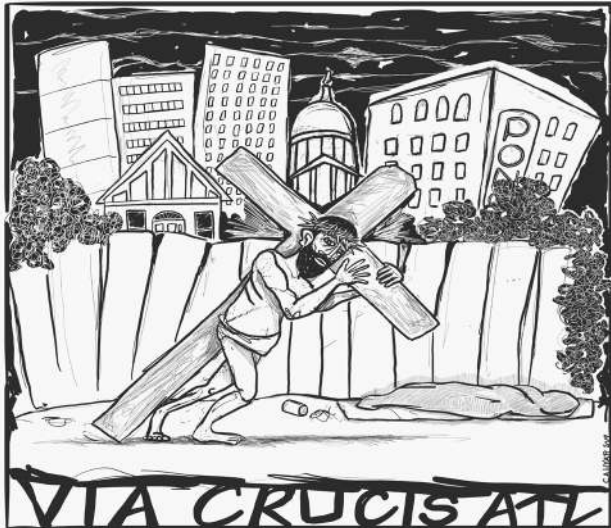


Lent Devotional 2020



mercy community church

Getting Started

In our community, we practice an ancient style of prayer and Bible study called Lectio Divina. Through this practice, we read the Scriptures multiple times together when we study. The first time through, we notice what word stands out to us. The second time through, we attend to what phrase strikes us, and the third time, we ask ourselves what God might be calling us to do. For this Lent and Holy Week, we have compiled a number of Lectio-style reflections to share with you, taken from the lectionary passages for the Sundays of the season.

We suggest you begin your daily devotion with a short prayer, simply and honestly asking God to speak to you for the day. Then read the text for the day before reading the reflection. Allow the reflection itself to serve as a voice from the wider community, as you prayerfully consider what God is saying to you. The prayer at the end of each reflection could be used to call to mind God's presence with you throughout the day.

**Ash Wednesday
Lectionary Readings**

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Cor 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21



Wednesday, February 26th—Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 1, ‘Beware of practicing your righteousness’

I’m a pretty weird guy—I really love Ash Wednesday and Lent. I love the smells and bells when we gather with other neighborhood churches. I love the imposition of ashes and the chalky black crosses that paint our foreheads. I love coming to the table to share with one another in the bread and wine that is the body and blood of Jesus. And I really, really love the theme of penance. It’s old-fashioned and cringe-worthy enough of a word to make us ill at ease—and yet radical enough to invite us to serious transformation. Francis of Assisi often described himself as just a penitent. Think about it: one of the most beloved holy people in all of history thought of himself as living a life of constant turning from sin. That makes me feel that real holiness is actually about practicing it—which, for me at least, would have to include a lot of messing it up along the way—and not about some idealized version of being human that is pretty much out of our reach. But I wonder if we haven’t allowed penance to become too church-y. We might come closer to what Jesus was talking about if our repentance was less religious and more real world, less bourgeois aspirational ‘spiritual growth’ and more righting and repairing our relationships with other human beings and creation. Jesus commends alms-giving, prayer, and fasting not as status-driven virtue-signaling but as ways to widen the capacity of our hearts for doing right by our neighbor and realizing the kingdom of heaven in the here and now. I think that’s a kind of weirdness our world could use a little more of.

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Prayer Jesus, help us always and ever to turn toward you—in our streets as much as in our pews.

Thursday, February 27th

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ivan Cooley

Reflection—v. 5 ‘do not be like the hypocrites’

Usually when I come home I turn on the TV. Until the other day when I turned on the TV and it was dead. I panicked, because what was I going to do without my TV?! When I get on the train, I guarantee that 60-70% of the people around me are looking at the screen on their phones. I’m amazed at how many people are addicted to their screens. But then when my TV went out, I had to admit that I was addicted to a screen too! But then I started playing my music. Since I had gotten the TV I wasn’t listening to music near as much. I couldn’t concentrate on the music because I wanted to watch TV. The next day I was downtown walking and there on the sidewalk were some speakers—I took them home, plugged them into my phone—it worked! The music was sounding good! Oh, I see what I’ve been missing now! At first, when the TV went out, in the quiet, I started thinking thoughts that I didn’t want to, but then after a while, my mind let that stuff go, and I noticed that it wasn’t that bad without the TV. I had to give up the TV. It wasn’t my choice, but I believe that God leads us. When I could hear my music again, I began to hear other things. I could hear good things in my head for a minute, and then even when I turned the music off, I knew I was going to be alright and my mind went to a different place. What I thought was going to be a bad thing, God showed me, might be what I needed. Peace is a good thing.

Prayer Lord, sometimes I’m a hypocrite; in your mercy, help me to look at others with the same love you look at me.

Friday, February 28th

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Bethany Apelquist

Reflection - v.5 'whenever you pray'

If you have ever visited Mercy during prayer time, you have probably felt the presence of the Spirit and felt the warmth of community. You may have sensed some peace in the bustle of a busy city. As we all squeeze into the small basement church, always making room for one more person to join, there is a sense that this thing we do together—gathering to pray—is important, even sacred. I think that this is the kind of prayer that Matthew is talking about. I don't think Matthew is arguing that praying together or in front of others is wrong. Rather, he believes that prayer is a holy moment, a moment in which we stand just a bit closer to God—a moment of refuge in the midst of the hardships of our lives. Prayer isn't about one person being the center of attention. Prayer is about the community holding each person as equally important to God and holding God's presence in the center of our lives together. Prayer is a moment that makes room for one more person to join. Prayer is a moment in which together we hold the joys and the concerns of our community in our hearts, knowing that God is close to us, that God cares for the things we care about. So this Lent may we make room for prayer in our lives. May we remember that God is present with us, and may we remember that we aren't called to do this alone, but that we are called to do this in beloved community.

Prayer Thank you God for being present with us and for the joys of community.

Saturday, February 29th

Isaiah 58:1-12

Rod Reimer

Reflection—v. 6 ‘loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke’

Dr. Martin Luther King declared that the ‘ultimate measure’ of a human being is not where we stand ‘in moments of comfort and convenience’ but where we stand ‘at times of challenge and controversy.’ Those words are so very true and appropriate to all of us today. Many of my brothers and sisters who are on the street find themselves weighed down by the chains of injustice, tied to a yoke of oppression, seemingly forgotten, left to wander without shelter, hungry, thirsty, and left to feel unloved. In Isaiah 58, the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz tells us not to turn away from our own ‘flesh and blood,’ for we are all brothers and sisters created by God. We are to ‘loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...share [our] food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter...to clothe the naked.’ In doing these things, our light ‘will break forth like the dawn’ and our light ‘will rise in the darkness.’ The great news is that we do not have to do this alone, for ‘righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be our rear guard.’ When we call, the Lord will answer. When we cry for help, God will say, ‘Here am I.’ The Lord will guide us always and will satisfy our needs in a ‘sun-scorched land.’ I give thanks for what I am experiencing at Mercy with all of my brothers and sisters, and I pray that all of us may follow the prophet Isaiah’s directions always.

Prayer Lord, help your people to be a light in these times of challenge and controversy.

1st Sunday of Lent Lectionary Readings

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

Psalms 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4: 1-11



Sunday, March 1st

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

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v.17 ‘but don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...’

Restrictions and rules are incredibly frustrating. Boundaries can make us feel trapped and restless. We live in a world of constraints, many of which, for good reasons, can have negative connotations. We desire to build walls and put up fences that keep some of us in power and separate others from good relationships. But healthy boundaries are not always a bad thing. God has created boundaries for human beings, not because of God’s deep desire to control and manipulate us but because of God’s great love for humankind. The image that comes to mind is that of a parent and child or a teacher and a student, where the learner is asked not to do something—like touch a hot stove. To the child, this can feel oppressive and limiting, whereas to the parent or teacher, it is a measure of love and care. We have a beloved member of our community who often encourages us to be obedient to God and to one another in our space. By living within the boundaries of our community, what that beloved community member might call ‘obedience,’ we all have a space where we can feel safe and loved. Being obedient in our community is not about restrictions but freedom. This is the work of God, where we can reclaim something that perhaps we’ve always seen as negative and see freedom and wholeness instead.

