JUSTICE and the PROPHETS

SPRING QUARTER 2020 • MARCH, APRIL, MAY
# SPRING QUARTER 2020

## LIFE

### Unit 1: Wilderness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 1</td>
<td>Because of Sin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genesis 3:8-24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 8</td>
<td>Jesus in Gethsemane</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 26:36-46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 15</td>
<td>The Israelites in the Wilderness</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers 21:4-9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 22</td>
<td>Jesus in the Wilderness</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 4:1-11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 29</td>
<td>The People of Judah Are Exiled</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Kings 25:8-21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Unit 2: Salvation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 5</td>
<td>Jesus Dies on a Cross</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark 15:22-39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 12</td>
<td>Jesus’ Resurrection</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 28:1-10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 19</td>
<td>Rebuilding the Temple</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haggai 2:1-9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 26</td>
<td>John Prepares the Way for Christ</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark 1:1-8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Unit 3: Grace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 3</td>
<td>The River of Life-giving Water</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revelation 22:1-5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10</td>
<td>God’s Grace Toward Adam, Eve, and Cain</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genesis 3:21; 4:10-16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 17</td>
<td>God Provides Food in the Wilderness</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exodus 16:2-15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 24</td>
<td>Grace to the Dying Thief</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 31</td>
<td>The Holy Spirit Inspires Jesus’ Followers</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acts 2:1-21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 1

Because of Sin

Purpose

To recognize the relationship between our human condition and our sin.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Genesis 3:8-24 (NIV)

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

11 And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

12 The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

14 So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

16 To the woman he said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

20 Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

21 The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

22 And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”

23 So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3:8-24 (KJV)

8 And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.

9 And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?

10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

11 And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

12 And the man said, The woman whom
Lesson 1  3  March 1

thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

13 And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

14 And the Lord God said unto the woman, Because thou hast eaten of the tree, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:

15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

16 Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

17 And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

20 And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living.

21 Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

22 And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:

23 Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

24 So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Seeing the Need

I was a good boy growing up. I never swore, and I never spit. I was always kind to animals, and I was mostly kind to my younger sisters. Was I perfect? After 63 years, my mother would say yes, but you shouldn’t believe her. I was good, and that seemed good enough.

That belief represents the big problem with us as humans. We tend to think we are pretty good. We do what we think is the right thing most of the time. We are also fairly adept at setting aside those not-so-good things in our lives when we evaluate ourselves because we tend to think they don’t matter.

We think we are pretty good, and that should be good enough. The truth is, we have a marvelous capacity for self-
deceit. We accommodate our blindsided biases and shortcomings as just honest mistakes that shouldn’t factor in when we tally our righteousness.

This lesson takes us back to the beginning, to the first humans and the first sin. The story of the first man and woman challenges us to look honestly at our human condition and at the consequences that arise when we follow that condition instead of God’s intention and will.

That “Human Condition”

If nothing else, Genesis 3 helps us understand that humans are all alike. I’ve come to believe we are created with a spectrum of living and acting. At one end of the spectrum, we are created to dream. We can aspire, imagine, and see things that could be, and live almost without limits. At the other end, we are locked down by the knowledge of our own limitations. We see what we cannot do, or perhaps should not do, and the limitations keep us grounded.

Our human condition, then, is the push and pull between those two ends of the spectrum of our lives. Motivational speakers play to our aspirations. You can do whatever you dream of doing, they tell us! Rules and commands remind us of our limitations. Everything we might want to do does not grant us license to do it, they tell us.

So, throughout our lives, even daily, we are urged from deep within to consider sin. That is, I see what I’d like to do but shouldn’t do; or I don’t believe I can be more than the minimum in my life, yet my potential is so much greater than I want to believe. The tension is critically important for us to exist and act appropriately as human beings, those “less than divine” (Psalm 8:5). Indeed, we can’t be the boss of the world and do whatever we want, although perhaps we can do more than we sometimes think we can.

