



AND **PASSION** **PROMISE**

2018 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

NATIONAL CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Welcome to the 2018 Lenten Devotional

National City Christian Church is honored to make this Lenten Devotional booklet available to you. It contains meditations written by members of the National City community, sharing their faith journey during Lent. On Sundays, we asked our writers to talk about the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives. Their meditations offer us opportunities for study and reflection as we explore the theme “Passion and Promise” during Lent.

*Diana Morse
Editor*

Passion and Promise

The weekly scriptures selected for this Lenten Devotional tell the story of the passion and the promise of God in Christ Jesus. These were selected from the Gospel readings of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B. Each devotion struggles with what it means to live a life of faith, and how Jesus’ teachings are as pertinent to our times today as they were 2,000 years ago.

Church members and friends of National City Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are delighted to share these 47 devotions for Lenten observance in 2018. National City Christian Church is a congregation that is characterized by a diversity of opinions on matters of politics, culture, society, theology, and faith. Yet we are united by a bond that is stronger than any of our differences, for each of us is bound together by Christ Jesus. While we recognize a great freedom in believing and living out our belief, we are united with the essential of our faith: Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and he is our Lord and Savior.

Read the devotions, ponder the scriptures, pray the prayers, and sing the hymns. Do not neglect your weekly worship on Sunday. For it is together – in the Spirit of Christian community – that we can live into the passion and promise of God in Christ Jesus.

*Rev. Dr. Stephen W. Gentle
Senior Pastor*

First Week in Lent
40 Days
Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

Ash Wednesday, February 14

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

Forehead ashes on Valentine's Day? Resurrection celebrations on April Fool's Day? It has been 73 years since Lenten season started and ended on such cultural holidays. Yet perhaps such juxtapositions are spiritually appropriate!

Although I always loved the fluff and glitter of Valentine's cutouts, cards, and cupcakes as a kid, it was an adult Valentine's Day I most remember when – suffering from repeated bouts of e-coli – the doctor finally scheduled a serious surgery. It was on Valentine's morning! In approaching days, I felt fear rather than excitement, dread rather than desire for the day; aware of what must be journeyed through before any change in my condition. In Mark's terse, two-verse account of temptations of Christ, we encounter a Jesus so full of the forceful Spirit that entered him at baptism that it immediately pushed him (the Greek verb "ekballo" means literally "drove out") into the wilderness!

In Mark, unlike any other gospel accounts, Jesus never even had the chance to preach a minute or say a sentence before the Spirit compelled him to confront the powers of chaos and threats of wild animals! It is only after such combat that the Jesus presented to us in Mark – who would continue to confront evil forces that threaten bodies and minds through his first public ministry act of an exorcism in 1:21-28 – could say that "the Kingdom is near." Mark's world-changing Jesus can encourage us also to find protection on the other side of challenges in our path, as well!

The Jesus who was filled with a power that held wild beasts at bay can also offer us a way for healing beyond our fears (like those I felt on Valentine's years ago). It offers a promise of a presence that brings safety into the realities and places that threaten us still. And that is no fool's joke – on April 1st or anytime!

Prayer: Spirit power, in this season, enter us forcefully in new ways, even as you entered Jesus at baptism. And, as life pushes us invariably into wilderness encounters – may we know that, amidst chaos, you are the confronting and comforting power that can both calm and clear our path of all anxieties, and protect us in the face of threats.

Sharon Stanley-Rea

Thursday, February 15

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

And there will be a test. What will your answer be?

The voice of God said "This is my Son, with you I am well pleased."

Then, Jesus went into the desert, and was there for 40 days and nights.

The test came there, and the questions came from the expert on tempting people, Satan.

He is the source of our tests too, and the questions are not usually straightforward, clear, single-issue ones. They may be just a little bit out of order, have no visible or identifiable loser. They are often a choice to do something that is just not quite right, but who will ever know?

"Cast yourself down from the precipice." Jesus could depend on God to save him, but declined.

For us, this might be "I left a bit late, but can make it up driving faster."

"One drink more will not make any difference."

"I will find the money for this somehow."

"Turn these stones into bread, and eat." Jesus could have done a miracle, and declined.

"The next lottery ticket will be the big one."

“The guy I owe this money to might die and I will not have to repay it.”

“Become my follower.” Jesus could have transferred allegiance to the underworld, and once again declined.

“I am only borrowing this until I get ahead on my finances.”

“If I buy some drugs, and resell part of them at a higher price, I can enjoy them free.”

“I won’t become addicted; I will stop after a while.”

Drugs are the example here, but there are many other things that we become dedicated to that take us away from an appropriate life as Christians.

Prayer: God, as we consider the choices we have made, and those still in the future, help us to see the guidance that you provided through the life of Jesus, and make decisions that are good for all mankind, not just for us.

Norman Kruse

Friday, February 16

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

In this passage, Jesus is baptized by John and then unceremoniously banished into the wilderness. In his baptism, Jesus is readying himself to do God’s work and God wastes no time in immediately sending Jesus into temptation and isolation.

It’s easy to imagine Jesus’ time in the wilderness as cold and dark as he wanders through uncharted territory. It’s much more difficult to recognize the wilderness in our own lives when we feel isolated and unsure of our direction. Certainly at times it is seemingly impossible to emerge from difficult phases ready to proclaim our continued faith in God, as Jesus does in the passage. Yet, in spite of its difficulties, God asks us to worship him in both our trying and happy moments of life. In return, God promises to be with us always. Whether or not you find yourself in the wilderness this Lent, know that God is with you. Like God sent his Angels to be with Jesus, God sends us his community in church to support us when we need it most.

Prayer: God, help us to recognize the wilderness in our own lives and give us the strength to emerge from these difficult times proclaiming our faith in you.

Ana-Elisa Gentle

Saturday, February 17

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15

Do you remember the time you were passionate about a particular moment in your life? Perhaps starting a new career, moving to a new location, or seeking more understanding. I remember many passion moments in my life and one thing I usually come away with, when looking back, is the determination and desire that I had to make dreams into reality. I’m sometimes in awe, saying, did I really made that happen? What guided me to dare to do such a thing? It had to be something other than myself; there had to be some force to help me along the way.

That was the prevailing thought I had in reflecting on this scripture of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry. We find Christ, now of age, coming for his baptism, and just like our baptism, this is a calling for Jesus. A force was beginning to guide him as it called on us when we dedicated our lives to God. We learn that his driving spirit descended from Heaven itself and God spoke. He had a purpose to achieve on Earth and with passion you want to put all your heart and soul in accomplishing the task. Immediately, the Spirit led him in the desert for 40 days. These are the moments that truly make passion and desire stronger when it is put to the test. Your ambition and your spirit grow and mature. Jesus’ choice to be obedient to God was the start of his journey. His faith and trust made him ready for the challenges that lay ahead. Even when he learns that his own cousin John the Baptist is arrested while he was away, Jesus did not become wary or even second-guess what he was getting into, but he embraced his responsibility in this new role.

We all had that guiding force and spirit to drive our passion to turn dreams and hopes to reality and possibilities. Let us not grow wary or second-guess in our 40 days but to follow our passion to walk with Jesus.

Prayer: Spirit of passion, be with us on this Lenten journey and throughout our lives, giving our all, hearts and souls to you, our God and our Friend.

Nicolas Bullock

Sunday, February 18

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives.

*Sing unto the Lord a new song,
For the Lord has done marvelous things.
Psalm 98:1*

When our congregation was celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation last October, our Minister of Music, Michael McMahon, shared an interesting fact with our choir. Prior to the Reformation, music at Catholic services was only performed by professional musicians. Those attending the services had the role of spectators rather than participants. With his great gift for hymn writing, Martin Luther (1483-1546) revolutionized that dynamic. Suddenly congregations had the gift of great soaring hymns to sing, beloved hymns which we continue to sing today, hallmarked by his classic "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Our own church has a long tradition of using music to create a rich and interactive worship experience. The Sunday order of service interweaves hymns and congregational singing throughout the service. Music moves us through the whole range of spiritual experiences, from praise to reflection to assuredness in going forth as people of faith to meet the issues of our day.

On a personal note, I especially relish the opening hymn, which resonates with joyful praise. (Don't tell Rev. Gentle, but oftentimes after processing down the aisle with the Sanctuary Choir, singing a great opening hymn such as "Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee," to the sound of a full pipe organ and robust congregational singing, I feel I have experienced a rich time of spiritual fulfillment, and can go home at that point, having been fully replenished and refreshed.)