Prayer Thank you God for boundaries that keep us safe and promote wellness.

Monday, March 2nd

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

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 1 ‘Did God really say...’

All of the passages from this week’s lectionary readings speak highly of God’s great love for us, and the ways that God is in relationship with us. Relationships, whether we like them or not, are a part of our everyday lives—we are in relationship with God, others, and ourselves. When we are in particularly healthy relationships, we are in good communication, actually listening and speaking with one another. Healthy relationships are free from gossip. They are also free from triangulation, where rather than engaging an individual directly, we pull someone else into the conversation. This is the case in the conversation between the serpent and the woman regarding God’s relationship with her. God is absent from the conversation. Yes, they are talking about God, but God is not invited into the conversation. God’s words have been perverted and manipulated in such a way that has excluded God, robbing the serpent and the woman of a potentially rich engagement with God.

Prayer Help us, O Lord, to communicate well with one another and with you. Make us mindful of the ways that we can be better communicators.

Tuesday, March 3rd

Psalm 32

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 1 ‘The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!’

I am a perfectionist and a people-pleaser. I want to do everything correctly the first time and make sure no one is ever displeased with me. It doesn't matter how many times I am told that I can't be perfect and I won't always get it right, I am determined to be the best and never make any mistakes. Then, of course, there is the shame when I don't get it right. Shame is one of those things that follows us, particularly in faith and in the church, when we speak of sinfulness. God does not want us to live in shame, beat-down because we are inevitably going to get it wrong. God wants us to be happy and well. True happiness is not never making mistakes or ensuring that no one is ever displeased. True happiness is in finding peace within ourselves and knowing that we don't have to get it 'right' all the time. We often have conversations about relationships at Mercy being 'mess-up safe.' In other words, we will inevitably make someone mad, hurt someone's feelings, or just generally mess up. However, as with God, there can be forgiveness and healing when those things do occur. Knowing that I have a space where it is safe when I mess up—because yes, even pastors get it wrong—brings me joy. It's not that everyone is happy with me all the time, because they are not. It isn't because I've not made a mistake; I have. It is because there is a process where I acknowledge that I will not always get it right and I will not always make folks happy. It is a process of being my best self. And that is true joy.

Prayer Lord, help us to see that true happiness comes from you, and is free from guilt or shame.

Wednesday, March 4th

Romans 5:12-19

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 15 ‘The free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.’

We talk a lot about the differences between transactional and transformational relationships in our community. Transactional relationships mirror the exchange of goods and services when we make purchases, and are tit-for-tat interactions—you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours. We expect to receive some kind of goods or services from someone if we do something for them. This is not who God is. This is not why Jesus came. Jesus desires to be in a relationship with us, a relationship that transforms our entire being. This is a gift that comes through Christ, who speaks so radically against the ways of the world and encourages us to be countercultural. Transformation is difficult—it is a process. It is the difference between buying someone a meal and sending them on their way, and sitting down with someone to eat a meal together. One is a transaction the other invites relationship-forming transformation. Such a transformation honors the belovedness of our creation and God’s desire for wellness and wholeness for each person—not because we have ‘earned’ it, but because, as the text reminds us, it is a ‘free grace.’ Love for the individual in the relationship is at the core of such a gracious relationship and thus speaks of the transformation that happens within us. In God’s grace, we are changed.

Prayer May we continue to be challenged into transformational relationships.

Thursday, March 5th

Psalm 32

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 3 ‘While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.’

Certain kinds of silence can make us unhealthy. Staying silent can keep us so focused on whatever we are trying to hide that we can't focus on anything or anyone else. We brood. We stew. It leads us to violence and anger and hatred. Self-loathing is far too common for many of us, when we keep silent about transgressions or fears of our own goodness. Self-loathing festers to the point where we become so depressed that we feel paralyzed. I love that the psalms can be a place where the psalmists feel that they can air grievances with God. They don't have to keep silent, but can speak up in a way that brings freedom, a stronger relationship, and the understanding of trust. Destructive silence not only keeps us in bondage but imprisons those with whom we engage. It severs the potential for healthy relationships and the possibility of respecting both ourselves and the other as beloved and capable of receiving both the good and bad of living in relationship.

Prayer Lord, help us to be better communicators with you and with others.

Friday, March 6th

Romans 5:12-19

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 16 ‘but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.’

God’s gift of grace is not part of a transaction, wherein we are to offer God a sacrifice, some flowers, or buy God something, as recompense for our wrongdoings. There is nothing I can do that will make me worthy. Only God can justify us, and God does, through Christ Jesus. This is the free gift that this passage speaks of and what we experience in our lives with Jesus Christ. I am going to make mistakes and mess up. The justification that God offers comes even after I do all of the things that I believe should have excluded me. We live with a lot of shame and self-loathing, in part because we are told that who we are and what we do supersedes our belovedness. ‘If only they really knew’ is what I so often tell myself in moments of self-loathing and negative self-talk. God knows, and God loves! For the things that we can’t do on our own and for ourselves, God says, ‘Here, take my hand.’ This is the true grace and love we get to experience in Christ Jesus. God does not desire us to live in shame, crushed by guilt or self-loathing. God’s free gift (yep, really free!) is more than anything we have ever experienced on this earth.

Prayer Help us, O Lord, live into the free gift of your love and mercy that brings us closer to you.

Saturday, March 7th

Psalm 32

Hiram Evans

Reflection—v. 6 ‘...let all who are faithful offer prayer to you.’

One time, I was at the doctor’s office, and I felt like the doctors and nurses were mean to me. I told them I was on drugs and when they actually saw the drugs in my system, they were like, ‘Get him out of here; he’s nasty!’ But God wouldn’t do something like that. It angered me when they wanted me to get out. It hurt. People can be really mean. But when Jesus is speaking to us in parables, he’s breaking things down in a different way and sends a different message. Jesus is encouraging our words to become actions. He’s making things happen. And Jesus wants us to be near him—he wouldn’t tell us to go away. Sometimes when I’m praying, I think God might say to me, ‘Well, Hiram, you’re doing things you said you were going to do, but you’re also sometimes going away from what you say.’ Sometimes I feel like I’ve got the faith that God gave me, but then when you go back out on the streets, or back out at Catch-Out Corner, your mind can start to wander and you only see the things that God’s not going to do for you. But as we often talk about here in Bible Study, God loves the people who hunger, and the people who are sleeping under bridges—he loves us, whether we make mistakes or don’t, he loves us! Because, the truth is, we’re going to goof up sometimes. We goof up just about every day. The thing with me is that I’ll pray and then the devil will intervene with my mind. So, how do I keep that same prayerful mindset out on the streets? How do I change my heart to be right as well as my mind?

Prayer God who loves us, in this season of mindfulness, let my heart be turned to you, wherever I am.

2nd Week of Lent Lectionary Readings

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17



Sunday, March 8th

Psalm 121

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 3 ‘the one who keeps you will not slumber’

The pastor didn't sleep much that night. She was too alert to rest as she kept 'watch o'er her flock,' not unlike certain shepherds on a Christmas night long ago. But the sweet song of angels didn't reward her vigilance. Instead, a chorus of antiphonal snoring and the persistent percussion of footsteps en route to the restroom announced the good news on this evening. For those nocturnal sounds could mean only one thing: her sleepless night had helped create the space for forty other souls to rest warm and safe—for one winter night at least. This psalm describes in tender detail the attentive care of our pastoral God, and hers is the image I call to mind. God isn't asleep on the job. She's watching over us, whether we're sound asleep or wide awake, coming in or just about to head out. Our song, 'Jesus Is a Sanctuary,' explores this theme of a God who is the faithful refuge of her people. Singing it, we remind ourselves that God is indeed our our shelter and sanctuary. But we also remind ourselves that we are called to provide space for one another that is both sacred and safe. Jesus is indeed a sanctuary, but we are his body. As we ponder penance this Lent, let us repent of doors that are closed and sanctuaries that sit empty on cold nights, of pews and carpet that are unstained by human need, of policies and liability concerns that take the place of moral discernment and compassion. And let us give thanks, too, for churches like our partners' that open their doors and for so many, like that pastor and countless other volunteers from many churches, who hear the call of the God who tenderly watches over her people, by day and by night.

