind of handy. I really enjoyed my breakfast burrito.

Joe Yoder and Jason Gerlach
Community Mennonite Church

Friday, March 9

The Glory of these forty days (HWB 225)

Text: 11th century Latin, translated by Maurice F. Bell, *The English Hymnal*, 1906

Music: attributed to Martin Luther, 1543

The glory of these forty days
we celebrate with songs of praise.
for Christ, by whom all things were made,
himself has fasted and has prayed.

Alone and fasting Moses saw
the loving God who gave the law.
And to Elijah, fasting, came
the steed and chariots of flame.

So Daniel trained his mystic sight,
delivered from the lion's might.
And John, the Bridegroom's friend, became
the herald of Messiah's name.

Then grant that we, like them, be true
consumed in fast and prayer with you.
Our spirits strengthen with your grace,
and give us joy to see your face.

Yesterday's entry was about fasting. Here's a very old Latin hymn about fasting through most of the biblical story. I remember learning in Sunday school a long time ago (and still don't know if this is really true) that "forty days" in the Bible may or may not really be forty days, but is shorthand for "a long time"—fasts, rain storms, wilderness stays all get it at one time or another. I don't know for sure which of these forties gave us the length of Lent.

A fascinating line in this hymn is "consumed in fast." A fast is the opposite of consumption; the only thing consumed is ourselves.

Jeremy Nafziger
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, March 10

“Spring Forward” - Daylight Savings

As we anticipate the longer days and we change our clocks so our evenings hold more light I wonder if I can really be present to this subtle shift. Instead of racing towards the longer days I want to see the dance between light and darkness and be mindful of the quality of this relationship in myself. Can I live with the tension and see the sacred in both?

John O'Donohue wrote a blessing for light and I think it speaks well to this time of year:

Blessing For Light

Light cannot see inside things.
That is what the dark is for:
Minding the interior,
Nurturing the draw of growth
Through places where death
In its own way turns into life.
In the glare of neon times,
Let our eyes not be worn
By surfaces that shine
With hunger made attractive.
That our thoughts may be true light,
Finding their way into words
Which have the weight of shadow
To hold the layers of truth.
That we never place our trust
In minds claimed by empty light,
Where one-sided certainties
Are driven by false desire.
When we look into the heart,
May our eyes have the kindness
And reverence of candlelight.
That the searching of our minds
Be equal to the oblique
Crevices and corners where
The mystery continues to dwell
Glimmering in fugitive light.
And when we come to search for God,
Let us first be robed in night,
Put on the mind of morning
To feel the rush of light
Spread slowly inside
The color and stillness
Of a found world.

Emily North
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Sunday, March 11

Laetere Sunday

Tea and Sweet Cake

In England, *Laetare* Sunday is called “Mothering Sunday” — a reference to the Introit that, while it disappeared with the abolition of the Roman Missal and the coming of the Book of Common Prayer, remained deeply anchored in the sensibility of the faithful. In the nineteenth century, it became customary on “Mothering Sunday” for employers to give servants a day off to go home and visit their mothers. A special sweet cake, called the “mothering cake” was brought along to add a festive note to teatime. Today, “Mothering Sunday” has become the British answer to the secular American “Mother’s Day.” Few realize that it originates in the Introit of Laetare Sunday.

The Golden Rose

There is another custom associated with Laetare Sunday: the blessing of the Golden Rose. It was the custom, at least from the time of Pope Leo IX (1049–1054), for the Pope to bless a rose fashioned out of gold on Laetare Sunday. We still have the text of a sermon preached by Pope Innocent III at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme on the meaning of the Golden Rose. It is a symbol of spiritual joy, a portent of the sweet fragrance of life that will rise like incense from the empty tomb on Easter.

Laetare Sunday, Mothering Sunday, the Sunday of the Rose! Wear pink. Smell a rose. Sing “Laetare!” If you can, have a sweet cake with your tea today. Do something to mark the joy that already rises, like the Paschal Alleluia, in the heart of Mother Church. The mysteries of the Lord’s Passion and Resurrection are but a few days away, the mysteries of our joy, the end of every sadness.

(from Vultischristi.org, March 18, 2007)

Monday, March 12

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Impatient and sullen, the Israelites have nothing good to say on their way to the promised land. They even have the audacity – repeatedly – to bemoan that *wandering* is worse than *enslavement!* Their constant grumbling is embarrassing: can't they see that God has protected them and kept them alive for decades? It seems like the Israelites would rather project their bitterness on God than give God credit for keeping up God's side of the covenant.

So, God, ever-imaginative, deigns snakes to be the inspiration needed to counter the Israelites' cynicism. Snakes, historic symbols of fear and punishment and trickery, do not disappoint in their lethal work, and a verse later, the Israelites return collectively to Moses, repenting to him and God and asking for forgiveness. Moses, under tutelage from God, then fashions the antidote: a serpent crafted from bronze. Fighting fire with fire, as we say.

During Lent, it seems that poison and antidote – death and life – keep company with each other, and we are so disoriented by this odd couple. There's the confusion *and* beauty that will be the Last Supper. Betrayals *and* unconditional love. The cross *and* the empty tomb.

Like the snakes sent to teach the Israelites a lesson in repentance, we journey amidst our own death and disorientation in these days. This aimless wandering feels oppressive in comparison to the predictability of the weight of our old chains. Do we catch our grumbling before the snakes bite? Or, might we see that this wandering *will* lead us to a place to call home?

Valerie Showalter
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Tuesday, March 13

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Well, I'm conflicted.

First of all, someone seemed to have decided, probably a long time ago, that this passage, and especially verse 16, should be the cornerstone of all things Christian. It was one of the two verses I, as a youngster, used to wish would be assigned by my Sunday School teacher for memorization, because I already knew it by heart, of course (looking for a way out of extra work. I had small dreams at this point, clearly). (The other verse was John 11:35- “Jesus wept.”)

And how about that dude with the clown wig at professional sporting events, holding up a large John 3:16 sign? I wonder how many converts he could claim over the years. Or was it more than one guy?