Rev. Beau Underwood has rightly said, "We learn our faith from our hymns." Hymns restore, comfort, and renew us. They are a vital part of our faith journey.

Choir Prayer:

***Grant, Oh Lord,
That what we sing with our lips,
We may believe in our hearts,
And what we believe in our hearts,
We may show forth in our lives,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.***

Kathleen Burger-Gerada

**Second Week in Lent
Incredible News
Scripture: Mark 8:31-38**

Monday, February 19

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

When we think of the gospels as "good news," we rarely think what it must have been like for Jesus' followers before they knew about his death and resurrection. How would they have coped with the devastating news of Christ's death? How would they have understood his resurrection, unless Jesus himself had told them it would happen?

Jesus was bringing his followers good news when he spoke of being rejected, killed, and rising again on the third day. Yet Peter could not hear it. Peter, as so many of us might, wanted his savior to be victorious and rule the day conspicuously in a humanly triumphant way.

Jesus had a different version of victory in mind.

What Jesus offered his followers then, and still offers us today, is the victory of knowing the Risen Christ in our own hearts and minds. What good would a political victory do, if we couldn't then know Christ as part of God's still, small voice encouraging us to make more moral choices when the choices before us are not easy.

Would we rather gain a worldly successful life, but lose our life with Christ and with God? If we did that, we might be hanging out with other people who have no moral compunctions, and we might end up suffering rather than experiencing Christ's resurrection at all. Jesus invites us to let go of life that is lived for ourselves, and to discover the joy of living life with Christ, and that life lasts forever.

Prayer: Everliving and Everloving God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ and his desire to reassure us that God's ways are better for us than we can even yet imagine. Help us to live in this reassurance that Christ is with us through the challenges of our lives, and that if we will just trust and walk in his ways, the resurrection will become real, even for us, and even in our lives.

Carol Richardson

Tuesday, February 20

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8:34.

Early one morning my phone rang waking me up from a sound sleep. It was a request for a ride to a doctor's appointment, needed because their car was not available for some reason. I was immediately put in a position where I would have to decide to stay within my comfort zone or to obey what I felt was a higher calling to be a true disciple and help this person out. I was reminded instantly of what I had told some people at church recently, "The word 'convenient' must be removed from the vocabulary of anyone who would consider themselves to be a true disciple."

Each and every day we are all confronted with situations like mine. Can we truly say, "Thy will be done" or do we cave in to our own personal fleshly desires and whims. I continue to learn and practice this principle knowing that having ability is one thing, having availability is quite another. Are we truly available to God or are we trying to preserve the flesh forgetting that "except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit." John 12:24.

Over the years I have discovered that it is very liberating to "let go and let God." Now I see that as a result of taking up my own cross my life has become a daily series of "divine appointments" because I am liberated from my own willfulness and open to the wondrous ways the Lord will open doors for me, giving me new privileges and opportunities to represent Jesus Christ to people who meet me.

The life of a believer and follower of Jesus Christ will always require strength, stamina, and resolve. However, I find that I become stronger all the time as a result of my surrender. I consider the words of Phillips Brooks who penned "O Little Town of Bethlehem." He is quoted as saying, "Do not pray for an easy life, pray to be stronger. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but pray for powers equal to your tasks."

Prayer: Dear God, the strength we need is completely available to us as we surrender our hearts and will to thee. May our service be marked by this desire to serve by taking up our cross daily as our blessed savior Jesus Christ has called us to do.

Paul Heffron

Wednesday, February 21

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

Too many times in the gospels, the disciples are only looking at the most obvious effects of Jesus' ministry. They don't want to upset the existing religious order and yet they seem to think that Jesus will walk right into power as the Messiah. Part of the confusion goes back to differing Messianic messages in the Old Testament. The Hebrew people are awaiting a Messiah of Power and Might to overthrow the domination of their oppressors. The current power centers are the Roman Empire and their puppet Hebrew government.

Jesus is doing more than teaching and healing, he is undermining the existing order without claiming to be the next Hebrew King. He is fulfilling the words of the prophets who revealed a Suffering Servant who reveals God's word for another Kingdom. He rebukes the disciples who still haven't grasped the enormity of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The Suffering Servant must be rejected in order to fulfill the Word of the prophets. In this version the Messiah does not lead the Hebrew nation to dominate the world. Instead he must suffer and die and his followers must be willing to preach and heal the people, knowing they too might suffer as the Son of God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to understand your intentions for our lives. We too often expect to be rewarded for success and to be admired for our deeds. It is our need to follow your example and be a light to the world that makes us Followers of Christ. Change our hearts so that we may be instruments to your purpose. The world is full of accomplishment and loss. Help us discern the difference so that others may see God through our actions.

Barbara Boward

Thursday, February 22

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

In this passage Jesus is telling his disciples of his forthcoming return to Heaven. As he is preparing his most devoted followers for the Christian journey they must travel without him, he is ensuring they know the struggles in telling others I have decided to follow Jesus.

Many of us grew up singing a hymn whose lyrics included "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." These lyrics were first written by Thomas Shepherd after preaching about Simon Peter. The name Simon was replaced with Jesus. This original hymn lyrics were "Shall Simon bear the Cross alone, and other Saints be free? Each Saint of thine shall find his own, and there is one for me." This shows us a perfect example of how even though Jesus died on the cross for our sins as believers we still have a cross which we must bear as we travel through life as a religious being. Can we proudly state I want to be a follower of Christ and declare to the world I want to be one of his disciples without being ashamed or possess a fear of judgment from those who do not fully believe?

When it comes to bearing the cross, this is not something we fully consider when making the decision to accept Christ as our Lord and Savior and always abiding by the commandments dictated in the Bible. The suffering of bearing the cross is only for those who have chosen to believe and accept God as the all-powerful and mighty creator he is. Everyone who believes will have their own cross to bear in their own way. Your cross may be more difficult than others to endure without having the support of other believers.

Surrounding yourself with other believers who are encouraging you will make your burden easier to bear, knowing you are not alone in this struggle. Being around like-minded individuals who support your decision to follow Christ without question and who can understand the struggles between wanting to follow the crowd, just do whatever you want, or face ridicule from those who chose to live their life differently will lighten your load, but you still must bear your cross alone. Many people are persecuted solely for their religious beliefs, which is a form of bearing your cross. Just know that whatever your cross is, God will provide you with more than enough strength to bear the burden.

You must trust with your whole heart in there being a reason for your suffering and through it all, things will work out for your good as you are continuously seeking to do God's will.

Your journey through life will be full of many disappointments, sorrows, heartaches, trials, and tribulations, but through it all your faith in God will carry you from day to day. Things will not always turn out the way we expect and sometimes those who you thought would understand you the most will make your cross the hardest to bear. Life will always be full of dangers and temptations, but when we give our life to Christ and dedicate our life to the uplifting of his kingdom, we do so knowing the cross is placed upon our back right then and there. Our ability to resist the pressures of life and not diminish our morals, convictions, and standards in the face of adversity will create the cross we must bear as we proudly proclaim we are not ashamed to stand up being counted as one who will take up the cross for his sake and the sake of the gospel.

Prayer: Father God, we come before you thanking you for the cross you bore for our sins. We appreciate the teachings you shared with us in the Bible which prepare us to live our lives daily without being ashamed of the God we serve. We ask that you allow us to bear this cross in a way that others might see your glory within us as we travel this earthly journey doing as we know how to be a worthy vessel suitable for your use. May your will always be done letting our light so shine that others may see your glory even in the midst of personal distress brought upon us solely for not being ashamed for who you are and all that you have promised those who believe in you while in this generation will receive in glory. It's in your name we pray.

Travaughn J. Lovick

Friday, February 23

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

This scripture is a stark reminder of Jesus' simple instruction to us all that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Indeed focusing on seemingly undeniable comforts, riches, and wealth is pointless when we are clearly told how we must live in order to follow Him.

Unfortunately, it is not our nature to want to deny ourselves or those we love. It is human nature to want to be prosperous, successful, and influential, though it is clear that prosperity, success, and influence are not the priorities of Jesus. He implores us to serve, not to be served; to pursue Him and his ways, not earthly pursuits; to be proud and loud in our devotion; and not ashamed of Him or his words.