Prayer God who never rests in your constant care for us, help us to care for one another always.

Monday, March 9th

Psalm 121

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 1 ‘where is help to come from?’

When I worked at a nursing home, earning my way through seminary, this verse—Authorized King James Version, of course—was a favorite prayer of one of my co-workers. ‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help; my help cometh from the Lord!’ she would cry out on a trying day. Unlike the King James, the Hebrew text probably presents a question before it goes on to its radical affirmation. And it’s not a bad question to ask ourselves. Where is help to come from? The psalmist sets our gaze on the mountains. Here on the city sidewalks, I often look up at the skyscrapers that overshadow us and wonder the same. Both have towering majesty, even beauty. Both can seem so big that we feel small. And if I may be so bold, both can serve as make-shift altars, places we imagine heaven and earth might meet and gods dwell. For our psalmist, such majesty does not possess power enough to save us and altars built there cannot bless. In our own day, systems and institutions that hold sway over us with so much power and pile up promises of help, often disappoint, leading to greater disillusionment and alienation. Sadly, we must confess these include our churches and religious institutions, too. But our psalmist offers us an answer: ‘Help comes to me from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth.’ Here mountains don’t matter. And neither do our modernized Babylonian towers. The God who made everything—mountains included—is the one who is our saving help. This powerful proclamation invites us to ground our faith deeper than the mountains—deeper, indeed, than all that is—and to nurture radical hope in the God of creation and liberation.

Tuesday, March 10th

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—‘that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all’

The Temptations sang it in the Seventies: ‘Ball of confusion... that’s what the world is today!’ The old folks said we live in a ‘sin-sick world’. But it’s also a ‘grace-drenched’ world, as a professor of mine once observed. Both of these can be true at the same time. But one of these is by far greater, and that one is the grace of God. We live in critical times, yes—as in truth, every generation does in one way or another. But in our despair, we are prone to underestimate the grace of God. For Paul, what God has done in Jesus calls all the world into God’s saving justice. Grace is the generous welcome of God that heals our wounded world upon the rough wood of the cross. Just keeping your head above water when the waves of chaos seem to ever swarm around us is no easy task. How much harder is it for us to faithfully follow Jesus when God’s saving justice calls us to be fully present precisely where the wounds and brokenness of our world—and of ourselves—are laid bare and bloody. It’s hard to share your food with the hungry. It’s hard to welcome the stranger. It’s hard to make peace at the knife-point of violence. But always and in every way, the grace of God is there, and it weaves it’s healing way amid the economic injustice, systemic racism and genderism, and hateful fear that encamp in every dark corner of our culture. God is always present, just as we who follow God are called to be present, even when we feel forsaken. God is at work, just as we are called to work, even when we wonder if our labor is in vain. Grace is enough, especially when we feel we are not. Upon this grace all the promises of God for human well-being and liberation rest. And those promises are guaranteed for every one of us.

Prayer Grace-full God, let our hearts not be so overwhelmed that we forget your grace is enough.

Wednesday, March 11th

Genesis 12:1-4a

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 2 ‘I will make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing’

Our little community isn't exactly what you might call famous. Our only 'signage' is some spray-painted graffiti by a beloved-but-angry member who wanted to describe for us exactly what 'Mercy' does in his opinion. But, hey, at least it says Mercy. Most of us will never be what our celebrity culture considers famous, but we can be known for the kind of persons and communities we seek to be. What if our names were used as a blessing? One of our blessings is the way so many of us have come to see our little community as 'home.' We're loud and wild at times, but also kind and tender, too. Even so, we make a home for one another. It isn't the work of any one of us. Rather, it is the work of all of us. Many of us who find no place of belonging much of any place else, find it here somehow. A flood of recent moments come to mind. I think of my friend, who has been in and out of the hospital a lot of late, who will tell any confused-looking doctor who will listen, 'This is my family; say whatever you need to in front of them.' I think of another friend or two, who find themselves occasionally in the care of other institutions, telling the folks in charge about their church and the calls we get to come and visit. I think about the particularity of love, which doesn't look exactly the same for any one of us and is often very hard to discern, especially when relationships aren't as healthy as you might hope but care is still necessary. I think about the friends that tell other friends to come and see what's happening. And then that person remarks, 'I like y'all's hospitality.' That's the kind of famous all of our communities could be. And that seems like a blessing to me.

20 Prayer God of blessing, let our fame be found in our loving care for one another.

Thursday, March 12th

John 3.1-17

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 3 ‘born again’

The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus is a contrast between conventional and comfortable religious practice and the revolutionary demand of Jesus. Nicodemus ticks all the boxes as a member of the religious ruling elite. He even recognizes where and with whom God is present. But so do the crowds in Jerusalem. And Jesus doesn't trust them, either. His support is vocal—at least 'at night' and in a private meeting. But Jesus calls for radical transformation. He says, in essence, that human beings need to start all over again from scratch. Their perspectives are so at odds it is like Nicodemus and Jesus are speaking different languages. What is at stake between the two is what it means to be faithful. It isn't enough to see where God seems to be and then do nothing more. To be born anew is to see God mightily at work, yes—but then to join full-on in the work God is doing. Our churches are nearly empty. And we're scrambling to attract more people back to the faith. But our faith doesn't stop with filling a pew. Jesus isn't working Nicodemus for a capital campaign or calling him to deeper doctrinal development. Encountering Jesus in the Gospel of John is to stand face to face with the missional movement of God's love: Jesus has come from God into the world in order to save the world so that we might be sent out in the same way and for the same thing. Anything less than that, and we might as well start over. Or as Jesus says, it's time to be born again.

Prayer Jesus, you call us to find you in the fullness of your love for the world; we are born anew.

Friday, March 13th

John 3.1-17

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 16 ‘God so loved the world that he gave’

Following Jesus is to be overwhelmed by generous love. God’s love is for all, and God doesn’t love some more than others or others less than some. God loves us all—passionately, profoundly, particularly, and without prejudice (other than God’s own powerful predilection for human well-being.) It’s funny how we read ‘God so loved the world that he gave’ and think it means something other than what it says. The obvious emphasis is love so generous that its ultimate expression is the gift of Godself for us, plain and simple. According to John, that love has been giving since the beginning. All of creation is an expression of that love. God takes our flesh and pitches a tent to make a home with us as an expression of that love. We are not wrong, of course, to see the cross within the loving gift of God’s self for us. But we are misguided to think the cross is just a piece in some cosmic chess match we suppose God is playing. The cross is nothing more and nothing less than what love looks like at full measure, unbowed even in the face of death. We were made by and for that same love. John calls the transformation love begets in us being born again. Other gospels call it taking up the cross. To take up the cross is to love like Jesus, no more and no less. Whether we like it or not, loving human beings means being opposed by the powers that lift some up while crushing others. And regardless of their sometimes benevolent rhetoric, those powers will fight back. The cross just means choosing to love people anyway. Just like our God.

Prayer Your love, O God, flows from your heart as the gift of your self, transforming us into love.