But it seems that some Christians have taken this verse as something God intended as a hammer, instead of, perhaps, a gentle reminder. Or a massage? Verse 18 in particular: “...whoever does not believe stands condemned already...” I've been living in a place where a few Christians have decided that others aren't Christian enough, or maybe an apostate doesn't have the right belief about a certain topic (what chance does a Mennonite have in a setting like this?). This is concerning, of course, because the hammer doesn't seem to work like it once might have. It certainly doesn't work on the Millennials. Well, it probably doesn't work for anybody. Who likes being told how wrong they are?

This is confusing to me, because this passage is much more ambiguous than it might seem at first glance. God sent his son so that the world would not be condemned....and then He condemns so many in this world in the very next verse? I guess that's John for you.

It seems, though, that maybe we're missing an emphasis here. While some people use this passage as an excuse for withholding love and acceptance, in reality, the verse actually says that God gave his only begotten son. His son wasn't taken by enemies, or grudgingly relinquished; God gave his only begotten son willingly. This is a gentler version of our God, giving a gift. A pretty big one, in fact.

And the parents among us understand what kind of sacrifice this is; most of us would do anything, anything at all, for our children to be healthy, happy, and well adjusted. How else to take this but to love and cherish what we have been given? To love everyone in this world as if they are a gift from God? (This can be pretty daunting, actually. Everyone? Even that guy who has made my life miserable lately? Yup. Even that guy.)

So to me, this passage is about giving, not taking, withholding, or manipulating. Isn't this a better way for Christians to interact, both with each other and with those who do not believe? It might make us all a better witness in the end.

But I have to go; time to debate pacifism and the Augustine just war theory again....

John Leonard
Community Mennonite Church

Wednesday, March 14

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.*

*Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.*

Giving Thanks in the Midst of Evil

Praise and lament. In my life I keep going back and forth between the two, as do the psalms. These days, I admit, it's often easier to lament – to feel sadness and anger at the state of this country and the world. Can we – or should we – give thanks in the midst of a situation that seems to be deteriorating by the day? Scripture suggests that the answer is yes, as seen, for example, in the writings of Paul and the Book of Job.

Here, in Psalm 107, the writer gives praise to God for love and deliverance. All sorts of difficulties are listed: wandering in the desert (verses 4-9), sadness and captivity (10-16), storms at sea (23-32) and political oppression (39-43). In our current national context, I like the assertion that God “pours contempt on princes” (verse 40a) and “raises up the needy” (41a). I'm also struck by the statement that “all wickedness stops its mouth” (42b).

In the verses for today, the psalmist begins by giving thanks for God's “steadfast love that endures forever.” The writer urges those whom God has redeemed to “say so” – to praise God for rescuing them. In the midst of today's demonizing of immigrants, I like the image in verse 3 of God gathering people in “from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south” – though this probably depicts exiles or travelers returning home, rather than true Multiculturalism.

Verses 17 and 18 strike an odd note with their depiction of people who were sick (or “fools”) and “loathed any kind of food.” An interpretation for today's world might be that it's possible to fill ourselves on mental and spiritual junk food, to the point that we lose our taste for what is truly healthy and life-giving.

In any case, in verse 19, these malnourished people cry out to God and are healed. The psalmist urges them (and us) to give thanks for God's “wonderful works to humankind” and to tell of God's actions “with songs of joy.” In a troubled world, such expressions of praise can appear shallow or naive. Indeed, to people who have suffered, our words of thanksgiving may come across as triumphalism or a refusal to face life's inequities. We must be clear that God does not love some people more than others and that injustice and pain often fall on those who have done nothing wrong.

Even so, it's important to be mindful of God's gifts to us, to give thanks for love, laughter, the beauty of nature and many other blessings we have received through no merit of our own. Most of all, as the hymn “By Gracious Powers” (Hymnal: A Worship Book 552) reminds us, we can give thanks that God is with us in all days and seasons – no matter how bright or bleak the times.

David Graybill
Community Mennonite Church

Thursday, Mar. 15

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Walk in Them

A well marked path is a great thing. Many years ago, Isaac, my oldest son, and I tried to climb Mt. Agung in East Java. We had instructions to follow a footpath from an asparagus/eucalyptus plantation up onto the mountain. We followed the broadest trail, encountering beautiful orchids, ferns, and streams of water, but never made it to the top. The next time we tried, an altimeter helped.

The first ten verses of Ephesians 2 assert the saving work of Jesus for those whom he has claimed. They contrast us beforehand as “dead in trespasses and sins,” “children of wrath.” Yet in Christ’s resurrection, Paul teaches, we too were raised, solely by grace, which we have not earned.

And then there’s a purpose clause: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” That’s what the Greek says: “to **walk** in them.” Like on a path.

One can get the idea that God has an exact path for us to follow in this life, one unitary route from which we better not deviate, or we’ll get lost, like Isaac and I did on Mt. Agung.

But my experience in life is twofold. First, I don’t find the “path” always well marked. There are a lot of “good works” to pick from, and I’m not sure which are my path. As a result, I can waste a lot of time worrying that I’ve deviated and hunting for the trail blazes.

Secondly, I do deviate. I’ve turned off onto other paths, sometimes ignorantly and sometimes foolishly or rebelliously. Am I forever thereafter off the path?

I don’t think the grace of God works that rigidly. By its very nature, grace is forgiving. And so can trail hiking be.

Not every trail leads to the top of the mountain, but on most mountains, there is more than one route. Isaac and I may not have followed the exact route described in the material we read, but we got there.

What helped was an altimeter, which showed whether we were climbing or not. This great little instrument measured air pressure to gauge our altitude and to tell us our direction relative to the summit.

The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would “guide us.” We can’t always trust our own impression of whether we are climbing or declining, but we can always ask the Spirit – and the very act of asking the Spirit can be what sets us on a right path again.

Of course, there are also benefits to hiking with a group. As long as somebody has a good altimeter.

Hans Christian Linnartz
Raleigh Mennonite Church

Friday, March 16

Christ be near at either hand (STJ 80)

**Text: Irish, from St. Patrick's Breastplate
(probably 8th century)**

Music: Irish traditional

Christ be near at either hand,
Christ behind, before me stand;
Christ with me where'er I go,
Christ around, above, below.