There is so much in our sinful generation that can distract and deny our commitment to God that we must be deliberate in finding moments to walk in His path of empathy, tolerance, and generosity than down an alternative path of indifference, intolerance, and accumulation.

Prayer: God, as we pray for peace to reign in ourselves, in our families, at our places of work, and in these turbulent times facing our nation and world, please guide me, my thoughts, and my actions as I strive to make your priorities my own.

Sarah McCue

Saturday, February 24

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38

Verse 36 has been a part of my life seemingly forever, but this version is not the way it is in my consciousness. For that version, I had to search my home for a King James Bible with the familiar verse "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" In a place where I protect my family memorabilia I found two – my mother's well-worn and my more pristine one.

There are lots of descriptions of “soul,” but for me, it is my essence. Deep down, it is who I am...and I protect it. That verse has guided me as I was growing up and making choices – finding a way to earn money to go to college, deciding to go to college away from the D.C. area, choosing a major from the plethora of choices at Ohio State University, finding an exciting home in journalism school as city editor of the college newspaper, and then the job-seeking days of newspaper life.

Once in the workforce, though, we witness – and experience – siren calls to us and those around us. Ambition, fame, domination, glitz, greed, prestige, temptation, wealth...

If we build our life listening to Jesus and following his counsel we can be protected. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” gives us a framework...a brake sometimes...a “timeout” to think about what we are doing and why.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for this Lenten time, to dig into the tenets of our faith, to remind ourselves of its depth, and to feel the embrace of your love as we find our way through our lives, in exciting times and in challenging ones.

Diana Morse

Sunday, February 25

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives.

PEACE! BE STILL!

Page 221 (African American Heritage Hymnal)

*Master, the tempest is raging!
The billows are tossing high!
The sky is over shadowed with blackness,
No shelter or help is nigh;
Carest Thou not that we perish?
How canst Thou lie asleep,
When each moment so madly is threatening
A grave in the angry deep?
The winds and the waves shall obey Thy will.
Peace be still! Peace be still!
Peace be still! Peace be still!
Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea,
Or demons, or men, or whatever it be
No water can swallow the ship where lies the Master of ocean and earth and skies;
They all shall sweetly obey Thy will!
Peace! Peace, be still!*

We, personally and as a nation, are going through some turbulent times and are in need of a spiritual movement that heightens our faith in God and to know that He is always there to guide us if we only listen. When I think of the lyrics of “Peace! Be Still!” it makes me look back at all the storms that have been endured in 2017:

- **The tempest is raging** – *Hurricanes: Harvey, Irma and Jose*
- **Billows are tossing high and the sky is over shadowed with blackness** – *California and Montana fires*
- **No shelter or help is nigh** – *Immigrants being turned away or returned to their countries by the USA*
- **A grave in the angry deep** – *Migrants drowning in ships trying to seek refuge in the USA*

Whether our storms are financial, racial, political, ethical, cultural and/or climatical...God is still God. Through all the storms of life...God is still God. He is with us and guiding us but we just need to be still and listen.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for allowing us to see one more year and for calming the storms in our lives as we strive to be better listeners, parishioners, and followers of You. In Jesus' name we pray.

Lolita Neal

**Third Week in Lent
Turning the Tables
Scripture: John 2:13-22**

Monday, February 26

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Today's passage may be uncomfortable for some; it should be. In it we find what some might call an upset or angry Jesus; I just see him as being real. You see, when Jesus enters the temple he's not only entering the religious center of Jewish life but also the center of Israel's political system and economy. According to Dr. Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., "When we look at the practices that went on at the Jerusalem Temple in Jesus' day, it is clear why Jesus was moved to invoke God's judgment on it. Its activities and the priests who administered them had become inextricably intertwined with systemic appropriation and the goods and resources of the "least of these" while hiding behind "the Temple of the Lord."

In essence, what Jesus did was "give a voice to the voiceless." "Publicly and powerfully he articulated the people's unspoken anger and resentment, not just to give vent to their feelings, but to empower them by giving them the inspiring thrill of hearing their own thoughts and spoken by someone just like them."

In 2018 very little has changed. Every day we see the rich and powerful continue to amass more and more while the poor continue to be trampled upon by the actions and policies of the political and religious "elite." As followers of Christ we are called to something different. Like Jesus, we are called to action and to "turn over the tables" of the modern day temples and centers of power. We do this in both word and deed by expressing our righteous indignation and committing ourselves to stand against the evils of Empire and the systemic injustices that continue to oppress and marginalize far too many today in society.

Prayer: God of justice and righteousness, help me not just believe in Jesus but to be more like him. On this day help me be more committed to stand against the unjust laws and policies that affect the poor and marginalized in society as well as those that enact them. May my love for "the least of these," who are my sisters and brothers, lead me to "turn over tables" of injustice through your Son and our exemplar of love and justice in the world, Jesus the Christ.

CJ Rodriguez

Tuesday, February 27

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Our scripture this week is one that stands out among the other stories we hear about Jesus' life. We often see Jesus as a mild-mannered teacher, speaking in parables, or performing miracles. Rarely do we see Jesus lose his cool and take obvious action! This must be serious! But let's look at what made Jesus so angry.

Considering the historical context. Passover was a huge, week-long celebration that took place every year at the temple in Jerusalem. All Jewish males were expected to make a pilgrimage to the temple. Visitors were required to pay a temple tax and provide a sacrifice. Of course the temple tax had to be in local currency and animals had to be healthy. To aid in fulfilling these requirements there were money changers and vendors set up in the Court of Gentiles on the temple grounds. This all may seem pretty reasonable on the surface. The visitors had made long journeys from places

with different currency. Perhaps their animals had gotten sick or lost along the way. The money changers were a greedy bunch and would take advantage of visitors by charging steep fees for currency exchange. There were so many other vendors that the Court of Gentiles was terribly overcrowded. It was hardly a good environment to prepare one for worship. As a Jewish man himself, the necessity of these “services” surely was clear to Jesus, but his anger grew as he saw how out of hand things had become. The focus was no longer on worshipping God. The focus was now on commerce and profit. These people had completely lost sight of what this week was all about!

We no longer make annual pilgrimages to make sacrifices to atone for our sins. We don't have to pay a tax or change our currencies to enter the church. Nor do we pass through a busy marketplace before we enter our place of worship. But what can we learn from Jesus' anger in this situation? What is our intent in coming to our place of worship and being part of a Christian community? The church can offer a lot of opportunities. Friendships, social events, networking, career opportunities – all of these things seem innocent enough and we all have no doubt benefitted from at least one of them in some way. The caution we must take is to not let these activities overshadow, or become our primary purpose, for being involved in the church. There may not be any tables to overturn or animals to drive out, but we must make an effort to keep our focus on what Jesus wants for his followers – to worship and praise the Heavenly Father!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, during this Lenten season, help us to examine the ways we have strayed from worship. Forgive us for losing sight of why we long to be a part of a faithful Christian community. Bring our focus back to you and to your Son Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he made for our sins.

Natalie Carson

Wednesday, February 28

Scripture: John 2:13-22

I always find this scripture interesting as I try to visualize the temple with all of this commerce in a place supposedly built for worship.

How should God's house be used outside of a worship service? Jesus was clearly disgusted that his Father's house was not being used as it was intended after it took 46 years to build. Anyone utilizing a church facility should ponder the question of “Is what I am doing in the Lord's house pleasing to him?”

It is next to impossible to drive anywhere in Washington, D.C., without seeing a crane looming overhead for the construction of a new building. I have watched the slow progress of a 182-unit condominium building slowly rising from the ground across the street from me – wrought with delays in order to properly lay the foundation after finding more water than expected when the initial soil samples and surveys were conducted.

Jesus spoke of building his church on solid ground – that all other ground was sinking sand. In the same light Jesus foretold of his impending death, only to have his new temple raised in three days – built on the solid ground of the sacrifice of his life so that his believers might have everlasting life.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ, who worked tirelessly to provide lessons for us to know how to go out into this world and to live our life so that it would be pleasing to you.

Cecil Talbott

Thursday, March 1

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Many Jews expected the Messiah to lead an armed rebellion against the Roman Empire and the Jewish authorities who helped that empire. Jesus, instead, taught his followers to love God, to love their enemies, and to turn the other cheek when wronged.