Saturday, March 14th

John 3:1-17

Jerome Johnson

Reflection—v. 17 ‘God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world’

God gave his only son so that I might live and be forgiven of my sin. Knowing that God came to bring life makes me feel good and bad in a way, because of the way they treated Christ. If I were Christ, I don't think I would have wanted to do it. I'm glad he did, I just hate the way they treated him. Sometimes I hate to read the scripture where they beat Jesus. I don't get any pleasure in that, the way they beat him and stripped him and then hung him on the cross. Jesus came here and he did nothing but good, and still, they crucified him and killed him. I just don't understand it. I still just can't quite grasp it. If a person is doing good, why would you harm him? Oh, God forgive us. Thank God, that's not the end of the story. It makes me sad sometimes, thinking that if I was Jesus I would have called on my angels, but instead he said, 'God forgive them for they know not what they do.' How can you have that much love for people? It's awful amazing, and I thank God for that. And that God didn't send Jesus to condemn us, but to save us? That's awesome. I like that part of this passage too. I just thank God for what he's done. He wants to save us, and that is awesome. I thank God for coming down for me.

Prayer Oh, God forgive us. Thank God, that's not the end of the story. Thank you for sending Jesus, and the ways that you want to save us.

3rd Sunday of Lent Lectionary Readings

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42



Sunday, March 15th

Romans 5:1-11

Bill Smith

Reflection—v. 1 ‘we are justified by faith’

Paul’s use of justification by faith in this passage is a reminder to us that our salvation is dependent on what Christ has done for us at Calvary. Whether you subscribe to a substitutionary atonement, a scapegoat atonement, or look at Christ’s death as an act of nonviolence, I believe that Christ does for us what we could not do, nor would be able to do, on our own. He put us back in right standing with God—and not because of what we have done or not done. Paul contends that whether we were Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, or female, we all come under the loving embrace of God’s amazing grace and the gift of love that Christ poured out for us on the cross. We then should live as forgiven-folks and share the knowledge of this great gift with others.

Prayer Christ Jesus, we thank you for your amazing gift of grace, help us to share the knowledge of this great gift with all we meet!





Monday, March 16th

Romans 5:1-11

Maurice Lattimore

Reflection--v.8 'while we were still sinners Christ died for us'

When I reflect bak on this passage, it shows me just how grateful I am for the mercy and grace that was shown to me through our Lord Jesus Christ—which through no merits of my own do I deserve but only through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And when life throws us curves, just keep fouling them off. The right pitch will come, but when it does, be prepared to run the bases. We may encounter many defeats, but with Christ's Spirit within us we will not be defeated. Those curveballs are always coming. Eventually, you learn to hit some of them. Keep hope alive! Hope does not disappoint us because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For when we were without strength and still sinners Christ died for us. Amen! We've been justified and saved by his life, death, and resurrection. He has reconciled us back to God almighty. Praise God, Hallelujah! Peace and love always! Peace!

Prayer Father God, we thank and love you for your mercy and the grace you have shown us, allowing us to be reconciled back to you through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen, Amen, and Amen!

Tuesday, March 17th

Romans 5:1-11

Bethany Apelquist

Reflection—v.5 ‘hope does not disappoint us’

We can't expect life to be neat and tidy, in fact life is often rather messy. We know that our stories are complicated and full of a range of experiences--some that are so beautiful but also some that rock our world and leave us feeling lost. We have seasons of life that are full of disappointments. I know that I often look around and it can feel like the whole world is crumbling. I feel the sting of disappointment as I look around and I see violence, I see injustice, I see that many don't have what they need, and I see the shadow of death everywhere. I bet you see it too. But friends, that is what makes hope a bold and brave choice. It is bold to see the way things are and hope for something better. It is brave to look death in the eye and hope for resurrection. I was recently flipping through a hymnal and saw a song titled 'Live Into Hope.' I love the imagery of actively living into hope--the idea that we don't just idly hope for a better future, but that we actively hope, that we live into hope, and that our hope moves us to action. We hope for justice and we do justice. We hope for peace and we do peace. We live into hope. So this lent may we boldly, and bravely, live into hope, because that kind of hope does not disappoint us.

Prayer Lord, help us to live in hope, a hope that will never disappoint us.

Wednesday, March 18th

John 4:5-42

Bethany Apelquist

Reflection—v. 11 ‘Sir, you have no bucket’

We all have a friend who is the practical thinker, the one who points out all the ways a plan could go wrong, the friend who can look at the resources and assess the best way forward. I imagine this woman sitting at the well with Jesus was that friend. Jesus asks her for some water and she points out the obvious problem that Jesus seems to be overlooking, that he doesn't have a bucket. But then Jesus surprises her and offers her the unexpected--he offers her water that doesn't require a bucket, he offers her water that is life itself. It is easy to think that if there is no bucket there is no water, that if we don't have a picture perfect plan, God can't work. But what if we opened our hearts to be surprised by God, to be surprised by the ways that God can move, and to be surprised by the gifts that God offers each of us--gifts of grace, gifts of creativity, gifts of mercy, gifts of kindness, and gifts that don't fit into our small buckets, but rather fill and overflow our hearts and our communities with the unexpected. Maybe then we will feel more free--more free to offer others gifts of love, mercy, and kindness. Maybe then we will be more free to be creative, to try something new, and to believe that just like Jesus offered the woman water that satisfies her soul, Jesus offers water for our souls.

Prayer Thank you God for all the ways you surprise us and the way you remind us of our precious gifts. May we be free to be creative as we share our gifts with others.

Thursday, March 19th

John 4:5-42

Matthew Hyatt

Reflection—v. 9-10 ‘The Samaritan woman said to him...Jesus answered her...’

While I was reading this passage, I was taken by three observations. The first was that we are told that Jews and Samaritans do not associate with each other and yet Jesus reaches out and engages the woman in conversation. This is a clear example of Jesus crossing boundaries and expanding his ministry and guidance to someone for whom it would not traditionally have been offered. Furthermore, the woman engages him back. She reaches right back across those very same boundaries to join Jesus in conversation. The second point is that the woman does not blindly accept what Jesus tells her. At the same time, neither does she reject what he says without at least attempting to understand. She participates in this discussion even while acknowledging that they come from different backgrounds, have differing world-views, and even their own religions. This stuck out to me particularly when I look at the current political climate and the polarization that prevents us from even talking to the other party in a civil manner. The third thing that stood out to me was that the townsfolk were also welcoming and willing to engage and learn from Jesus. They were willing to listen to Jesus first because of the woman’s testimony, but they also came to their own conclusions about Jesus based on their own experience with him. They did not react with fear, mistrust, or revulsion at a foreign outsider who came into their midst and began teaching a new religious doctrine. They chose to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt and see what God had brought them.

Prayer Jesus, lend us your understanding so that we may engage respectfully with everyone.

Friday, March 20th

Psalm 95

Kevin Harris

Reflection—v. 2 ‘let us come into his presence...’

God shows us how truly great he is. Our father could have been frustrated with all the groaning and distrust from our ancestors, but God said ‘I will keep my generations for they are mine.’ God claims us as his own. God placed a great spirit inside each of us. This spirit helps us to know God, to worship him, and to experience his grace. We don’t have to bargain with God, but can just be like the beloved child who asks our Lord ‘Where do I go? Who do you need me to see? How do I love?’ We are to wait on the Lord, yes, but God also wants us to ask for what we need, and to seek God’s guidance. That’s the worship that God wants from us. God wants us to desire goodness from above, and to live with purpose, but also to know who we belong to. God our Mother and Father who art in heaven hears our praise and guides us back from pain. To the creator, I will just say ‘yes.’

Prayer Heavenly Parent, you know what we need. Guide us through our difficult times so that we may know that we are in your presence. Be attentive to our needs, and help us to always remember that we belong to you and that you love us so deeply.