Christ be in my heart and mind,
Christ within my soul enshrined;
Christ control my wayward heart;
Christ abide and ne'er depart.

Christ my life and only way,
Christ my lantern night and day;
Christ be my unchanging friend,
guide and shepherd to the end.

For St. Patrick's Day tomorrow, this is a short version of a very old Irish prayer attributed to St. Patrick in the 5th century, but probably at least 300 years newer than that. The legend is that when Patrick, on a ministerial journey, encountered an ambush, he prayed this prayer and he and his monks appeared to their would-be attackers as wild deer and passed safely by. The prayer is sometimes called "The Deer's Cry," but is also known as "St. Patrick's Breastplate" or the "Lorica of St. Patrick."

The longer version, translated in 1889 by Cecil Frances Alexander for the Irish Hymnal, is 441 and 442 in the blue hymnal—the five stanzas of 441 start with "I bind unto myself today," and the two stanzas in 442 are from the same source lines as the three printed above. All together, they have a raw spiritual warfare sort of feel (not in the weird Frank Peretti sense) that comes right up to the border of pagan incantation. The prayer itself is regularly invoked by diocesan exorcist Merrily Watkins in the excellent mystery series by Phil Rickman, a series set on the Welsh borderlands and traversing the line between good and evil, spirit and spiritual, church and natural religion, holy and pagan.

Jeremy Nafziger
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, March 17

St. Patrick's Day

The Prayer of St. Patrick

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven;
Light of the sun,
Splendor of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftness of the wind,
Depth of the sea,
Stability of the earth,
Firmness of the rock.

I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me;
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's hosts to save me
Afar and anear,
Alone or in a multitude.

Christ shield me today
Against wounding
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

I arise today
Through the mighty strength
Of the Lord of creation.

--Anonymous

Sunday, March 18

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah is a historically complex book with layers of edits and structuring, including content related to the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). These books share similar theological and linguistic patterns and concerns for obedience to the law given in Deuteronomy as well as centralized worship in Jerusalem. These concerns were fostered by the belief that the tragic political realities of the time were a direct result of Divine anger toward Israel’s failed commitment to their God.

GLASS HALF-FULL: This passage presents a view of God committed to reclaiming relationship, being known more intimately, and being willing to start again. This is a God who changes, and perhaps co-creates in relationship with people.

GLASS HALF-EMPTY: This passage capitalizes on the anger of God, who is presented as a jealous “husband” or “master” and who asserts himself upon the people in order to be known.

Which glass are you drawn to? Why? Is there an invitation to sit with one in discomfort? Consider why someone else might be drawn to the glass you didn’t choose.



The New Oxford Annotated Bible: with the Apocrypha. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 1058, 1111, 2273.

Chris Hoover Seidel
Community Mennonite Church

Monday, March 19

John 12:20-33

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

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

What About Those Greeks?

Imagine some Greek travelers who want to see Jesus. They find the disciples, and through a game of telephone, Jesus learns that he has visitors. Instead of telling Andrew and Philip to invite these guests to have a seat, maybe get them a snack, Jesus chooses this moment to talk about his own impending death.

The Greek visitors are left in the foyer, waiting to meet Jesus, because "the hour has come." Wonder about them. Did they sneak into Jesus' presence anyway? Did they poke their noses through the door, curious what was taking Andrew and Philip so long, just in time to hear this booming voice from heaven?

Imagine them swept up in the Jesus story. They thought they were going to ask him some philosophical riddles, maybe get a rash healed or witness a loaves-and-fishes miracle, and suddenly

they are pulled into the intense current of Jesus' headlong dash toward the cross.

What did they make of this talk about a grain of wheat dying in order to bear fruit? Did they pull a disciple aside after this strange rumbling and ask whether the sound was really the voice of God or just thunder? Did they ask if this sort of thing happened often? And how would the disciples, themselves caught off guard, answer? Did anyone have the presence of mind to offer to take their cloaks or get them some water?

Imagine them trailing at the outskirts of Jesus' followers, thirsty for a word from him, a smile, a moment of connection. Overhearing the disciples report on what they've witnessed and speculate about what comes next. *What does it mean, that Jesus will be lifted up from the earth? What does planting a grain of wheat have to do with a man's death?*

Imagine them on the periphery, seeing only the confident, God-has-a-plan Jesus, the I-can't-explain-this-to-you-right-now Jesus. Never the Jesus who asks his friends to sit with him in the dark night. Never the Jesus who wonders if there's another way. Never the Jesus who is a little bit, humanly, confused and afraid.

Are they in the crowd as Jesus carries his cross? Are they still in Jerusalem when rumors of an empty tomb start to murmur through the streets? Do the Greeks scatter with the rest of the flock, or are they unmarked enough to remain close to the action?

Imagine them going back to Greece, to their hometown, and telling their friends what they've witnessed. Maybe they are ridiculed for their outlandish stories. Maybe they are punished or killed for their sacrilege. Maybe their neighbors hold these stories in their hearts and wonder.

Imagine Paul stepping off the boat on a foreign shore. Imagine him, shown hospitality that these anonymous Greeks were denied. Imagine his story of Good News falling on fertile ground, prepared long before, by travelers returning with stories of a man whose death was like a grain of wheat falling on the ground. Imagine it bearing fruit.