As this passage illustrates, these peaceful principles do not preclude less violent resistance to oppressive powers. In a display of righteous indignation, Jesus drove merchants and money changers from the temple courts with a whip. What violation inspired this anger? "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"

I believe that Jesus' objection to turning the temple into a market goes beyond indignation at the sacrilege involved. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus made clear that justice is an element of loving one's neighbor. He also consistently portrayed the pursuit of money and power as a barrier to justice and to serving God.

The Jews coming to Jerusalem to honor God in the temple needed animals for ritual sacrifice and money for contributions. The merchants and money changers exploited their piety for financial profit. Jesus' indignation against both the sacrilege and the exploitation flows directly from gospel teachings on justice and care for the poor and lowly.

Further, Jesus' actions should remind us that acting from love may require active resistance to injustice.

Prayer: Lord, help us to discern injustice in ourselves and in our society and lead us in seeking loving and respectful ways to seek justice and to resist injustice.

Sara Ann Ketchum

Friday, March 2

Scripture: John 2:13-22

As I approach Thomas Circle and our beautiful church comes into view, it is with great anticipation knowing that I will soon enter this sacred place where I have been worshipping, singing, learning, and serving for many years now. My passion only seems to grow stronger as I even more than ever understand the truth of Psalm 127:1, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it."

Being old enough to remember when most stores and places of business were closed on Sundays, I still wonder why others do not share my passion and fervent desire to put work and shopping aside for awhile and gather with the people of God for a beautiful service of worship. Perhaps some were never exposed to this kind of life and have been blinded by the god of this world, thinking that money and self-exaltation are the only way to happiness. I will probably never understand this completely but I do know what has made the difference for me. I have tasted and seen that the Lord is good as Psalm 34:8 describes. My appetite for the things of God was awakened in me at an early age and I never found anything in this world that can compare to having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and his atonement. We emphasize this a lot more in our church during this Lenten season as we approach the Easter celebration that follows. It is a celebration of the gift of eternal life made possible by Jesus Christ.

Knowing what a great gift was given to us and yet taken so lightly must have grieved the heart of Jesus to the point that he turned over the tables. It's one of the more dramatic examples of Jesus expressing anger that causes me to examine my own heart to see if there are any tables in my life that should be turned over.

Prayer: Dear God, may we never take for granted the place that has been prepared for us. May we revere the house of God and the sacred things we have been blessed with because of our redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul Heffron

Saturday, March 3

Scripture: John 2:13-22

The Passover celebration took place yearly at the temple in Jerusalem. Jewish males were expected to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during this time.

The temple was always crowded with out-of-town visitors. The religious leaders allowed money changers and merchants to set up booths in the court of the Gentiles, as a convenience for the worshippers and as a way to make money for the upkeep of the temple. But this was not the purpose for visiting the temple, and this is why Jesus was angry.

The temple tax had to be paid in local currency, so the money changers charged exorbitant exchange rates. Also, the people were required to make sacrifices for sins. Because of the long journey the people could not bring their own animals, so the merchants charged higher prices for their animals. They were making a mockery of God's house of worship.

Jesus teaches us that there is a difference between uncontrolled rage and righteous indignation – yet both are called anger. It is right to be angry about injustice and sin; it is wrong to be angry over trivial personal offenses.

Jesus made a whip and chased out the money changers. He took the evil acts in the temple as an insult against God. He was consumed with anger for such flagrant disrespect for God.

When Jesus was asked, "What sign can you show as authority to do this?" He said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." Jesus was not talking about the temple made of stones, but about his body.

Those listening didn't realize it, but Jesus was greater than the temple. His words would be understood by his disciples after his resurrection. Christ's fulfillment of this prediction of his resurrection became the strongest proof for his claim to be from God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, bring us closer to that perfection from which you emanated.

Warren Brooks

Sunday, March 4

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives.

Each time I thought that the hymn choices had been narrowed down, a different song came to mind. About twenty years ago, when I decided to resign from my full-time job at a computer technology firm and accept a full-time music ministry position, the federal agency division where I worked as a contractor held a farewell reception. My remarks began, "It pays to serve Jesus." It was not "politically correct"; nonetheless, it was – and is true.

It Pays to Serve Jesus

The service of Jesus true pleasure affords,
In Him there is joy without an alloy;
'Tis heaven to trust Him and rest on His words:
It pays to serve Jesus each day.

Refrain:

It pays to serve Jesus, it pays ev'ry day,
It pays ev'ry step of the way;
Tho' the pathway to glory
may sometimes be drear,
You'll be happy each step of the way.

As I wrote this, I thought of an acquaintance, Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, civil rights activist, retired pastor who died on January 23. He and I were part of the team of ministers and musicians who worked together to produce The African American Heritage Hymnal. I pulled one of his books from the shelf – "Somebody's Calling My Name."* As I was quickly fanning through the pages, I stopped.

"The music of the Black church often verbalized poetically that which the individual has difficulty articulating. It is not uncommon to hear, in the everyday speech of the faithful, the idiomatic use of snatches of lines of hymns and Spirituals... When some occurrence takes place that smacks of good fortune, a frequent response in explanation is, 'It pays to serve Jesus every day.'"

Prayer: Lord, as this new day begins, help me in my thoughts and actions to intentionally serve Jesus with gladness.

Valeria Foster

*Walker, Wyatt Tee, "Somebody's Calling My Name": Black Sacred Music and Social Change. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979.

**Fourth Week in Lent
Love Forever
Scripture: John 3:14-21**

Monday, March 5

Scripture: John 3:14-21

A biblical verse many children first commit to memory is the essence of Christianity found in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Of all scripture, this one verse represents the embodiment of belief: (1) God loves; (2) He gave his only Son; (3) that whoever believes should not perish, but (4) shall have eternal life. The love of God is forever with us reminding each believer that God will always be with us. Doesn't this resonate when we examine anew Matthew 28:20, reflecting on "Those departed souls we love are with the Lord... and the Lord has promised to be with us," with special emphasis on "Behold, I am with you always." Another way to cast a new light on this passage is to cap this thought with the truism that if our loved ones are with Him and He is with us, they cannot be far away.

So embrace through faith what is expressed in the words of John Oxenham, who penned the thought –

Not for one single day
Can I discern my way
But this I surely know –
Who gives the day
Will show the way,
So I securely go.

For this is how love that abides forever is best expressed for those in this world as surely as those in the world that is to come.

Prayer: Help us to recall, O God, that in true love we recognize an effort made for the happiness of others that lifts us above ourselves. So may love be around us in all circumstances just as we were taught in learning to sing the well-known children's hymn, "Jesus loves me this I know..."

Bill Brown

Tuesday, March 6

Scripture: John 3:14-21

Forever. That's a hard word for us - humans - to wrap our brains around. In our lives, nothing lasts forever.

All good things must come to an end: vacations, Christmas, dessert.

We lose jobs, relationships, loved ones. Letting go and saying goodbye become second nature.

But in this week's passage, we are promised forever. Eternal life, beyond this earthly existence.

In John 3:16 – the often quoted, widely repeated scripture – we find some of the Bible's most reassuring and comforting concepts: love, giving, believing, eternity.

We learn of God's selfless love after he gives us his only Son. We learn that through believing, we will have eternal life.

Nevertheless, digesting that isn't always easy.

I lost my only brother last year. He was a passionate follower of Christ. While I believe he's now resting in the arms of the Lord, processing eternity is difficult.

It's hard to imagine what eternal life looks like.

Perhaps this week's reading gives us a glimpse: "...the light has come into the world...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."

In dark moments, we are called to the light. The light always overcomes the darkness. Eternal life is living in the light with the Lord. Forever.

Prayer: Dear God, Your love is forever. We thank you for sending us your only Son. Through him, we are saved and promised eternal life. Help us remember to always walk in faith and seek the light.

Aixa Diaz

Wednesday, March 7

Scripture: John 3:14-21

This week's passage is challenging, even though portions have been held up as a beacon of hope for a challenging world, particularly at sporting events. I see God's love and a call to responsibility, though it can read like the only possibilities are love and condemnation. I see a timely, and timeless, call to action. God's love for us is forever, but it is our actions that show the way.

Prayer: Lord of all who has shown us endless love, we thank you for your sacrifice. Help us to honor that with our actions in a challenging world, to be your beacon of hope.