Saturday, March 21st

Psalm 95

Joyce Evans & Sandra Hill

Reflection—v.3 ‘...for the Lord is a great God’

Sandra and Joyce sat in Mercy’s art room discussing their options for housing. They crunched numbers, called some places, and bemoaned the cold rainy weather and their limited options. In the midst of these everyday moments we believe God is present. Changing the topic, Joyce commented on our Bible study from earlier that day, commending another member’s commentary on the scripture in our group discussion of the passage. When asked for her own wisdom she contributed:

Joyce: To me, sometimes I think about giving up, but I know I can’t because God’s got my back. Mostly, I know I’m a child of God—I do know. That’s basically it. To know that God chooses me feels good. Even in moments when I think he doesn’t, he does, and it feels good.

Sandra: He’s a great God. What’s great about him? Everything. I’m living. I’m not dead. He saved my life one time. I was run over. Someone ran me over and left me for dead, and God was there for me. I’m blessed, and I love God for that. (Sandra pointed to some of her companions) And I’ve got them right there.

Prayer Thank you God, for a love we can see and feel. For all of the ways that we experience your greatness and mercy. Amen.

4th Sunday of Lent Lectionary Readings

I Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41



Sunday, March 22nd

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 2 ‘How can I go? If Saul hears of it...’

I can relate to Samuel’s hesitance after God urges him to seek out the next king of Israel. ‘If Saul finds out I’m looking for his replacement he will literally kill me,’ says Samuel. ‘Just take a cow with you and pretend you’re going to give a sacrifice,’ God says, imploring Samuel to be a little crafty in his work-around the system. God asks Samuel to subvert the powers that be, and while it’s cool to think about being a rebel for the Lord, it wasn’t as easy as blasting a contentious Facebook post. You see, I too like to fancy myself a rebel sometimes, with my turquoise hair and my tattoos, but in truth, deep down inside I like following the rules, getting pats on the head, and well, being liked. Yet try as I might to avoid it, if I position myself with God’s people on the margins, I seem unable to escape uncomfortable conflict. I find myself in situations where I must push-back when I would rather be agreeable. Where I must step in the midst of arguments when I would rather turn away. Where I must hide my intentions to protect the well-being of my community when I would rather trust systems and policies. Because the longer I find myself trying to be a faithful follower of our expectation-sabotaging God the more I find myself questioning whether ‘the powers that be’ have the poor’s best interests at heart (spoiler alert: they don’t!). When we’d rather not, may God give us the courage to be crafty power-subverting God-followers like Samuel and answer God’s command to ring in a different kind of kingdom.

Prayer Give us the courage, O God, to subvert the powers that do your children harm.

Monday, March 23rd

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 7 ‘do not look at his appearance’

This story is pretty classic disrupt-the-norm-defy-expectations God. Samuel is seeking the next king of Israel, but surprise! it’s not any of Jesse’s older, stronger, more qualified progenies, but the uninvited youngest of the bunch left to babysit the sheep! God’s choice is confoundingly not-obvious, but we’re told it is because God does not see as we appearance-obsessed mortals do. God understands the rich intricacies of a human heart for all its worth and value and judges from within. How odd then, isn’t it, that as followers of this heart-perceiving God who seeks the depths and complexities within human beings, we are so often satisfied with our face-value judgments of one another. Throughout our sacred texts God is choosing to work through, speak through, and lead through the unexpected, the marginalized, and the overlooked. We make all sorts of judgments about who can lead or serve, about whose voice has value, about who is in and who is out. To succeed or lead you must have the proper credentials and enough education. You can’t be too young, but you shouldn’t be too old either. You must dress a certain way and talk a certain way. It helps if you’re a certain gender, race, and sexual orientation too. Yet God continuously subverts our expectations and imagined regulations. Quite often God calls who we may least expect. Let us not be too hung up on appearances to miss when God is up to something new.

Prayer O God, surprise us, and let us be open-hearted enough to perceive the many people you work through every day.

Tuesday, March 24th

Ephesians 5:8-14

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 11 ‘expose them’

Listening to the news about our country’s current state of affairs can be a practice in self-inflicted misery—it’s disheartening. Is there no one above corruption? Is there anyone willing to listen with reason and compassion? As I listen, I wind myself up with self-righteousness that quickly turns to resentment and despair. I want people to see what seems too clear to me! I want these crooked politicians and all their broken systems to be exposed! But then there are also these other times, when I myself know there are things I would rather conceal—all the ways that I am selfish, the many instances when I have benefitted from privilege, the mistakes I’ve made, the times when I’ve said the wrong or hurtful thing. I don’t want anyone to know these things about me, lest they know that I’m imperfect too. On my healthiest of days, I know in my heart that none of us are perfect. The more willing I am to expose my own short-comings instead of squirreling them away in shame, the better I am able to mature and be transformed by the loving truth that I am complicit and sinful, that I have things to work on, but I am also beloved. Walking into the light, letting yourself be exposed for who you truly are (simultaneously beloved and broken), can be a bit of a painful process, but I believe it leads to wholeness, health, and a loving truthfulness we too often neglect. I pray for our leaders, and all of us who hold power, to be so exposed, that it may bring life, truth, and well-being for us all.

Prayer Healing spirit, descend upon us to bring light and truth and life!

Wednesday, March 25th

John 9:1-41

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 6 ‘he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva’

There are many days at Mercy when my work as a pastor includes pulling on some latex gloves. Whether it’s cleaning a particularly dirty bathroom, picking up soiled clothes, looking at a bloody wound, taking out the trash, or throwing away half-eaten discarded scraps of food, gloves can come in handy here. There’s been a time or two when I have mused aloud, ‘should have worn gloves for that’ after completing a task. One such time one of my fellow pastors retorted ‘Jesus didn’t use gloves,’ to which I’m pretty sure I openly rolled my eyes. But he had a point. Now, I believe sanitary conditions are a good thing and bestow dignity that every human deserves, but there’s also something to be said about our fear of ‘getting our hands dirty.’ We avoid the most vulnerable among us placating our consciences with a list of seemingly legitimate well-reasoned excuses for looking the other way (believe me, I’ve done it). Our fears and prejudices, our attempts to sanitize the Gospel, and our addictive desire for order and cleanliness, keep us from getting our hands dirty in the complicated work of being present with God’s people. In this story Jesus is quite literally popping a squat and getting down in the dirt, reaching out and touching this poor beggar who society has cast out. If you really ponder the details of the story, the embodied dirtiness of Jesus’ healing can be a bit disturbing, but Jesus didn’t call us to comfort or rigid purity, he called us to notice people and see them for their God-given humanity—gloves optional.

Thursday, March 26th

John 9:1-41

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 34 ‘You were born entirely in sins... are you trying to teach us?’

Before they drive him out of the synagogue, the leaders balk at the audacity of the beggar-turned-prophet who outwits their persistent questions and offers to elucidate instead. They are trying to reason, question, logic-out, or even theologize what has happened to this once over-looked poor beggar who, along with the man who healed him, no longer fit into their limited paradigm of how God works. As this clever evangelist and a busy-at-work Jesus become progressively disruptive and unignorable, the leaders become increasingly unable (and perhaps unwilling) to accept and perceive the messy beauty of what’s transpired—that God-with-us wasn’t afraid to get down in the dirt and empower this prophet who can plainly speak for himself. The leaders bring up the man’s sinfulness, a convenient reason to discredit his voice and silence his experience. They grasp for any reason not to hear wisdom from a poor man they not-so-secretly wish had stayed in his lane. If one spends any time with our sacred text, it should be unsurprising that God’s voice so often speaks from the margins—from the mouths of the poor, the homeless, the disabled, and the neglected. Yet, do we give credence to these voices, or do we, like the grasping synagogue leaders, question what they could have to teach us? God is still busy out there on those streets. May we be open enough not to miss God’s handiwork in the stories and experiences of others.

Prayer God at work, help us to listen and to be willing to learn, especially from those we don’t expect to have something to teach us.