Aili Huber
Community Mennonite Church

Tuesday, March 20

Psalm 119:1-48

*Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.
How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.
With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.
Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.
Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.
I live as an alien in the land;
do not hide your commandments from me.
My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.
You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones,
who wander from your commandments;
take away from me their scorn and contempt,
for I have kept your decrees.
Even though princes sit plotting against me,
your servant will meditate on your statutes.
Your decrees are my delight,
they are my counselors.
My soul clings to the dust;
revive me according to your word.*

*When I told of my ways, you answered me;
teach me your statutes.
Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.
My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
Put false ways far from me;
and graciously teach me your law.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.
I cling to your decrees, O LORD;
let me not be put to shame.
I run the way of your commandments,
for you enlarge my understanding.
Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.
Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD,
your salvation according to your promise.
Then I shall have an answer for those who taunt me,
for I trust in your word.
Do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth,
for my hope is in your ordinances.
I will keep your law continually,
forever and ever.
I shall walk at liberty,
for I have sought your precepts.
I will also speak of your decrees before kings,
and shall not be put to shame;
I find my delight in your commandments,
because I love them.
I revere your commandments, which I love,
and I will meditate on your statutes.*

Happy Wholeness

I read scripture because it's part of my job and because I'm a Christian. I also read scripture exercising an American right: the pursuit of happiness. "Happy are those who walk in the law of YHWH...who seek God with their whole heart...I will delight in your statutes" (v.1-2, 16). While some may jeer and others snooze, reading Ps 119--the longest in our collection--brings me a sense of happy wholeness as if surrounded by all those who have run the race of faith with perseverance, who stick it out and pray the whole psalm: Israelites worshiping in resistance to the many false gods within and around their society, early Jewish and Gentile Christians making peace with each other through one Lord, monks and nuns who chant up the psalms wearing yesteryear fashions, dear friends reading through the Bible in 2018, and children learning v. 105 by heart. (You know it... "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a...")

In late 2008, shortly after the election of President Barak Obama, Emily North, former pastor of Shalom, and I discussed creating a homegrown Lent devotional, inviting writers from each of our congregations to contribute. So in 2009 a little tradition began. Ten years later four congregations continue sharing our words about God's word. Re-reading those pages from 2009 reveals earlier versions of ourselves--names of persons sojourning elsewhere--and familiar rehearsals of Lenten themes. As I read, that tearful happy wholeness overtakes me again and I'm confident that scripture shapes us as church, that we are different today because we have heard and heeded God's word and because we have added our words to a conversation in which we will not--thank God--have the last word.

Since it's included in the world's most popular collection of poetry, Psalm 119 is worth a read even if it takes time. Like a few others, this psalm is an acrostic. Every set of 8 lines begins with the same Hebrew letter, beginning with *aleph* through the whole alphabet ending with *tav*. Praying this psalm collectively as we are, the big theme of our prayer is commitment to meditate on God's word, to actually love and treasure scripture, as if it is a source of life, liberty and happiness, a GPS when we're lost, a defense against hostile powers, protection against temptation, balm for our wounds and wisdom for the vexing circumstances of life.

The tone of the psalm could be saccharine piety, or Bible-thumping brutishness, but there is ample evidence in these first 48(!) verses that we psalm singers, aiming to live as God's people, are likely to forget God's word, to get caught up in "vanities," to be distracted from the good way, to be tempted by materialism, to be threatened by princes and kings, or simply unable to see or understand God through this baffling word--written, spoken, or living. So we might not be so very happy just now: "*my soul melts away from sorrow*" (v. 28). Psalm 119 nevertheless sings us with a tone of simple confidence, that is, faith, that being God's people and listening to God's word brings a happy wholeness to our lives, no matter the conditions of the world. Maybe we need to wait it out and here's a psalm to pass the time.

So in 2018, praying this psalm in the US as an Anabaptist Christian during the Trump presidency, I'm pursuing a little happiness with all of you. Each contributor and reader makes me happy by your company, your faith, and your inspired engagement with God's word. May the Spirit of happy wholeness be with you today.

Jennifer Davis Sensenig
Community Mennonite Church

Wednesday, March 21

Psalm 119:49-96

*Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope.
This is my comfort in my distress,
that your promise gives me life.
The arrogant utterly deride me,
but I do not turn away from your law.
When I think of your ordinances from of old,
I take comfort, O LORD.
Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked,
those who forsake your law.
Your statutes have been my songs
wherever I make my home.
I remember your name in the night, O LORD,
and keep your law.
This blessing has fallen to me,
for I have kept your precepts.
The LORD is my portion;
I promise to keep your words.
I implore your favor with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.
When I think of your ways,
I turn my feet to your decrees;
I hurry and do not delay
to keep your commandments.
Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me,
I do not forget your law.
At midnight I rise to praise you,
because of your righteous ordinances.
I am a companion of all who fear you,
of those who keep your precepts.
The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love;
teach me your statutes.
You have dealt well with your servant,
O LORD, according to your word.
Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
for I believe in your commandments.
Before I was humbled I went astray,
but now I keep your word.
You are good and do good;
teach me your statutes.
The arrogant smear me with lies,
but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.
Their hearts are fat and gross,
but I delight in your law.
It is good for me that I was humbled,
so that I might learn your statutes.
The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.*

*Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your
commandments.
Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
because I have hoped in your word.
I know, O LORD, that your judgments are right,
and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.
Let your steadfast love become my comfort
according to your promise to your servant.
Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;
for your law is my delight.
Let the arrogant be put to shame,
because they have subverted me with guile;
as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
Let those who fear you turn to me,
so that they may know your decrees.
May my heart be blameless in your statutes,
so that I may not be put to shame.
My soul languishes for your salvation;
I hope in your word.
My eyes fail with watching for your promise;
I ask, "When will you comfort me?"
For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,
yet I have not forgotten your statutes.
How long must your servant endure?
When will you judge those who persecute me?
The arrogant have dug pitfalls for me;
they flout your law.
All your commandments are enduring;
I am persecuted without cause; help me!
They have almost made an end of me on earth;
but I have not forsaken your precepts.
In your steadfast love spare my life,
so that I may keep the decrees of your mouth.
The LORD exists forever;
your word is firmly fixed in heaven.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.
By your appointment they stand today,
for all things are your servants.
If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my misery.
I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have given me life.
I am yours; save me,
for I have sought your precepts.
The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,
but I consider your decrees.
I have seen a limit to all perfection,
but your commandment is exceedingly broad.*

The text we have before us comprises not quite a third of the entire Psalm. For those of us who revere compression and getting to the point, even this section can feel a little long. We can find (for the sake of Lent) a few verses that sound like Jesus' experience: "though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law" (v. 61) and "I am persecuted without cause" (v. 86). But on the whole Psalm 119's precise acrostic structure (22 sections of 8 lines each, each line within a section beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet) feels contrived. The careful variation of terms—word, promise, law, ordinances, statutes, precepts, decrees, commandments—makes me think that the Psalmist fought the law, and the law won.