Alan Williams

Thursday, March 8

Scripture: John 3:14-21

This Gospel of John 3:14-21 is a bit challenging for me. In this encounter the Gospel of John has sharp divisions between believers and non-believers, saved and condemned, people who love darkness rather than light do evil and not good. It feels like some are being tossed to the curb and the rest are surrounded by grace. How can that be? If God is truly with each of us all the time then how else do we respond but to love and cherish the world and every creature in it as beloved of God?

If we take this response seriously, it will be an all-consuming challenge. We might take it in the direction of global warming and care for the earth. Or we might tackle poverty, healthcare, education, civil rights, or hunger in light of the abundance we enjoy and powerfully advocate for peaceful resolutions of differences. I have been a passionate advocate for "doing the right thing" for my entire life. I will continue to believe that God is here with each and every one of us, no matter what, no matter when.

Prayer: We are facing some tough times in our country and in our world right now. Please bless us with your grace, God, and stand with us as we find our courage to speak your message of love, unity, and civility. With your help we will get it done.

Mary Paradise

Friday, March 9

Scripture: John 3:14-21

*Indeed, God [sent his son into the world] in order that the world might be saved through him...
John 3:17*

Those who participate in sports know that in the final moments, one often wishes the game could be extended – other days you wish the game had finished at half-time. Marathon runners speak of “hitting the wall.” In this competition with themselves their body rebels and declares the competition finished – only their spirit runs on.

Sometimes one wonders if God, watching over his creation, ever tires of humankind in our folly. All those foolish things we do that would disappoint God. John assures us that that is not the case – that God’s love is forever. As Annie sang “the sun will come up tomorrow...” the laws of nature hold, flowers always bloom anew each spring, and in countless other ways God will continue his love for us. And John assures us that the supreme proof of his eternal love is that he sent his son, Jesus, to walk with us forever.

Prayer: Thank you God for your constant love.

John Scott and Beverly Williams

Saturday, March 10

Scripture: John 3:14-21

What wondrous love is this oh my soul, oh my soul... Have you ever pondered while singing this familiar Lenten song, how one describes God’s love? Do the overused and insufficient words of “super,” “great,” “wonderful,” and “amazing” ring a bit too hollow to describe God’s everlasting love for creation, including you and me(!)?

Suppose a daughter were to ask her parent to describe God’s love so simply she could understand it through a child’s perspective. Maybe the simplest answer would be: “God’s love is a gift that you didn’t ask for, expect, or deserve, just to enjoy.” We all understand the joy of receiving a gift at Christmas or birthdays. But the unmeasurable and indescribable joy this gift bestows to us is our one, Holy God incarnate, Jesus, who came to show once and for all, love in perfection – love forever!

Jesus didn’t come with a switch and paddle to blame, punish, and persecute us; Jesus came offering love, forgiveness, and redemption through God’s eternal grace. Oh yes, we might have to walk our own Via Dolorosa, but we walk that pathway with the risen Christ as our guide.

Prayer: Everlasting, loving God, we remember your gift of Jesus this Lenten week and meditate upon the penned words of our 19th-century Disciples forebear, Barton W. Stone:

***Behold the love, the grace of God,
displayed in Jesus’ precious blood;
my soul’s on fire, it yearns to prove
the fullness of redeeming love.***

***The cross I view – O wondrous love!
My sins expire, my fears remove;
my native enmity is slain.
I’m reconciled – I’m born again.***

***Our God is love – O leap my soul!
Let warm hosannas roll!
Love gave a Son to save our race,
and Jesus died through sov’reign grace!***

***What love has done, sing earth around!
Angels prolong the eternal sound!
Lo, Jesus bleeding on the tree!
There, there, the love of God I see.***

Sunday, March 11

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives.

While I'm sure that I sang "Happy Birthday" and various nursery songs in pre-school, the first real memory that I have of singing was at about age six in the children's choir of my church. We sang "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and I was thrilled to be in my choir robe lifting my voice with the other children. I knew that I was praising God, but wondered who this Emmanuel could be. The words "and ransom captive Israel" were beyond my understanding. I remember learning quite a bit by asking about those words!

So for me, one of the thrills of singing and listening to sacred music is how that music focuses my mind on sacred concepts and truly brings them to life. Speaking the sacred Word provides a more powerful connection than simply reading it, and singing the Word is more powerful still!

A favorite hymn of mine is "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Based on the 90th Psalm, its verses describe the eternal majesty of our God, and God's abiding love and attention to us. In contrast to God's eternity is humanity's fragile mortality: "Time like an ever rolling stream, soon bears us all away, we fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day." Despite our ephemeral nature, we are assured that our loving God is protecting and guiding us, and will keep us in that Holy Presence always. When I sing these powerful words as a declaration of praise to our loving God, it opens my heart and my mind to these eternal truths.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at this season of Lent, may we reflect on Your abiding love, and Your willingness to suffer crucifixion and death so that we might be saved and dwell with You forever. "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home."

Kent Woods

Fifth Week in Lent *Troubled Hearts* Scripture: John 12:20-33

Monday, March 12

Scripture: John 12:20-33

In all likelihood the Greeks in this story were Gentiles who had been attracted to Judaism but hadn't quite gone all-in. They had traveled to Jerusalem to worship at festival time, but because of their status as outsiders, they were restricted to the Court of the Gentiles – close to the action, but not quite fully part of it.

These Greeks knew their place, showing enormous respect even in approaching Jesus. Rather than presuming to speak with him directly, they took advantage of intermediaries Philip and Andrew. In his response, Jesus tosses aside protocol and cuts directly to the chase. He leaps over their request to see him and invites them to go further and follow.

Be sure to read the fine print on this invitation. Jesus is calling these seekers to follow him into his "hour," the time in which he is to be "lifted up" and offer his very life. Jesus is about to become that grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit. "Whoever serves me must follow me," he tells us, calling us to follow him on the way of self-sacrificing love, to lose our life in order to "keep it for eternal life."

We come each Sunday to the Lord's Table, hoping like the Greeks to see Jesus. As we share the bread and cup and remember his love even unto death, we also accept once again our own call to follow him in embracing the cross.

Do you want to see Jesus? Be careful what you ask for!

Prayer:

**God, Abba of Jesus,
we thank you for the self-sacrificing love of Jesus your Son,
who laid down his very life for others.
Help us to follow him faithfully,
to become like him persons for others,
grains of wheat that die
to bring forth rich fruit for the life of the world.**

J. Michael McMahon

Tuesday, March 13

Scripture: John 12:20-33

Jesus shares the parables to illustrate that we must sacrifice in life to death. That's heavy stuff. The promise He makes is the most powerful thing I can imagine; in death, we will be reborn into someone forever enduring. Endure now and we get to endure forever. That sounds unbelievable.

Let's look again at the scripture. He uses something as simple and intricate as a grain of wheat to highlight His point. As a single grain it has only that value. If it falls and dies it germinates and allows more grain growth. We are the same. We must die in our old selves before becoming new with Him.

There's great power in a promise, at least when that promise comes from God Almighty. He never forgets, nor waivers. Why then do we have such trouble accepting His Word? This is something about which I frequently pray, to accept what I know because what my human mind is telling me contradicts what I know from Him. My desires, impatience, and ego get in the way because I go towards the path I want.

While an expert I am not, but I do know that this summer I was at a low and prayed to Him that I would accept His answers, even if not the ones I wanted. I promised also to accept His timing and the path He wanted for my life. It wasn't until then that the door opened to the path I had been trying for months to walk. He's funny like that. He waited for me to wait on Him. He kept His promises!

Prayer: Father God, please remind me of Your promises and forgive me when my human desire for instant gratification causes disbelief. I know You are the One true God and I will keep my eyes on You as a constant reminder of Your goodness. Thank you for being on this journey with me and calling me Your child.

Jessica Max

Wednesday, March 14

Scripture: John 12:20-33

Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say – "Father save me from this hour?" No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour. John 12:27

None of us likes to go through a trial or a test. We think that having a carefree life would be the ultimate ideal in how we should experience life in its fullness. However, it is only when we learn to embrace the bitter with the sweet that we appreciate how blessed we really are as we learn that every adversity carries within it the seed of an equivalent or even greater benefit. It is this seed that holds the essence of this life and our eternal place that Jesus says he has gone to prepare for each and every one of us.

I seek to find the lesson that is to be learned as a challenging situation comes my way. Jesus sets this example for us in this passage when he faces head-on the reality of why he came into this world. He came into this world to save us from our sins and to open the door to a relationship with God that would be eternal in a place that is too beautiful to describe with human language. This understanding puts all things into perspective when the thought of taking up my own cross to follow Jesus seems

unpleasant and unappealing. Now I can see that this life is not a sprint but indeed a marathon that I must run with patience one day at a time.