Friday, March 27th

Psalm 23

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 23 ‘...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord’

What does it mean to make someplace a home? This past fall my family and I purchased and moved into our first home, but oddly enough, my new residence isn't the first place that comes to mind when I think of the home I've made here for myself and my family. I think of my community and how they have taught me to read the Bible in ways I couldn't perceive before. I think of how the moment my daughter bursts into the room where we worship and eat together multiple voices shout out reminders about her peanut-allergy and stash nut products away so no harm comes to her. I think of the people with whom I can be angry and disappointed and joyful and silly and my whole beloved-broken self, knowing that there's no judgment because they're beloved and broken too and I am not alone. Being in community isn't always so wistfully blissful, but it does remind me of what God desires for us: home. God desires for us, pursues for us, a place to rest our heads at night that offers shelter and security and the dignity we all deserve. But in addition to the physical shelter that is so essential, God also desires for each of us places of security where we know we can come and be ourselves, embraced for our full humanity, not told to move along, but told to sit and rest awhile because we belong here. The church can be that place—let's make a home for one another right here.

Prayer Let us dwell with you, O Lord, and lead us into safe spaces where we can be ourselves and know that we are loved.

Saturday, March 28th

Psalm 23

David Swank

Reflection—v .4 ‘I fear no evil, for you are with me’

I was in good health for a 61 year old man, or so I thought until 3 months ago when I suddenly became ill. I was forced to see a doctor at Grady where I was checked in as a patient. The doctors there had to run a bunch of tests for them to determine how sick I was. After the tests were done and the results were in, I had Pastor Chad with me, and the doctor informed us that I have colon cancer. It was Stage 4--which it doesn't go any higher than that. I have three pastors who have been a real rock and salvation for me. I'm high on personal confidence--I truly feel that with God's love and guidance, along with three loving pastors standing behind me, I truly do feel that I can overcome any life-threatening disease that Satan will throw at me. I also think my current armor of God is me, Pastor Holly, Pastor Brittany, and my helmet is my Senior Pastor Chad--he has helped me more than I could ever repay. Whatever happens in the end, I feel ready to meet my God, if that is God's plan for me.

Prayer God, our rock and our salvation, protect us from all harm and surround us with your love and guidance when we need it the most.

5th Sunday of Lent Lectionary Readings

Ezekial 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45



Sunday, March 29th

Ezekial 37:1-14

Maggie Leonard

Reflection—v. 9 ‘dead bodies’

Have you ever found yourself so busy that you forgot to eat? I am not one to forget to eat often—but every now and then, the momentum will carry me and I won’t know what time it is, much less that I haven’t eaten. Once I finally do slow down, or look at a clock, exhaustion and hunger hit. I’m tired, dead tired. Through the scriptures featured for this week, there is a theme of death. Real, full, smelly, dry death. I wonder if Ezekiel’s valley of bones knew that they weren’t living, even when the sinews and flesh appeared. Or if the Romans knew that selfishness was killing them and separating them from God. Or Lazarus? That one’s a doozy to begin with, I can’t even imagine what he was thinking. What seems clear, is that without God, without the Spirit, we aren’t truly living. A friend of mine recently took Benedictine vows. He lives at a little house of prayer in middle Georgia where the weary can find respite, prayer, and reflection on silent retreat. As we celebrated his decision, a fellow well-wisher reflected on the space that he, and his companions, hold for others. It is because they live a slow, prayer-filled, countercultural life that others can enter more deeply into the presence of God. Visitors take up the invitation to ‘be’ with God and are given the time and space to reset and reconnect with God. This Lenten season, may we have the awareness to see how weary we have become and have the courage to allow God to bring us to new life.

Prayer Living God, give us rest, give us nourishment, and bring us new life.

Monday, March 30th

Ezekial 37: 1-14

Maggie Leonard

Reflection—v. 2 ‘they were very dry’

I have a confession for y’all. I kill plants. Especially house plants. I’ve even killed rosemary, which is basically impossible to kill. I don’t do it on purpose, it just comes naturally to me. I suspect they die because they are deprived of sunlight or water or new soil or a bigger pot... I’m never really sure. It’s probably mostly the watering though. I always know that it’s a bad sign when I try to water the plant and all the water trickles straight through the dry dirt. It’s like the dirt has been dry for so long that it has forgotten how to absorb water. At that point, it’s not necessarily a lost cause yet, but immediate attention is needed. It takes time, consistency, and patience to get the dirt to absorb water again. Pouring lots of water on it never works, on those occasions I end up with water all over the table. Instead, I have to drop ice cubes in the pot. As they melt slowly, the dirt has more time to soften and absorb. I think we can get like that too. If we deprive ourselves of God’s presence in the world, it doesn’t matter how much grace and mercy is poured upon us, we don’t absorb it. We can’t--not yet anyway. It takes time, consistency, and patience. Slowly but surely, as we attend to God we start to feel that love fill us again. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why Lent is 40 days – if we haven’t been attentive to God’s presence, it will take some time to soften, absorb, and feel. It will happen though, have faith.

Prayer Patient and attentive God, soften our hearts that we may absorb your grace.

Tuesday, March 31st

Ezekial 37: 1-14

Maggie Leonard

Reflection—v. 14 ‘I will plant you on fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord’

As I think about this verse in the Lenten context, I am reminded of a poem by my favorite poet, Hafiz. Daniel Ladinsky translates it from Persian as follows – ‘What plant can grow if you keep lifting it from the soil? Let your roots expand unchecked into a forest, a river, a song, or some verse you hold tenderly. You need to become quiet for this, as roots work in silence beneath the earth’s silhouettes. Draw from souls all you ever could want above, below, and to the side, and within us, within us just love.’ Having the gifts of nutrients available isn’t enough, we have to do our part to receive them. This call to silence is probably the most difficult part for many of us. Last year for one of my classes, I had to devise an experiment on myself to change a habit. I decided that I wanted to walk my dog more often. I failed miserably. I realized that I failed because while I wanted to change my habit, I had not really done the work of changing my attitude and heart. Post-experiment, I worked to make these deeper changes and my dog walking habits did indeed shift as well. For many of us, we will have to actively seek to change our attitudes about taking time for silence – to really prioritize that time in our hearts. It is there that we will grow in depth, nurtured by God’s gifts of love - drawing it in from every direction. It’s in receiving this goodness that we truly start to understand and know who God is.

Prayer God of life, nurture us that we may ever grow deeper roots in love.

Wednesday, April 1st

Ezekial 37:1-14

Maggie Leonard

Reflection—v. 10 ‘the breath entered them, they came to life and stood’

Breath prayer was an ancient spiritual practice of the church. One of the earliest of these prayers was known as the ‘Jesus Prayer,’ wherein early practitioners would repeat ‘Jesus, son of God, have Mercy on me’ in rhythm with their breath. At Mercy, Chad turned this phrase into a beautiful sung prayer. I typically think of breath prayers as shorter prayers, one or two words in length, thought in concert with each inhalation and exhalation.

I find that praying in this way slows me down, helping me to focus and find calm.

Interestingly enough, research has shown that changing our breath can also affect our nervous system. When we are stressed out, the sympathetic part of the nervous system is activated (think, the flight, fright, or freeze response) and we get stuck in this space with a faster heart rate and more elevated blood pressure. It is difficult for the brain to switch back to calm after experiencing stress. However, it has been shown that by taking long slow exhales, we can convince the brain that things are calm and peaceful, even in the midst of stressful circumstances. Long slow exhales can literally bring us calm and clarity. This is the place from which we can make good decisions. This is the place where it can become clear what we should stand for. God’s Holy Spirit fills us with breath and brings us clarity. Through prayer, may we discern this Lenten season where and with whom God’s infusion of love calls us to stand.

Prayer (take a deep breath and slowly exhale) Loving God, give us calm and clarity.

Thursday, April 2nd

Romans 8:6-11

Steve Smith

Reflection—v. 6 ‘to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.’