Yet it is exactly these elaborations of sameness that speak with such authority in Lent. The key word in this Psalm, *torah*, means instruction. The Psalm goes through the alphabet, and just so God moves with us from A to Z in our lives, showing us the way.

The Psalmist begs to know more of God's wisdom and life (v. 66, 68). It is not the written code (law in the English sense) but the dance of guidance we see here. This dance is a slow dance, an intricately patterned movement of the Spirit, a dance that requires discipline and careful listening. Read Psalm 119 in its entirety and let its repetitive cadences fill your heart. Learn from and be instructed by the Spirit of God, so that these guides become your song, wherever you make your home. (v. 54)

When you, like Jesus, face the cross, you will then have the language to cry out and to endure.

G. Marcille Frederick
Shalom Mennonite Congregation

Thursday, March 22

Psalm 119:97-144

*Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
Your commandment makes me
wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.
I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.
I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O LORD, according to your word.
Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD,
and teach me your ordinances.
I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes
forever, to the end.
I hate the double-minded,
but I love your law.
You are my hiding place and my shield;
I hope in your word.
Go away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commandments of my God.
Uphold me according to your promise,
that I may live,
and let me not be put to shame in my hope.
Hold me up, that I may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.
You spurn all who go astray from your statutes;
for their cunning is in vain.
All the wicked of the earth you count as dross;
therefore I love your decrees.
My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgments.*

*I have done what is just and right;
do not leave me to my oppressors.
Guarantee your servant's well-being;
do not let the godless oppress me.
My eyes fail from watching for your salvation,
and for the fulfillment of your righteous promise.
Deal with your servant according to
your steadfast love,
and teach me your statutes.
I am your servant; give me understanding,
so that I may know your decrees.
It is time for the LORD to act,
for your law has been broken.
Truly I love your commandments
more than gold, more than fine gold.
Truly I direct my steps by all your precepts;
I hate every false way.
Your decrees are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
With open mouth I pant,
because I long for your commandments.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your custom toward those
who love your name.
Keep my steps steady according to your promise,
and never let iniquity have dominion over me.
Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may keep your precepts.
Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.
My eyes shed streams of tears
because your law is not kept.
You are righteous, O LORD,
and your judgments are right.
You have appointed your decrees in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
My zeal consumes me
because my foes forget your words.
Your promise is well tried,
and your servant loves it.
I am small and despised,
yet I do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,
and your law is the truth.
Trouble and anguish have come upon me,
but your commandments are my delight.
Your decrees are righteous forever;
give me understanding that I may live.*

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Word

(based on Psalm 119:105-112)

Life-giving God,
we praise You for the gift of Your Word;
for the light and life it brings to our lives.
Through it, we come to know You better;
we come to understand ourselves more fully;
and we find the wisdom
and encouragement we need
to live as Your faithful disciples.

Help us keep Your Word at the center of our lives;
a light to guide our way
in whatever darkness we encounter,
or whatever temptations we face.
Teach us what it means
to follow Your commandments,
and to walk in Your ways.
Amen.

(from re.worship.blogspot.com)

Friday, March 23

Psalm 119:145-176

*With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD.
I will keep your statutes.
I cry to you; save me,
that I may observe your decrees.
I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I put my hope in your words.
My eyes are awake before each watch of the night,
that I may meditate on your promise.
In your steadfast love hear my voice;
O LORD, in your justice preserve my life.
Those who persecute me with evil purpose
draw near; they are far from your law.
Yet you are near, O LORD,
and all your commandments are true.
Long ago I learned from your decrees
that you have established them forever.
Look on my misery and rescue me,
for I do not forget your law.
Plead my cause and redeem me;
give me life according to your promise.
Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek your statutes.
Great is your mercy, O LORD;
give me life according to your justice.
Many are my persecutors and my adversaries,
yet I do not swerve from your decrees.
I look at the faithless with disgust,
because they do not keep your commands.
Consider how I love your precepts;
preserve my life according to your steadfast love.
The sum of your word is truth;
and every one of your righteous ordinances
endures forever.
Princes persecute me without cause,
but my heart stands in awe of your words.
I rejoice at your word
like one who finds great spoil.
I hate and abhor falsehood,
but I love your law.
Seven times a day I praise you
for your righteous ordinances.
Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.
I hope for your salvation, O LORD,
and I fulfill your commandments.*

*My soul keeps your decrees;
I love them exceedingly.
I keep your precepts and decrees,
for all my ways are before you.
Let my cry come before you, O LORD;
give me understanding according to your word.
Let my supplication come before you;
deliver me according to your promise.
My lips will pour forth praise,
because you teach me your statutes.
My tongue will sing of your promise,
for all your commandments are right.
Let your hand be ready to help me,
for I have chosen your precepts.
I long for your salvation, O LORD,
and your law is my delight.
Let me live that I may praise you,
and let your ordinances help me.
I have gone astray like a lost sheep;
seek out your servant,
for I do not forget your commandments.*

A Lectio Divina Exercise

Lectio:

Read today's scripture passage slowly a couple of times. You may want to read it out loud. Notice a word or phrase that you're attracted to and underline it.

Meditatio:

Read the passage again. This time notice your emotional response. What feelings does this passage evoke from you?

Oratio:

Read the passage through again as an invitation to prayer. What response to God do you wish to make? Take time to offer a prayer of Response.

Contemplatio:

Spend some time resting in God's presence allowing this word to minister to you.

Saturday, March 24

Psalm 119, Isaac Watts

Lord, I have made thy word my choice (HWB 317)

Text: Isaac Watts, 1719

Music: *A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1749

Lord, I have made thy word my choice,
my lasting heritage.

There shall my noblest pow'rs rejoice,
my warmest thoughts engage.

I'll read the hist'ries of thy love,
and keep thy laws in sight,
while through thy promises I rove,
with ever fresh delight.

In this broad land of wealth unknown,
where springs of life arise,
immortal seeds of bliss are sown,
and hidden glory lies.

Two more stanzas not in the hymnal:

'Tis a broad land of wealth unknown,
Where springs of life arise,
Seeds of immortal bliss are sown,
And hidden glory lies.

The best relief that mourners have,
It makes our sorrows blest;
Our fairest hope beyond the grave,
And our eternal rest.