All of us have a great calling and a purpose. I find great joy every day as I seek the Lord while he may be found. Only in Jesus Christ can our troubled hearts find hope and healing for our souls.

Prayer: Dear Lord, there is a life that we are called to that is magnificent and wondrous in its eternal value. May each of us die daily to our selfish whims as we give our seeds to you knowing that we will have an overflowing and bounteous supply that is truly beyond measure.

Paul Heffron

Thursday, March 15

Scripture: 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..."

While reading, meditating, and praying about the verses from John 12, I was struck by several seemingly unrelated themes. I wondered about the Greeks unrequited visit and about the raw emotions they might have felt in seeking Jesus and not being rewarded. Meditating on their request to see Jesus I was hit by the truth spoken in the African American Spiritual "Give Me Jesus."

*In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise
In the morning, when I rise
Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus
You can have all this world
Just give me Jesus

When I am alone
When I am alone
Oh, when I am alone
Give me Jesus

When I come to die
When I come to die
Oh, when I come to die
Give me Jesus*

We need to ask ourselves if we seek Jesus like the Greeks in the passage? If we are truly seeking Him, everything else will fall in place. The everything might not look like we imagine but if we are seeking we will find His great truths.

Pull up the lyrics on the computer, play the music, close your eyes, breathe the words and the music, allow yourself to be completely enveloped by the words. Continue to ask to have Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Lord, in my business I often forget to seek you, to seek your will for my life and for my circumstances. I forget whose I am and who I am serving. I attempt to take control. Please remind me daily, hourly, to ask for you.

Teresa Swihart

Friday, March 16

Scripture: John 12:20-33

Of John 12:20-33, the significance may seem a little illusive, but it essentially (verses 24- 25) represents an important part of the spirit and reasoning describing the Christian religion.

It raises some problems, probably due to translation. For example, most farmer or gardeners can tell you that seeds don't exactly die with growth development, but transform into a seedling. Actually rotting poses death to seed. Here it doesn't matter much. When we become a follower of Jesus, when we see the light, a kind of transition occurs whereby we accepted, amongst other changes, that we must love every person. You may have heard me formerly as an Elder, refer to the "love" that Jesus taught.

The remainder of the section piques special interest: it talks of losing your life, not your physical life, but your old idea of your way of living and thinking. Those who serve Jesus must follow Jesus, thus I consider myself a disciple of Jesus, "and the Father will honor" me.

Then Jesus asked, should he ask the Father (GOD) to save him.

Then a voice came from heaven glorifying Jesus' name. Upon public discussion, Jesus asserted that the voice came for regular people, not him; and when he is lifted up, he will draw all people (you and me) to himself; ergo, the kind of death for him.

While I don't favor ritualism so much, I do try to favor what Jesus taught, particularly to love and be helpful to the downtrodden.

Prayer: Lord, may we all follow Jesus and take that into the world. May we live the love that Jesus taught. And may the whole world, thus, become a place of love, prosperity, and justice.

Douglas Cook

Saturday, March 17

Scripture: John 12:20-33

An elderly aunt was driving her car, which she had long ago named "Has Been," as she entered the parking lot with nary an empty space in sight. Just then backup lights indicated the car nearby was readying to leave. But before "Has Been" could be driven into the now empty space, another driver zipped around, beating out our exasperated aunt so that the parking lot was again full. Another car shortly departed with our aunt leaving the rude driver with sage advice when she said, "You needn't worry about bad luck for surely good luck will never find you."

In truth, trouble is always present in life and it seldom leaves us where it finds us. This may have been among the thoughts Jesus was expressing when He proclaimed, "Now my soul is troubled..." Surely Christ realized his troubled state was not to be His final state.

How often do we find our souls troubled? Our concerns may range from a troubled marriage, to financial worries. What about being troubled waiting for a definitive diagnosis while the mammogram shows yet another recently discovered lump? We are beset by trouble from so many sources. Our anxieties are ever present. This is when we recall the word, "temporary."

So let us never forget that the troubled soul points to a temporary situation. "Father, save me from this hour" was not the Master's final thought nor should it be ours, as we discover anew that no trouble ever lasts forever.

I am often comforted by a quote from one of Dr. Gentle's sermons where he proclaims, "The will of God will never take us where the grace of God will not protect us."

Prayer: Lord, help us to see beyond the moment, finding firm footing on higher ground as we sort out the unimportant temporal from that which will last forever as we take our places in that house not built with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Nett Brown

Sunday, March 18

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

The Lutheran minister Martin Rinkart arrived in Eilenberg, Saxony, in the seventeenth century. By 1636, war and plague left him, as the town's only living pastor, to conduct some 4,000 funerals during a single year. It was during this time that he penned "Nun danket alle Gott" – or as you may know it, "Now Thank We All Our God."

Today, you are most likely to sing this hymn around the fourth Thursday in November, as it pairs nicely with the American tradition of eating large lunches and dozing off to football. Indeed, I fell in love with this hymn as a child, singing with the congregation during an outdoor Thanksgiving morning service: "who from our mothers' arms, has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today." I had no idea that these words, reminding me of God's constant blessings, came from a man who would soon conduct his own wife's funeral.

When Paul instructs the Colossians "with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God," he did not have a time or place in mind. He didn't demand that we sing God's praises when our world is crumbling in famine, or when we are spooning out the last crumbs of stuffing after a feast. Thanksgiving is a way of life.

Prayer: Gracious Father, as we go about the business of Lent, let us be thankful. When our stomach groans for the chocolate we swore off, or our finances take an unexpected plunge; and when we ace that test, or welcome a healthy grandchild into the world, our hearts will be thankful. Thank you for your constant blessings. Thank you for guiding us when perplexed, and freeing us from all ills, in this world and the next.

Wesley Gentle

**Sixth Week in Lent
The Hour Has Come
Scripture: Mark 11:1-11**

Monday, March 19

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

Jesus traveled to Jerusalem knowing the trip would lead to his sacrificial death. Agony and suffering are looming, and yet great joy and celebration surround Jesus.

He's on a death march, and what amounts to a festival breaks out on the streets. It's a confusing confluence of emotions. What is God trying to teach us? I believe Palm Sunday is an important reminder to celebrate life, even in times of sorrow. Why do we share memories that make us laugh at memorial services? Or stories that bring smiles at hospitals? It's because the grace of God sustains us and leads us to great joy. Jesus didn't shun, shush, or dismiss those who were waving palms or laying down their cloaks before him. Jesus wants us to celebrate. He wants us to give thanks. He wants us to shout "Hosanna!" Because every day is a gift. Our lives are a blessing. And Jesus has saved us from guilt, fear, and hopelessness. Salvation has arrived!

Prayer: God, fill our mouths with laughter, our lips with shouts of joy, and our hearts with your grace. We know that your abiding peace helps us overcome all of life's hardships, and we are forever thankful.

Anthony Mague

Tuesday, March 20

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

As with most biblical passages, there are so many messages that can be deciphered.

One of the commentaries (The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 7, 1989) that I read suggested that the actions like the colt being untied and taken for Jesus' use or the unknown man helping to prepare the Last Supper (Mark 14:13-15) were not coincidental or miraculous.

Rather, these people were a part of Jesus' "underground." This underground in Jerusalem was comprised of friends and adherents who formed a social network, "a dependable force 'alerted' to Jesus' purposes," ready to act on his behalf.

Are you are part of Jesus' underground today? Are you ready to contribute your time, talents, energy, resources, and possessions at a moment's notice? How do you contribute to underground networks operating informally outside of church fellowship?

Prayer: God, in the name of Jesus, bless me to always be a part of a dependable force alerted to your purpose, ready at a moment's notice to help the cause of Christ.

Beverly Goines

Wednesday, March 21

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

Being a disciple of God isn't all glory. Imagine, you just devoted your life to Jesus for two to three years, and spent the last nine months travelling through 35 locations en route to what promises to be a glorious return to Jerusalem alongside your Lord. You've been a devoted disciple during that time and you might consider yourself one of the more important followers out there; surely, you'll be called to play a key role in Jesus' triumphant arrival. Then, Jesus asks you to walk to a nearby village to take an unruly donkey without asking its owner. Not quite the grand task you'd envisioned.