The spirit is the way you feel like God is with you in your heart. The spirit guides you to be more heart-full--not harmful, but heart-full. Being spiritual is a very healthy way, I believe, to live. If God is working through you, you're doing God's work. For me personally, God working through me looks like God not letting me get into physical conflicts. I stay out of jail. I haven't been to jail in seven years now, and that's because I changed my point of view on a lot of things. I used to fight in Little Five Points every day. What changed is that I quit getting into fights. When I left the navy, I was a control freak—I always wanted to fight the meanest person around and I did. I went to jail several times. I had to change that. I worked to clear the garbage out—it was a trashy way of thinking. It was a dark spell, but with Christ you get that little light, and then the Holy Spirit grabs you, and you think ‘Whoa! That's never happened before!’ But it happens a lot now. It's almost like a 6th sense--where most people have five senses, God becomes your sixth sense. It's not perfect perception, but the spirit is a kind of perception from God and it helps you to understand and get right in your life instead of walking and thinking in shadows. I think it's good for our community to study this type of scripture because we can relate to what we might need to change. That way it's not erroneous, and we're more intelligent--it makes us a stronger community to be bonded in scripture.

Prayer God, guide us by your spirit to walk in your light!

Friday, April 3rd

Psalm 130

Isaiah Lewis

Reflection—v. 5 ‘I hope, LORD. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God’s promise.’

I have to admit, I have a contentious relationship with hope. There have been some points in my life when hope felt naïve at best and dangerous at worst. I assumed that anyone who was hopeful about the future simply wasn’t paying attention to the suffering of the human beings all around them. But I also worried that my feelings of hopelessness meant that I didn’t trust God, that I wasn’t faithful, and that maybe that meant God loved me less as a result. This psalm comforts me because its writer begins with not one, but two direct calls for God’s attention to their suffering. They invoke God by name—the LORD, the liberator and life-bringer and system disruptor—and say, ‘Hey, listen up. I need you!’ The psalmist knows all about trouble and knows God sees the mess that they’re in, including the ways in which they may have contributed to it. But they still trust God to listen to them, have mercy on them, and forgive them. And this is a pilgrimage song, which means that while they’re singing about needing God, they’re literally getting closer and closer to the holy place. I know that I need the loving attention of God to save me from the oppression I inflict on myself and other people. Most people do, I think. And my whole being hopes for God’s promise to us all.

Prayer Lord, come meet us in our hope.

Saturday, April 4th

Psalm 130

James King

Reflection—v.1 ‘out of the depth I cry to you, O Lord’

In Psalm 130 it sounds like the people are asking for forgiveness for all the wrong-doings that they've done, and they're waiting on the Lord to answer their prayer. The people have been living their life in sin, and now it's catching up with them. Now they're asking the Lord for forgiveness. They're hoping and they're looking for him, and they're just waiting and waiting for the Lord to answer their prayer because they want to change the way they live. That is what the psalmist is saying: 'Lord, forgive me for all my sins, and help me to change the way I'm living, and give me a new beginning. I put my hope in you, and I'll keep my hope in you until you answer my prayers.' Only the Lord can do that. Sometimes I feel like this too. I feel this way all the time. Sometimes it weighs heavy on me. Sometimes I think about it at night when I'm trying to sleep, and it'll all be on my mind. 'Why do I live like this? I don't have to live like this. Why don't I just change the way I live?' It seems like I'm helpless. Sometimes it weighs heavy on me and it hurts. The writer of psalm 130 is like me, asking for forgiveness, asking God to take me from all of this madness and change the way I live.

Prayer Lord, forgive us for all our sins, and help us to change the ways we're living, and give us new beginnings. We put our hope in you, and we'll keep our hope in you until you answer our prayers.

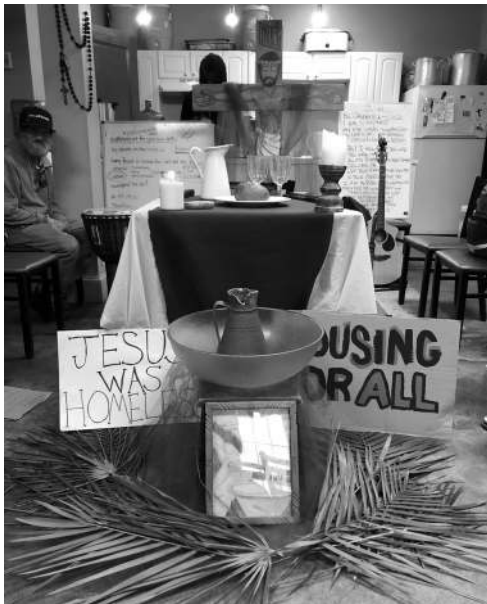
Passion Week Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 22: 14-23:56



Sunday, April 5th—Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Ivan Cooley

Reflection—v. 5 ‘Look, your king is coming to you, humble’

A youth group attended Mercy one day. I was asked to pray at the conclusion of the phenomenal time we had spent together. I ended the prayer with the words “All praise and glory and honor to our King” then I hesitated. In two seconds of hesitation, closed eyes opened, bowed heads raised, trusting eyes became dubious gazes. When I clarified myself by naming Jesus Christ, happiness and good cheer were restored. I found no reason to be alarmed. In all my discussions concerning emperors and kings, about the only thing that can be said that’s satisfactory about them is that some may have been refined in the art of war. In other words, they are excellent at disturbing the peace and balance of humankind through violence and oppression. Real quick! Name one czar, emperor, or king who is remembered for being a humanitarian. I can name only one. He lived roughly two thousand years ago. He traveled all through the land preparing people for life not death. He preached, he taught, he blessed, he healed, he fed, and he clothed—and these acts were considered miracles. The people of Israel were eagerly awaiting their king. The one who would free them from tyranny and oppression from the Roman Empire. He told two of his lieutenants to go into the village and find him a donkey. The donkey symbolizes serving, suffering, peace, and humility. The king lived his life serving and suffering with the peace and humility of a man who knew his destiny. Befitting a king, the lieutenants covered the donkey with their cloaks. When the King arrived in town, prophecy was fulfilled. “Look, your king is coming to you humble and mounted on a donkey.”

Monday, April 6th

Matthew 21:1-11

Ivan Cooley

Reflection—v. 9 ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’

When the people saw the king coming, they spread cloaks on the ground and broke off palm branches and laid them on the ground. They also waved the palm branches in the air to symbolize victory. The people were greeting the king in homage and shouted Hosanna. Hosanna is another way of saying savior, rescue me, or save me. On the king’s advent into town there was bedlam. The whole city was asking “who is this?” This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. That my friends, is the only humanitarian king I can think of. He lived a sinless life. He gave his sinless, blemish free life, so that we can be forgiven. He lived his life with love for humankind. A living, breathing human example of what we should strive for in our spiritual lives. I can tell people a king died so that I can live. In this way he conquered sin. He rose from the dead conquering sine and death. He demanded nothing and compassionately asked us to remember, follow, and believe in him. I certainly do, unquestionably. I wasn’t alarmed because the youth pastors and the youth group knew the same thing I knew. He is the only king worthy to be worshipped in prayer, and it sure is not a human one unless his name is Jesus Christ for he is truly the King of Kings—he has the victory over the enemies of our soul. He wants to see us all flourish like a palm tree in victory.

Prayer Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

Tuesday, April 7th

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Ivan Cooley

Reflection—v. 7 ‘I know that I shall not be put to shame’

I want to be proactive about seeing my family. I chose to give up being around my family because I felt like I was bringing shame to them, and I felt like I wasn't going to change anytime soon. I would like to say that my decision was some kind of noble decision, but it wasn't. It was a decision that was made out of shame and guilt. Believe me, I've felt the ramifications of that. Even though in a sense you could say I gave up on them, they never gave up on me. Even in my worst times my father would write me letters and tell me 'Son, you're smart. You're going to make it. We love you. The door's always open.' You see, that's the way God is too. And if God hadn't left his door open for me, then I wouldn't be in the process of trying to see my parents again. I haven't given up my parents. As much as it doesn't look like it, I do love them. I don't just want to satisfy my own needs and alleviate my own shame and guilt--it's something that I want for them too. I want to see my father and mother smile. I want to reunite with my family, because, you see, that's what we all are in this whole world--one big family. It's my wish and my prayer that everybody can reunite with their loved ones. God did the ultimate--God looked at humankind as his family. Even when we stray away, and maybe not pray or even think about God for a little while, let us not forget that we are a member of God's family.