The four previous entries covered the sprawling Psalm 119. Isaac Watts wrote his own versions of all the psalms, including this one—in eighteen parts! Watts didn't paraphrase the verses in

order, and wasn't afraid to mix the testaments. He stated that his psalms were written as if the writer had knowledge of the New Testament and all its stories, too; he called his collection *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship*. (For example, Watts' "Joy to the world" is his version of [mostly] Psalm 98.)

Watts writes: "I have collected and disposed the most useful verses of this Psalm under eighteen different heads, and formed a divine song on each of them, But the verses are much transposed to attain some degree of connection. In some places, among the words law, commands, judgments, testimonies, I have used gospel, word, grace, truth, promises, etc., as more agreeable to the New Testament and the common language of Christians, and it equally answers the design of the Psalmist, which was to recommend the Holy Scriptures."

Though his texts are intended to be sung (and twenty-one are in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* alone), few of the parts of his Psalm 119 are recognizable as common or even uncommon hymn texts in use today. The only part of it in our hymnal is the one above, which is Watts' Part 8: "Lord, I have made your word my choice." The entire five stanzas are related to Psalm 119:111: "Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart."

A newer paraphrase of Psalm 119 (verse 1-3 in this case) is Jean Janzen's "I long for your commandments" (HWB 543).

Jeremy Nafziger
Community Mennonite Church

Sunday, March 25 - Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

This year my family and I are living temporarily in a predominantly Catholic region of southern Germany. I value the opportunity to see where a confession and a culture that are different from my own place their emphasis in telling the Christian story. This fall, for instance, the village where we are staying gathered together for a candlelit parade in honor of St. Martin of Tours, a fourth-century Christian whose legend records that he cut his own cloak in two in order to share with a poor beggar. Mennonites do not grow up learning about St. Martin—at least I didn't—but encountering this story now had a particular resonance for me because each day as I bike from our village to my work in the city of Freiburg I pass a block of housing units provided by the German government to welcome hundreds of refugees

fleeing the civil war in Syria. The children of these refugees are learning German alongside my own son and daughter in the kindergartens and schools. This is an example of openness to people in need that is in the spirit of St. Martin, and one I wish my own government would imitate.

Though this meditation is to be read on Palm Sunday, I am writing it during the pre-Lenten season that is here called *Fasnets*, or carnival. This festive season in my village includes a parade, a talent show, and a party for all the local children. Evidently, I am learning, it is common this time of year to see *Narren* (jesters or fools) with caps and bells gathering outside the neighborhood soccer field to practice their dance steps, or to see men with matching silly hats shopping together at the grocery store after work.

By Palm Sunday, *Fasnets* is a distant memory, and our thoughts are focused on Holy Week. But in reading Mark's description of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, I am reminded of the spirit of topsy-turvy fun that is currently bubbling up around me in Germany. Jesus's procession, on an unbroken colt rather than a dignified warhorse, has an air of spontaneity and almost of silliness. When Jesus's "ancestor David" entered Jerusalem, he did so first as a conqueror (in 2 Samuel 5), and then later as a rejoicing dancer, bringing the ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). Jesus takes up this latter mood of celebration rather than conquest in his own entry—even as he looks ahead to the violent end that the Romans will make to the party.

Seeing another culture's Christian ritual year as a guest has made me conscious of and grateful for festive times of community in my own tradition: for potlucks and Harmonia Sacra sings, Relief Sales and retreats. Like the last supper, the triumphal entry reminds us that celebration and community are part of what it means to be a church, even at the moments when violence from the powers of the world is most threatening.

Jacob Sider Jost
Community Mennonite Church

Monday, March 26

John 12:1-11

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

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.



He, Qi, *Mary Magdalene*
from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the
Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.
<http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-image/ink.pl?RC=46104> [retrieved February 14, 2018]. Original
source: heqigallery.com.

Tuesday, March 27

John 12:20-36

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

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

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

John 12:20-36 recalls the days just before Jesus' crucifixion. Here we see Jesus facing his impending death and learn from his example how to face our own. We also notice subtle suggestions about why powerful elites might want to put an end to this young Jewish evangelizer.

The Gospel of John, addressed to a Greek audience, directly appeals to philosophical sensibilities – "in the beginning was the *logos*" [John 1:1]. Our reflection begins with a request from Greeks: "we would like to see Jesus" [v. 20] but ends with Jesus hiding "himself from them." [v.36] Jesus's snub seems odd.

To the Greeks' request Jesus issues a startling nonresponse, "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." [v. 23] "A kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies" [v.24] before it produces many more seeds. Sadly, what will happen to Jesus, death, must happen to all his followers. [v. 26] After his difficult message, some in the crowd hear a voice affirming it, while others hear only thunder. [v. 29]

Jesus inaugurated a radical revolution that was usurping the power and privilege of both religious and secular authorities. Greeks requesting to see Jesus evidenced the breadth of his following. When the Greeks came asking to see him Jesus knew "The hour had come." (It is worth noting that Jesus's birth was observed by kings and magi coming from the East fulfilling Eastern Jewish expectations and his death was marked by Greeks coming from the West indicating his far-reaching, inclusive appeal. As the Pharisees feared "the world has gone after him." [v.19])

If you have ever experienced insecure supervisors or leaders, you know what comes with the attention garnered by appeals to, and standing with, the oppressed: powerful elites feel threatened, react hostilely, and often inflict damage and death. Jesus knew God's disruptive coup would come in the days ahead, when Jesus would be lifted up, "the prince of this world would be driven out," [v.31, 32] and he would draw all people to himself.

The crowd became uncomfortable with what they were hearing. The dying seed analogy remains problematic for those of us who are living seeds. The crowd challenged Jesus's every word by recalling traditional teachings proclaiming the Messiah "will remain forever." [v.34] And to this rebuttal, Jesus shifts metaphors from seed to light.

Although metaphysically real, light is unlike any other "thing." It does not come into and go out of being like a seed. Jesus proclaims himself to be light in this world; a pervasive and enduring reality that transcends life and death cycles. Light, like *logos*, sustains forever. The philosophically minded Greeks understand this message.