Nevertheless, you complete the task and slowly realize that Jesus has yet again used an otherwise unremarkable event to demonstrate an important lesson. The task that seemed so mundane turns out to be the fulfilment of centuries-old prophecies regarding the savior of man's return to Jerusalem. More than that, the selection of the lowly unbroken donkey becomes a symbol for one of Jesus' final and most important lessons: humility should form the basis of all acts serving God. The King of angels chooses not a noble horse or golden chariot to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem, but a stubborn donkey. He Himself thus embodies humility, while demonstrating for those disciples that their seemingly menial task was in fact key to one of his final lessons.

Living God's will in the world isn't always as we'd expect it to be; the tasks we are called to do are not always noble nor will we necessarily be recognized for them. We are called to be humble in all we do, but rather than a challenge, humility can be freeing. As William Temple observed: "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all." Jesus reminds us, as he reminded his disciples that day, to think larger than ourselves and realize that even the most mundane acts can be done in such a way as to glorify God. As we go about our lives, let us recognize the many ways, large and small, glorious or donkey-related, in which we can demonstrate God's love for others around us.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for lessons like these and help us to realize that your kingdom is built on all types of good deeds, big and small. Help us to remember that our days are filled with opportunities to share your love with others, even in the simplest ways. We pray that we might not seek an earthly glory but your own, embracing humility. Renew our spirits, and remind us to think greater than ourselves. In your Holy name we pray.

Ben Moore

Thursday, March 22

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

As many of you may know and for those who do not know I am a convicted felon as of 2004. I was ashamed and humiliated at the arrest but eventually was glad it happened.

I recall the anguish and heartache at the thought of my parents and how disappointed they would be; I also felt stupid that things got so out of control that this arrest could have happened. After months

of psychotherapy I came to know that God had a plan for me. I just had to follow the path and let God lead me. He did and I followed!

In addition to therapy I had to do 200 hours of community service. I worked those hours at Central Union Mission which was a men's homeless shelter. I did what was requested: cleaning restrooms; unloading supplies; assisting, preparing, and serving dinner in the shelter's cafeteria. Over time my work in the kitchen became pleasant and I did not view it as a punishment. Cooking and helping serve the men became meaningful to me and I looked forward to doing it.

That building at 14th and R Streets NW is now an upscale condo building called: The Mission. The shelter moved elsewhere because the work of feeding the homeless goes on. That path God led me to and which I went down led me to: Martha's Table.

For as the Prophet Isaiah said: "If you offer your food to the hungry and attend to the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." Isaiah 58:10

Jesus may have been reluctant riding into Jerusalem for the final week of his life, but God led him and he followed.

Prayer: Oh God, we are reluctant to travel an unknown path. However with your guidance and unwavering love we will become travelers along that path you would have us go.

Gary Lewis

Friday, March 23

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

This is a momentous occasion. For the first time Jesus is permitting His followers to honor him as a King. His earlier habit of avoiding unnecessary publicity is negated. He requested a colt (baby donkey) that had never been ridden before. This is significant because unridden animals were used for sacred purposes. But, it's also important to note that He chose a donkey, not a warhorse. Can you imagine His feet dragging the ground as he rode? How humbly He appeared. The prophet Zechariah wrote: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." (Zechariah 9:9)

By spreading cloaks and branches, the Jews were showing royal honor to Jesus. And by shouting hosanna (which means "save now" in Hebrew), they were repeating the message of Psalm 118:26 which states, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." The manner of His entry expressed the character of His mission, for He was not a military conqueror upon a warhorse, or a political revolutionary that the Jews expected. For His mission was not to overthrow Rome and its tyranny, but to break the power of sin. His work was not to do with politics and the wars of Israel, but with their belief in God.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, we give you thanks for your love and saving grace. We remember your triumphant ride into Jerusalem and the significance of that day. You knew the outcome, but you still loved us and forgave us and died for our sins. For that we humbly give you the praise and all the honor. In your precious name we pray.

Loretta Tate

Saturday, March 24

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11

We are all familiar with the story of Jesus riding a colt into Jerusalem for Passover. It was told in all four gospels. Jesus had been out in the countryside with his disciples teaching the people, healing the sick, and even raising his friend from the dead when He determined his hour had come. Preparations needed to be made for Jesus and the twelve to celebrate their Passover meal. Throngs of people were following them and shouting Jesus' praises. "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!"

How different the atmosphere would change in a few days when they will denounce him and call for his crucifixion. Will we forget our promises to love the Lord and keep our faith as we continue on the road to Jerusalem and on to Calvary Hill and Easter Sunday?

Prayer: Lord, be with us and strengthen us as we continue to study your word and praise you. Keep us from stumbling, and do not let our love for you falter.

It's time.

Let's get ready!

Jane Strotman

Holy Week

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 25

Note: We asked our writers on Sundays to address the power of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their lives.

Music, like Lent, sometimes takes us where we prefer not to go. In "South Pacific," sophisticated South Sea planter Emile de Becque laments the lost love of perky World War II navy nurse Nellie Forbush. Each time I listen to Emile sing, "This nearly was mine," I become misty-eyed for all the "what-might-have-beens" in my life. The music lures me to where I did not want to go. I'd much rather chuckle as Nellie sings, "I'm gonna wash that man right outa my hair."

Lent, like music, sometimes takes us where we prefer not to go. Lent lures and leads us to the whole range of life's experiences. We sing our way from "Itsy bitsy spider" to "Till my trophies at last I lay down."

I would rather sing "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" but in Lent I am lured and led by the haunting refrains of "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded." I am immersed in Bernard of Clairvaux's words depicting Christ "scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown." Bernard's images of the suffering Lord I love set to Hans Hassler's music touch my heart and raise me up until I see the vision of Christ suffering as the costly price of love God is willing to pay. "What thou, O Christ, hast suffered was all for sinners' (including my) gain."

Lenten music takes me to where I would rather not go, but there I am prepared for the inevitable suffering in my life and in the lives of those I love. I learn the cost of being loved and loving in return.

Through tears, I respond, "What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest Friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end? O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be, O, let me never, never outlive my love to thee."

Prayer: O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down; now scornfully surrounded with thorns, thine only crown. Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve thy place; look on me with thy favor, and keep me in thy grace.

Peter M. Morgan

Holy Monday, March 26

Scripture: Mark 14:17-31

In spite of being betrayed, Christ shared his love with all of the twelve. After alerting them that he was aware of what would occur, he did not demonstrate any disfavor to the one who would betray him. He shared himself with them and also the covenant that bound them to him through the breaking of bread and drinking from the same cup.

During these times which can be busy and hectic, and even tense, we often hear that individuals are separated from loved ones, because harsh words have been said, or distasteful actions occurred, or

even for reasons that no one truly remembers. Family and friends can sometimes disappoint us, but if we are truly wanting Christ to be among us and in us, should we not take the first step to share love and connect with those whom we cherish?

As we prepare for the risen Christ, let us accept the grace of Christ to be more loving and engaging in our outreach to loved ones and also to those who are strangers.

Prayer: Forgiving and loving Christ, come into our hearts and lift the hurt and disconnect that we may carry so that we may come together in your name.

Eddie and Loretta Franklin

Holy Tuesday, March 27

Scripture: Mark 14:17-31

The scene is set - there is a buzz in the air; streets are packed with citizens and strangers alike; preparations are being made in the temple; Roman guards are on heightened security; tensions are high; and twelve men and one named Jesus are huddled in a crowded upper room - this is the scene of Passover in Jerusalem, the setting of today's devotion.

Amid the clamor, Jesus is about to celebrate the holy feast with his twelve disciples, but before doing so, Jesus sends an ominous warning to his followers that this very night, one of them will betray him and the mission he was sent to earth to fulfill. Suddenly, quietly and then in a growing chorus, the room echoes with three haunting words, "Is it I?; Is it I?; Is it I?: IS IT I?!!

And so it began - a narrative almost ripped from a late night Lifetime movie. The series of events that unfolded over the next several hours would lead to the crucifixion of God's "chosen," "beloved," "savior of the world." However, Jesus throws the ultimate wrinkle in the plot, when he pauses in the midst of chaos to bring a new order and a new definition to the words, "Is it I?"

In sharing of the loaf and of the cup, as many Christians observe during worship every Sunday, Jesus proclaims across the universe - "IT IS I!!" - this is my body and blood given and poured out for the forgiveness of all human sin. The leader would become the ultimate servant by giving his life, so that all who know and believe would also have his life, eternal life!