The woman in Genesis 3:2-3 explains that important tension for us: She could eat of any tree in the garden, except the one God said they could not eat of. Of course, as she explained that to the snake, she actually added more restrictions (Genesis 3:3). God actually had said, “Eat your fill from all of the garden’s trees; but don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die!” (2:16-17). God did not say the humans could not touch the tree.

Imagining how different our existence would be if, at that point, the snake had responded with, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know! Have a nice day!” But the snake, Scripture tells us, is “the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made” (3:1). Other Bible translations use words such as “more cunning” or “more crafty,” giving it an almost sinister cast.

We know the story: The snake denied what God had commanded and convinced the woman that things would only get better if she ate fruit from that tree. In fact, if she did, the snake promised, she would “see clearly” and “be like God, knowing good and evil” (verse 5).

Although we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” we know that temptation is all around us. It whispers in our eager ears and invites us to step away from the tension of living a balanced life, to do
what we want to. In fact, we know that we don’t even need a snake. We find it easy on our own to walk a little distance away from God. But taking that walk, even a short one, is sin. Anytime we live or act apart from God, we sin.

Considering sin ought to scare us to death. Instead, it’s as if we become comfortable having a snake roam around our homes. The danger is so evident, but for some reason, we forget how dire, how tragic a mistake we make when we assume a sin is “not so bad.” Eating a piece of fruit isn’t the same as killing someone, right? Deciding we know better than anyone else what is best isn’t that terrible, right?

Our “not so bad” choices become the path to getting what we want, but they also pave the way to losing all that we are. Much of the brokenness in our lives is not due to the evil we have done. Frankly, some of us might even say we haven’t done anything terribly evil. Much of our brokenness comes because we have considered that our own decisions—made separate and apart from God’s love and guidance and will—are the best. “You will be like God,” the snake assured the woman, and the woman sinned.

What happens when you consider the sin in your life?

Acting Out

Someone once said, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” We’re not sure who said this, but regardless of its origin, the greater truth stands: Considering doing something certainly puts us on the path to action, but it is far different and has less of an impact than actually doing or saying something that changes reality for us.

Potential and actual are different. Actual means “pertaining to an act—something real or existing.” It’s dangerous to think about doing something that might be sin (potential); but when we actually follow through, it becomes so much more harmful and tragic.

My wife and I always made sure to teach our boys the importance of thinking before reacting instantly and perhaps lashing out. The latter might feel good at the time; there is a lot of power in reacting. But those are actions we cannot take back or remove once they happen. It’s sad to read about someone with road rage who ends up hurting or killing another person because the one with rage couldn’t control the impulse that led to such terrible things.

The woman in Genesis 3 was deceived by the snake. The tree indeed was “beautiful with delicious food” (verse 6). Her thoughts propelled her actions at the idea of something so beautiful and delicious also providing wisdom. She wanted something and refused to allow any limitations to her actions, so she picked the fruit.

But even at that point, it wasn’t too late. God told the man and woman not to eat of it. Picking it was foolish and dangerous, but God did not tell them they would die if they did. But then she bit into it, and “also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (verse 6). Scripture doesn’t indicate that the man protested or objected in any way to eating the fruit.
The sin was cast. In that simple act, the human beings broke their relationship with God. We might argue that, as soon as the woman considered taking the fruit, the relationship was broken; but the act itself proved the willingness to step away from God and disobey what was a simple command. Don't do it, God said, but that's the thing they were drawn to do.

Why do we sin? Why are we willing to break our relationship with the one who has given us everything? Perhaps it’s because we are not satisfied with our place in the universe. We break relationship with God but also with one another, and then the best we can say is “Sorry” when the wound is opened and the hurt flows out. We don’t live in Eden because we have become too comfortable “doing sin” and creating pain, hurt, strife, and conflict.