Prayer: God our parent, when we feel alone, help us to remember we are yours.

Wednesday, April 8th

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 7 ‘I know that I shall not be put to shame’

Shame is something we talk about a lot in our community. While it often seems that healthy foods, affordable housing, and adequate healthcare are scarce, shame comes in abundance out here on the streets. Homelessness, joblessness, mental health, severed relationships, poverty, addiction—they can all carry shame, and the false narratives our society spews only serve to bolster the case that we are failing or that we’ve done something wrong, when really there are larger more systematic problems at play here. Shame can keep us from seeking wellness for ourselves or from forming healthy community. Shame can even keep some of us from learning and growing when we become immobile with fear, not wanting to say or do the ‘wrong’ thing. My firm belief is that God desires to set us free from such shame. When we study scripture together as a community at Mercy, we remind ourselves of this liberating truth. We remind ourselves that though the world may spit at us, strike us, and insult us, God will not put us to shame. God created us, loves us, and desires for us life and well-being, and not the shame that inhibits our thriving. In our community we have a variety of ways of proclaiming how our relationship with God is ‘mess-up safe,’ so there’s no shame. In the moments that I find myself carting around my shame like an unwanted carry-on, I’m thankful for a community that reminds me that my relationship with God, and with them, is safe.



Maundy Thursday Lectionary Readings

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

I Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35



Thursday, April 9th—Maundy Thursday

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Reflection—v. 15 ‘For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.’

At Mercy, every Maundy Thursday we hold a foot washing service. Surprisingly, though I had been a part of the community for some years, I had never attended one of these services until my first year as a pastor to the church. The reaction I had to the experience of washing the feet of my community members was a bit overwhelming. Pastor Chad and I took turns washing each person’s feet, all the while gently speaking to them affirmations of their sacred belovedness and value to the community. Tears of gratitude pooled in my eyes and streaked down my cheeks as the water ran through my fingers and I thought about how blessed I was to know each person—how thankful I was that this community had trusted me with the responsibility of being their pastor. After everyone who desired to participate had their feet washed and dried someone from the community volunteered to wash mine. I remember how calming it felt as they towed my feet, whispering back affirmations for me too. In that simple yet intimate moment I believed the truth of my belovedness. God came to be with us as a human being, an embodied example of the truest love. If ever we forget the truth of God’s great love for each and every one of us, all we must do is look to this example and do as the Christ we follow does—we humbly and graciously care for, serve, and love one another, and let ourselves be cared for, served, and loved in return.

Prayer Servant Lord, whenever we doubt our belovedness or the value of others, may we look to your example.

Good Friday Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrew 10:16-25

John 18:1-19:42



Friday, April 10th—Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 3 ‘He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity’

This is probably one of my favorite days of Holy Week because it honors the suffering that Jesus experienced as well as the pain that we also experience. Pain and suffering are real. Jesus experienced the physical and emotional vulnerabilities associated with being human. His body was susceptible to thirst on the cross, and he felt the pain of sharp objects piercing his flesh. Jesus also experienced the hurt of being rejected by folks who never really saw him as valuable. His disciples fell asleep on him and denied him as he was being questioned by the authorities. He died the dehumanizing death of a criminal. We too feel alone, isolated, and rejected throughout our lives and in moments and seasons of suffering. In our pain we ask questions similar to the Pharisees and High Priests, ‘Why would you let this happen God?’ As this passage intimates, suffering isn’t simply a physical loss—it can be when we feel alone and isolated, it is when we’re struggling with the loss or changing of relationships, it can be a change in our health and the realization that we don’t have what we need in order to recover. It can be heartbreaking, and that is okay. Let us not feel like we must move too quickly from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, because the pain is real.

Prayer Lord, may we find space for suffering and companions willing to journey with us.

Holy Saturday Lectionary Readings

Job 14:1-14

Psalms 31:1-4, 15-16

1 Peter 4:1-8

Matthew 27:57-66



Saturday, April 11th—Holy Saturday

Matthew 27:57-66

Holly Reimer

Reflection—v. 61 ‘Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.’

They sit and wait. I don't know about you, but I am not a patient person. I HATE waiting and as a result am in constant motion. But there is nothing to do on Holy Saturday but wait. We can remember the promises we have been told by Jesus himself, trusting in who he is, waiting for him to return, but we still must wait. And so we wait in our sadness, in moments of despair--waiting. Outside of pastoring at Mercy, I spend my extra time in the hospital serving as a chaplain to those who have lost loved ones. This is the very image that comes to mind – family members and friends sitting at the bedside. The loved one has passed, all efforts for revival have been attempted and it is finished--so they sit, paralyzed by sadness. Parents wait until the very last moment with their dead child. And so we also sit with one another in our community. We sit and wait for test results in the hospital. We sit opposite one another when a beloved member expresses feeling lost, distanced or even oppressed at the hands of God. We sit. In the pain and grief there is often nothing we can do to ‘fix’ the things that afflict, but being present in that very moment is valuable. In moments like these, we sit in the darkness and we wait. There is no pressure to move forward.

Prayer O Lord, we sit and wait for you. Let us be faithful as you have and forever will be.

Easter Sunday Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12



Sunday, April 12th —Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Chad Hyatt

Reflection—v. 18 ‘I have seen the Lord’

The resurrection changes everything. It's earth-shattering, world-upending, and cosmos-transforming. But in that oddly paradoxical way that the gospel holds truth together, it is also human-sized. It fits in our hands. It guides our feet. It opens our eyes. In John's telling, the 'other disciple' who outran Peter sees an empty tomb and discarded grave clothes, and he somehow 'believes.' But John is quick to add that as yet the community did not 'understand the scripture' that a crucified messiah should rise from the dead. Everything changes because the resurrection empowers faith even as we stand at the door of a tomb and look at nothing but emptiness. The resurrection makes it possible for us to believe even when we do not yet understand. That doesn't mean resurrection faith is unthinking or uncritical, refusing to reckon with our all too often wretched reality. Just ask Mary Magdalene. Her faithfulness brought her from the cross to the tomb, but she wasn't looking for anything like the resurrection. Her faithfulness simply wouldn't allow her to abandon Jesus, either in suffering or death—regardless of the very real risk to her own life of such open solidarity with an executed revolutionary. Even after Peter and the other disciple have come and gone from the tomb, she is still there, still grieving in her faith. And it is then, when the one she supposes a gardener and suspects a thief speaks her name, that her grief-stricken faithfulness becomes overjoyed faith full-ness. Last at the cross and first at the tomb, Mary Magdalene becomes the persistent preacher of a resurrection that changes everything. If the dead can be raised, is it really so hard for us to believe that the world could be changed, too?

Prayer Alleluia, sisters and brothers! Rejoice! Jesus is risen—he is risen indeed!

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Mercy Community Church is a grassroots, ecumenical congregation that worships and fellowships in the basement of a big church on a busy street in the heart of Atlanta, GA. We believe that God desires **life, health, dignity,** and **sanctuary** for us all. Whether you are in housing or not, whether you live in our neighborhood or come from far away, and whether you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus or definitely do not, we want to welcome you to come see us anytime as we work to build one another up in beloved community. We are open multiple days of the week for prayer, worship, study, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the sharing of food, clothing, and hospitality. Come see us sometime — our doors are open!

We are able to do our work because of donations. All contributions are tax deductible and may be mailed to PO Box 8676 Atlanta, GA 31106 or may be made through the Paypal account available on our website

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