Through all this, there is no casual nonchalance about dying. Jesus is disturbed by what he knows is to come. "Now, my soul is troubled." [v. 27] But we rest assured that when the hour comes, and we are troubled, we, like Jesus, not only leave behind seeds from what we have done: we, being children of light, become light. Shalom.

Bill Hawk, ed. by Elizabeth Sanchez

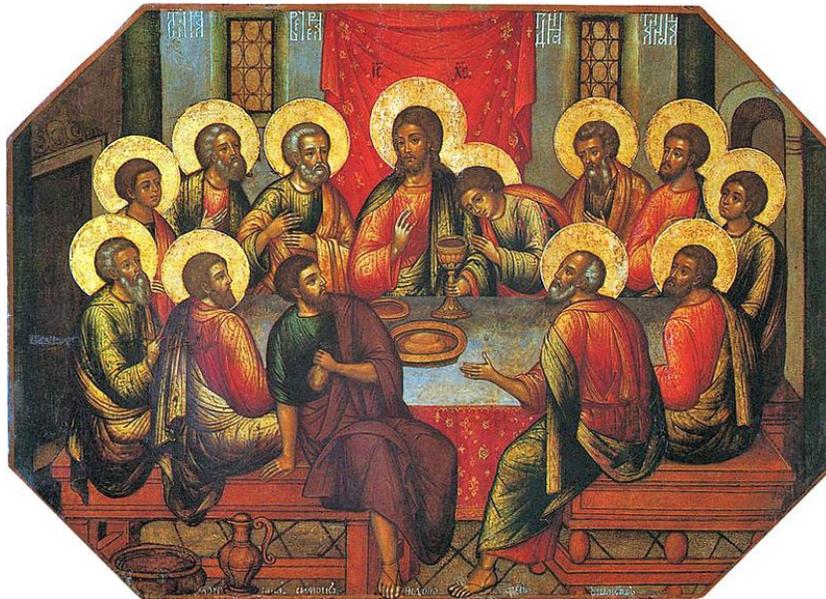
Wednesday, March 28

John 13:21-32

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas

son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.



Jesus and the disciples had eaten their meal and he had washed their feet. Afterwards they were reclining, even leaning into each other. I love this image of friends in close proximity, utterly comfortable with each other even while their private thoughts are churning.

Fr. Michael K. Marsh wrote these words in 2013 in a sermon entitled, *Lord, who is it?* I offer them as a challenge and a confession; yes, it is us.

They believed in him. They followed him wherever he went. They spent all their time together. They walked together. They talked together. They ate together. They worshipped and prayed together. They lived

together. They were a part of each others' lives. Jesus wouldn't have it any other way, then or now.

It was the perfect combination. Friendship, love, and intimacy. They are, I think, what we most long for. They are the ways of God and they show his presence in and among us. They are also the ground in which betrayal takes root. We can never betray one who has not first given and entrusted himself or herself into our hands and life, and Jesus knows that. "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." That Jesus can even be betrayed is proof of his love. Jesus has made his own betrayal possible not only with the disciples but in all times and in all places, even here, now, with us.

There is an obvious question to Jesus' statement but no one wants to ask. So Peter prompts another to ask, "Lord, who is it?" Why didn't Peter ask if he really wanted to know? Was he afraid of the answer? Did he wonder, somewhere deep within, that it might be him? Did he say to himself, "It could be any one of us?"

Regardless of why he did not ask, Peter and the others must have been relieved when Jesus dipped the bread and gave it to Judas. Perhaps we all are. It's always easier to look for a Judas than to look at our own lives. We would rather blame a Judas than consider our own responsibility. Most of us have a love and hate relationship with Judas. We hate him for what he did. We love him because he takes the rap, draws the attention away from us, and we can excuse ourselves.

Judas will go out into the night, but the question remains, "Lord, who is it?" That question is never answered once and for all.

Tonight a piece of bread is dipped in the dish and Judas will betray. Tomorrow a rooster will crow and Peter will deny. And the next day? "Lord, who is it?"

"It is one with whom I have spent time, with whom I have shared conversation, to whom I have given bread and drink. It is one whom I love and to whom I have given myself."

Sue Swartz
Community Mennonite Church

Thursday, March 29

Exodus 12:1-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste. (Exodus 12:11)

The Israelites in Egypt eat in haste because they are ready to leave, always prepared for the day of their deliverance. I am the child of immigrants, of people who leave and are always ready to leave. We are migrants, making our home here and there, settling for a time in places where strangers become neighbors. When we tell our family stories, I haven't figured out how to claim a homeland—with my mother from Central America and my father from South America and me: my life from a people on the move, sustaining by whatever we find on the way, loading our cars with what we manage to gather in this city, then that city, eating with our coats tucked into our belts, ready for our next departure.

There are others like me, others like the Israelites—immigrants, all of us, although our reasons for leaving are varied. Some displaced; others deported. Some escape enslavement; others are exiles forced from their homeland. Some are refugees from violence; others are desperate for work, driven by the cries of hungry children, risking their lives as they cross dangerous borders. I listen to them because they help me understand who I am. I share them with you here, below, as guides for all of us who await deliverance, who long for a homeland—all of us who are learning what it takes to survive along the way.

"I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back."

"I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture."

~ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

“We may have forgotten our country, but we haven’t forgotten our dispossession. It’s why we never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be. It’s why one hundred square blocks of Los Angeles can be destroyed in an evening. We stay there, but we don’t live there. Ghettos aren’t designed for living. The debris awash in the streets, the broken windows, and the stench of urine in the project elevators and stairwells are the signs of bare life. ‘The insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut,’ writes James Baldwin, daily assaults the residents of the ghetto, the quarters, the ‘hood. It produces the need to ‘destroy tirelessly’ or ‘to smash something,’ which appears the most obvious path of salvation.”

“Two people meeting on the avenue will ask, ‘Is this where you stay?’ Not, ‘Is this your house?’ ‘I stayed here all my life’ is the reply. Staying is living in a country without exercising any claims on its resources. It is the perilous condition of existing in a world in which you have no investments. It is having never resided in a place that you can say is yours. It is being ‘of the house’ but not having a stake in it. Staying implies transient quarters, a makeshift domicile, a temporary shelter, but no attachment or affiliation.”

~ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

“I forget the paths of departing to nothingness; I remember the starlight in the Bedouin encampments. / I forget the whine of bullets in the deserted village; I remember the song of crickets in the woods.”

~ Mahmoud Darwish, *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*

Isaac Villegas
Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship

Friday, March 30

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance,
beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they
shall contemplate.
Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been
revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty
that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance
that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring,
and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant,
shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

There's no free lunch

Through the years I have learned that there is no free lunch. No matter what I enjoy, someone has always paid for it. Whether it has been through my work, effort, or sacrifice or the work or sacrifice of someone else, what I enjoy comes with a price. We don't have to go too far to realize that there are those working in some tough conditions, maybe even exploitive, to produce food for the lowest possible price. And this applies not only to the food that I eat, but also to the privileges I benefit from. For every advantage in life that I enjoy there has been someone who has suffered. This text calls me to remember that as I enjoy something there has been a sacrifice made by someone.

On Good Friday as we read this text it seems so easy to name the unidentified subject of this text. We want to focus on the sensationalized image that Isaiah paints in these verses and make what seems to be the very obvious connection with Jesus. Isaiah is very ambiguous though. Is it a prophet from the past? Is it one to come? Or is it a prophet of Isaiah's generation or even Isaiah himself. It's really hard to identify who Isaiah is talking about.

Yet, in the midst of the uncertainty of identifying who the suffering servant is, we are at risk of missing two important known facts from this text. First, in the middle of this text we find ourselves identified, "We like sheep have gone astray." We, you and I, have turned our back to God. You might challenge the assumption that this text cannot be about us. And yes, Isaiah had no indication that his work would be

preserved and read millennia into the future. Yet human nature has continued and it is clear that we turn away from God. What is clear is that we who have turned to our own way are the beneficiaries of the sacrifice made by the unidentified servant.

The second clear message from Isaiah is that God provides salvation. God has sent many prophets to call back those who have turned away back into relationship. God has repeatedly taken those at risk of being lost, many facing certain death, and providing a way to being restored. While it's not explicitly addressed in the text read today, we learn about God's salvation in the verses around today's text. Our text makes clear that we benefit in God's salvation because of the sacrifice of this unnamed servant of God. No matter if Isaiah is talking about Jesus or not, today is a day to remember that we believers benefit from the sacrifice of another.

Jeff Mumaw
Community Mennonite Church

Saturday, March 31

How shallow former shadows (HWB 251)

Text: Carl P. Daw Jr., *A Year of Grace*, 1990

Music: Thomas Tallis, 1567

How shallow former shadows seem beside
this great reverse,
as darkness swallows up the light
of all the universe.
Creation shivers at the shock,
the temple rends its veil.
A pallid stillness stifles time
and nature's motions fail.
This is no midday fantasy,
no flight of fevered brain.
With vengeance awful, grim, and real,
chaos is come again.
The hands that formed us from the soil
are nailed upon the cross.
The Word that gave us life and breath
expires in utter loss.
Yet deep within this darkness lives
a Love so fierce and free,
that arcs all voids and—risk supreme!—
embraces agony.
Its perfect testament is etched
in iron, blood, and wood.
With awe we glimpse its true import
and dare to call it good.

Passion stories end with the burial of Jesus. This beautiful text (set to a gorgeous tune) is a passion story, and it is written as if the observer had no idea what happens next, as if the surprise of Easter hadn't yet been spoiled, and still found the story, as it stood, wonderful and earth-changing.

Read, hum, rest with this one tonight. Beautiful stories don't all have happy endings; happy endings aren't always preceded by beautiful stories. If this version of the passion were continued, the resurrection would be just an epilogue. I don't have a theological ground to justify saying this, but how incredibly beautiful must a story be, how much power must be there, such that adding the resurrection barely improves it?

Yes, it does improve it, and our prospects, and our beliefs, and our story. But until Easter, let this story rest as if it ended here.

Jeremy Nafziger
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Sunday, April 1

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The triumphalism and vindication of Easter dominate the end of Lent and Holy Week. And rightfully so! Our hopes were violently crushed, but Jesus, our teacher, has miraculously risen from death. We should be forgiven for getting too caught up in the revelry to notice the awkward loose ends of Resurrection stories. What exactly happened in the tomb and during the weeks that followed?

This is something I have wondered at times, but not a question that I have ever paused to ask. I think because I assumed there is no intelligible answer, or more likely, it was explained in church countless times while I wasn't paying attention. But, as I sat with this text from John (and its companion in Mark), these meta-questions overshadowed more personal readings and subtle observations. I couldn't get over the cliff-hanger in Mark and the confusion of John. A tip from a friend led me to chapter 12 of Rowan Williams' "On Christian Theology".

In a rich essay, Williams finds meaning in the contradictions and idiosyncrasies of the resurrection narratives. He reminds us that the Gospel writers were working during different time periods and integrating various reports of the Resurrection, with a myriad of religious and cultural allusions to support their own earnest political and theological perspectives. It seems safe to trust the early church leaders on the fact of Jesus's resurrection, but it is also clear that they weren't all on the same page about how it happened and what it meant.

Reading Williams, I was encouraged to embrace the uncertainty of the Resurrection, with humility, while focusing on the certainties. True to a radical political reading of the Gospels, Jesus did not present himself to a triumphant fanfare and assume a throne or position of power in the Church. Furthermore, across all of the apparition stories, Jesus is elusive, surprising, and perpetually a stranger. Many of the disciples didn't immediately recognize him. The Risen One offered words of comfort and a reason to hope, but no permanent or predictable presence.

In the midst of the pomp and fanfare of Easter Morning or for a moment during our joyous Easter lunches, we should pause and remember the early Christians, who did not have neatly numbered "Gospels" bound in "Bibles", and the stories of the Resurrections they told. Let their inability to grasp his risen body or recognize his fleeting apparitions, remind us to be humble and vulnerable, expecting to be surprised by Jesus. And may the uncertain hope of resurrection be a reminder to rely on the certainties of prayer, communion, and solidarity with the outcast and downtrodden.

For He has risen indeed!

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