Unfortunately, this story is our story. Even when we give it our best shot and try as hard as we can, it seems too easy to give up the tension of the human life. So we slide to one end or the other of the spectrum in hopes that things will ease up, and we will feel more relief. The truth, of course, is that after we do that, we only end up feeling worse and adding guilt, shame, and fear on top of it all.

At the very core, we give up our love for God for the sake of the trinkets of this world or so that we can have our own way. You can see, then, that sin is not simply doing some things that might be impolite or even a bit wrong. Sin is the shattering, crushing, and quiet breaking of our love for the Creator of the universe.

How does the story of the first sin help you better understand what makes you step away from God, and how might it work to keep you closer to God on a daily basis?

Consequences

Our son Aaron was about 60 miles from home, on Christmas break from college, when he called. The low-fuel light was on. He had long since passed what was the last gas station on the interstate before Fargo, and he didn’t know what to do. I suggested that he leave the interstate and take a parallel road that had more towns, and perhaps he could fill up somewhere along the way.

Later, Aaron called again. He had passed through two towns where the stations were closed or didn’t exist, and he was panicked. At that point, he was about 30 miles away, so I told him to drive until he made it to the first gas station or ran out of gas; then we would come and help out. He was nervous and unhappy, to say the least!

The next time we heard from Aaron was when he rang our doorbell. He had made it all the way and had coasted into the first gas station and filled up. Aaron did not want to talk about his experience, but we once again repeated the too-true rule: It is just as easy to fill the top half of the tank as it is the bottom half. In a way, Aaron had avoided the consequences of a bad decision that day—sort of. His free and breezy trip home had turned into a nervous and worried affair, even though he didn’t actually run out of gas.

In the last part of our Scripture for this lesson, we find consequences that arise out of the decision to eat of the...
tree’s fruit. We find out what happens because of sin. Some of these seem to be punishments, but it’s important to recognize natural consequences of our human choices, some of which are bad ones.

As God dealt with the disobedience of the humans, God described the future of the snake, the woman, and the man. As it turns out, all of them are descriptions of how we live in the world today.

Some people think this story helps, in part, to explain why snakes and people don’t usually get along well, why women have such pain in childbirth, why it is just so hard to grow a good crop, and why we die. This is our present reality and makes a good answer to the “why,” when we think about the world the way it is today. It’s as if the Bible is saying, “It didn’t have to be this way. But because of what happened, because of sin, it is now this way. So we must live with it.”

First, God cursed the snake (Genesis 3:14). God also “put contempt” between the snake and the woman and her offspring (verse 15). The consequences for the man and the woman were as profound, if not more so. God told the woman that her pregnancy would be painful (verse 16). God cursed the land because of the man and declared that the man must labor hard among “weeds and thistles” that would grow among the plants the man tended.

Because of their sin, this Scripture tells us, the humans “saw clearly” (verse 7). They had a deeper comprehension of the world around them. It was a natural and expected consequence of eating the fruit of the tree. The next consequence, however, was that they realized they were naked. In that first moment of shame, they had to sew fig leaves together. Both of those things were consequences: one potentially good, the other tragic.

The next consequence marks a sad moment in human history. Apparently, most every evening, the Lord God would walk in the garden. Perhaps the humans met God there and commuted in blessedness. But on this day, they hid, and God had to call, “Where are you?” (verse 9). You see, it’s neither a punishment nor God’s fault or actions that the humans had broken the divine relationship. It was a terrible consequence of their actions, their sin.

I believe the final consequence came in where the humans would live. It’s a decision God made, but it appears that in order for there not to be another bad choice by the humans (to eat of the tree of life), they had to leave the garden of paradise. Some might call this a punishment, but I think that, because of the change in the nature of the humans and their newfound knowledge, the garden could no longer sustain them without further danger, so they had to leave.

Verse 24 says that God “drove out the human.” Their sin (stepping away from God) also meant that their entire lives would change and, in a way, become far less than what they were before.

Knowing that God loves you, how can that begin to change your choices in life?