Indeed, it is I (we), co-servants of the Servant to a broken and fragmented world, so let us respond during Lent to God's dramatic story by giving our lives to those who hunger and thirst. May we live and be church as those three words pulse through our veins, reminding us that our sins are forgiven through the risen Christ.

Prayer: Holy God, storylines in today's world may be ever changing, but thanks be that your grace is always constant, always present and always forgiving to those called according to your purpose.

Steven Baines

Holy Wednesday, March 28

Scripture: Mark 14:17-31

Isn't it remarkable that the people gathered with Jesus at the table are the very ones that would one day betray and desert him? During what would become known as the "last supper," Jesus announces that one of those gathered around the table will betray him.

The disciples are so sure that they are not, and never will be, betrayers and deserters. Of course, they are! They have walked with Jesus for a long time, through crowds, and miracles, and accusations. Yet, Judas will betray Jesus. Peter will indeed deny Jesus, more than once. The disciples will fall away, lost after Jesus' death.

After his bold declaration, Jesus takes a loaf of bread, blesses it and breaks it, gives it to his disciples and simply says, "This is my body. Take and eat." With this act, Jesus lets the disciples,

deniers and betrayers, know that they are still loved and welcome to sit at the table with him. He does the same with a cup of wine, reminding the disciples that his blood will be shed for “many.”

The “many” include betrayers, deniers, those that fall away and forget Jesus. The acts of that evening reach out through the centuries and touch us today. We are the “many.” We are at one time or another the betrayers, deniers, the ones that fall away. But Jesus doesn’t let us go. On that night that he was betrayed he welcomed to the table the very one that would betray him. He welcomed and ate with the disciples that would deny him and would walk away after the crucifixion. He welcomed to the table his friends, just as he did throughout his ministry. He welcomed people that many believed to be unclean or not good enough.

Many times, I have felt like the disciples crying out: “Surely, not I?” I haven’t betrayed or denied you Jesus? Have I? Maybe not in a big, Judas kind of way, but in other smaller, subtler ways.

Have I failed to “love my neighbor as myself”? Have I at some point or another given up on church? Have I closed my heart and mind to the Spirit’s promptings trying to move me closer to God? Yes, yes, and yes! “Surely, not I?” becomes “yes, Lord, even me.”

But every week, I come to the table. I come to remind myself that Jesus gave his life for me, for us, that we may have life and have it abundantly. I come to the table despite my shortcomings, knowing that I am welcome. I come to the table seeking forgiveness and renewal.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) makes the celebration of the Lord’s Supper a central part of worship because of the many ways that we meet Jesus at the table.

We are the “many” that seek forgiveness and reconciliation with Christ and with each other. Come to the table. There is room enough for all!

Prayer: Thank you Lord for welcoming me to your table. Forgive the many times and ways I have denied you. Help me to make your welcoming love known to all.

Miriam Gentle

Maundy Thursday, March 29

Scripture: Mark 15:1-20

Pontius Pilate came to Judea as the new Governor to bring some order to this troublesome province. He finds himself thrown into a trial involving religious turmoil that has captivated the people but brought the ire of the Chief Priests.

One side of the trial stood the authority of Hebrew Faith. For generations, they have studied and practiced the Laws. They were ordained to carry the teachings of the Torah. They were the chosen, from the temple, itself, to be entrusted with the Faith of their Fathers.

On the other side of this trial was this man they accused of challenging almost everything that was taught about their faith, manipulating the people to follow a new teaching. If that wasn’t enough, he claimed he was the Chosen One by God, Himself.

Considering these arguments, it’s proven that Pilate didn’t want to get involved in this matter but the Priests insisted that he make a decision. Pilate begins his examination of Jesus, “Are you this King? Why are you not defending yourself? Say something, I have the power to release you!” This was the strangest moment for Pilate; Jesus provided no defense for his cause.

Everyone seemed passionate about their cause in this moment. Pilate passionately brings an option to the table to end the matter in a prison exchange for the life of Barabbas, a murderer and deserving of the fate of death. The Governor even passionately made a last-minute appeal for the life of Jesus, to no avail. The Priests and Scribes were equally as passionate to do away with Jesus. They agitated and persuaded the crowds to sentence Jesus with death.

Then, there was the one who had the least to say in all of this was who had the most passion. Imagine for a moment, if it was you standing before the accusations and examinations. If you heard

your fate being decided by an unruly mob. Hearing all, you still remained silent and accepted your fate. Jesus' role was the key to this trial of passion. Soon, it will become a part of the bigger plan and promise.

Prayer: There are many times that passion can be used in terrible ways. Help us to be able to use our passion to the greater good for the bigger things and not for our own interests.

Nicholas Bullock

Good Friday, March 30

Scripture: Mark 15:22-39

As Jesus hung on the cross, the soldiers cast lots to divide up his clothes among them.

What do we take from Jesus? Wealth, fame, possessions, power, and comfort.

As he hung there people verbally abused and mocked Him.

How do we treat Him? Abuse, neglect, or admiration and respect.

As he hung there, the people taunted him to perform a miracle to climb down and save himself.

What miracles do we seek from Jesus? Healing, success.

Who did Jesus put first in his life...certainly not himself?

Who do we put first?

What does it take for us to put others first?

What does it take for us to say as the centurion did, "This is the Son of God"?

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes and ears to hear your call to us that we might be your servants.

Kathleen Swihart

Holy Saturday, March 31

Scripture: Mark 15:42-46

We have a pretty good idea where Jesus was buried. Maybe you have been to the site in Jerusalem, within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Just in the past year, a team of scientists from National Geographic and the Technical University of Athens have cleaned, repaired, and restored the site, and in doing so found that two thousand years of building over it, followed by subsequent destructions, earthquake-induced collapses, and further rebuilding, nevertheless have left intact what is believed by many to be the actual tomb of Christ.

In the Gospel according to Mark, we hear that Joseph of Arimathea was a good man who was trying to do the right thing by providing a decent burial place for the crucified Jesus. He was going about the necessary steps, working through the bureaucracy of death if you will, to try to bring some decency to an indecent development.

But, he had no idea what he was about to help facilitate – at a tomb that would become an immediate mystery, and remain so millennia later.

Pilgrims were drawn to it right away, and still are, as I was myself a few years ago.

Standing near it, you have to be a bit skeptical of the location being genuine, even when you want to believe it is; too much has happened in two thousand years to make it likely what you look upon is the actual place. Now, however, thanks to the recent archaeological examination, religion and science seem to have united in their beliefs and findings: it probably IS the place. What a momentous development!

Yet, for Christians, there perhaps is a more important answer to the question of what might be where.

On that day after the crucifixion it could not be anticipated that the significance of the tomb's location might diminish. It was not known that the tomb itself might become not what is, but what was. It was not understood that here, for the first time, would be given meaning to the discounting words of the Apostle, Paul: "Oh, grave, where is thy victory?"

Prayer: In our search for where things might be or may have been, may we be ever reminded foremost that wherever they are or are not, our God is here now, in this place.

John Sparkman

Easter Sunday, April 1

Today is the First day – the Lord's Day – or Resurrection day. The Lord's Day celebrates the beginning of the new creation – the First day – in the resurrection of Jesus. On this Sunday, we join with the communion of saints all around the world, and remember the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But guess what? We have been celebrating the Resurrection each Sunday – all year long. No fooling! From Advent and Christmas through Lent and Pentecost, Christians have always considered the glorious meeting together on each Sunday morning to be the celebration of the Lord's Day – the First day – Resurrection day! So, while our "Alleluias" have been stifled during our Lenten Sunday worship services, our Easter celebration continues 52 Sundays out the year.

What then is so significant about Easter Sunday? Today is the Resurrection day of all Resurrection days – the First day, the day of splendor, and the feast of feasts! As eighth century theologian John of Damascus wrote in the Easter hymn "Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain":

*Now the brightest season dawns with the day of splendor,
Now the royal feast of feasts comes its joy to render;
comes to glad Jerusalem, who with true affection
welcomes in unwearied strains Jesus' resurrection.*

Prayer: With great joy on this day, I pray for all Christians gathered in houses of worship all around the world. Lead and guide me in the way of a resurrected life – 365 days of the year. Help me to see the risen Lord at work – each and every day.

Stephen Gentle