Most loving God, grant me the power to follow you and live according to your will for me; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Lesson 2

Jesus in Gethsemane

Purpose

To realize that suffering can come to all parts of our lives.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Matthew 26:36-46 (NIV)

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”
37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.
38 Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”
39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”
40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter.
41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
42 He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.”
43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy.
44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.
45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.
46 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Matthew 26:36-46 (KJV)

36 Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.
37 And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy.
38 Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.
39 And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.
40 And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?
41 Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.
42 He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.
43 And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy.
44 And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.
45 Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.
46 Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.
Seeing the Need

Difficulties, problems, and losses come to each of us throughout our lives. People we love—friends, family members, and spouses—face illnesses and die. We lose jobs and deal with financial concerns. We deal with the consequences of our poor decisions and those of other people. We face broken relationships and wonder how healing can ever come. We suffer. Some of the suffering is even beyond our imagination, and sometimes we wonder how we will ever survive such heart pain over situations that nearly destroys us.

This lesson focuses on suffering—personal, heartbreaking, and real suffering that comes to our lives. As we consider the suffering of Jesus in the garden, listen closely for the good news that can help us move through the suffering that we have experienced or will experience.

What Is Suffering?

When our sons were teenagers, my wife, Cheri, and I could have used a grant from the Department of Agriculture to assist with the purchase and preparation of the food required to fill their stomachs. Even after having healthy breakfasts and good lunches, by 4:00 in the afternoon, they had consumed their third full meal of the day. The amazing thing is, though, that the meal had no effect on their hunger when 5:30 or 6:00 rolled around. All the work of a full evening meal vanished before our eyes as the horde from the basement descended on the kitchen! They were polite enough to wait until about 8:30 before looking for a snack. We thought the ingestion of massive amounts of food was necessary to keep them from suffering the agony of empty stomachs.

Suffering is a subjective word; that is, the suffering each of us might identify belongs to us. You might look at what I call suffering and think it is silly, that I’m making a big deal out of nothing. However, any feelings we have rightfully belong to us. Though the ways we suffer vary greatly, the experience is one we all share at one time or another. The word suffer means “to bear, undergo, or endure” something. What we endure or undergo in terms of suffering is always something that creates pain or grief or fear. It’s just not a happy word for us to own.
Suffering is like having an aching big toe. No matter what we do, we can’t get away from the pain. It invades and paints a gray layer over everything. Even when we are involved in our everyday life, the pain is there. The distraction the aching creates keeps us from experiencing what the rest of life has to offer. We are suffering. Some of that suffering is almost overwhelming. The shock or the situation we are in may be so pervasive and life-robbing that we are nearly broken in two.

Think of the devastation caused by a hurricane or a tornado, when all seems lost, when lives are taken. The reaction of those whose lives seemed normal just a day before is justifiably agonizing. With loss and brokenness in life, with the destruction of those things that create the beautiful and happy framework of our lives, it appears that suffering is the only word that seems fit to use. Suffering is that terrible, honest tearing apart of life, the heaping of burdens and loss that becomes what we must undergo or endure, because there’s no other way to live at the time.

Matthew 26:37-38 offers us a description of Jesus at one of the lowest moments of his life. Read how Jesus described himself. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates Jesus as saying, “I am deeply grieved, even to death,” while in the New International Version (NIV), Jesus says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” The Common English Bible (CEB) translates Jesus as saying, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying.” Jesus was profoundly troubled. He was suffering.

While we certainly have not faced the circumstances Jesus faced that night, we have felt similar agony. We know what it feels like to face impending and unavoidable pain. The suffering resulting from the decision that Jesus came to, to die on behalf of the world, was agony, and he felt it. Jesus did not simply go through the motions of this garden of Gethsemane experience. He was deeply affected by what transpired there. Yes, he felt as if he was dying, because he would be betrayed, denied, beaten, mocked, made a public spectacle of, and then hung on an instrument of humiliation and execution before the sun went down the next day.

When suffering seems to overwhelm us like ocean waves crashing over our heads, we can take comfort that Jesus knows what we are going through. Jesus speaks to each of us and says, “I know it hurts. I know the pain, and I cry with you over the struggle and suffering you are going through right now. Take my hand, and let’s go through this together.” Knowing that the Lord of the universe knows our pain doesn’t make the pain go away, but it should help us each morning as we wake to go through the next day with Jesus by our side.

What difference does it make for you to know that Jesus also suffered?
Friends Should Help

“Randy, I have cancer.” The phone call came on a beautiful spring day in the Dakotas. My friend called from ten hours away. He had visited a few different doctors and had experienced several invasive tests. If you have ever received a call like this, you know that nothing prepares you to hear those words from a friend. I didn’t know what to say, and I struggled against saying that everything was going to be okay. His voice carried fear and a broken spirit. Cancer, a malicious presence he didn’t know how to eradicate, had invaded his body.

So I said I was sorry and asked how he was feeling. I also asked about the next steps he was going to take. The big issue, of course, was how he was going to live in the midst of something threatening his living. I promised him I’d keep in touch and would hold him in prayer, and I told him to call me whenever he wanted to.

As faithful brothers in Christ, we both knew prayer was critical for his healing and that prayer indeed is powerful. Still, the suffering remained, and the uncertainty of the future was permeating and nearly kept him from living the days that he had been given. But I hoped that my words would somehow let him know that I was there for him for whatever that would mean to him as he underwent the struggle and suffering of cancer in his life.

When something comes into our lives that creates suffering and pain, we often reach out to someone we know and trust. At the core of our beings as humans, especially when something bad happens, we don’t want to be alone. Somehow just knowing that someone else knows what we are going through gives us the courage and the grace to be able to talk about it and to determine that it won’t overwhelm and control us.

Perhaps one of the saddest human experiences is to suffer in silence or to try to endure a horrible thing and keep it a secret. That’s not to say we stand on a street corner and announce our suffering. But it does mean that we are better off when we share our burdens with those who can help us shoulder the pain, or at least are able to know that we are in such pain and suffering in our lives. When my Dad was dying in the hospital, I spent several nights sitting up with him, just to be there and tell him it was all right when he would wake with fear in his voice.

At one of his most painful moments, Jesus called on his dear friends, his closest companions, Peter, James, and John. “I’m very sad,” he told them. “It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert with me” (Matthew 26:38). Remember who these three were to Jesus. This select trio had been with Jesus at his transfiguration (17:1). They vowed they were willing to drink from the same cup as Jesus (20:22). In other words, they were willing to die for him (26:33).

Keep alert. Be my friends. Stay here and just be with me, Jesus said to them.
He wanted their presence and their attention. The fact is, there was nothing they could do except to be with him so that he would not have to suffer alone.

When has someone sat with you in your suffering? What was the most helpful thing they said or did?

**The Time Has Come**

After making his request of his close friends and disciples, Jesus “went a short distance farther and fell on his face and prayed, ‘My Father, if it’s possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want’” (Matthew 26:39). Jesus’ prayer reflects his deep struggle, asking God first to deliver him from death but then stating firmly and clearly his commitment to God’s will.

It’s sad and almost painful, to read that, after Jesus prayed this poignant prayer, “he came back to the disciples and found them sleeping” (verse 40). They actually fell asleep three different times that evening (verses 42-43)!

They had one thing to do: to stay with Jesus and to stay awake. Instead, they slept and found comfort in the place where Jesus found agony. They fell far short of doing what should have been a simple thing. We like to think that we would never have done that, but we can certainly think of times when we have walked away from Jesus’ call to stay with him. It is not a matter of what we pledge we will do for Jesus. It’s a matter of what we do at each moment that shows our love is more powerful than our personal desires of comfort.

Sadly, Jesus needed the disciples, and they faded to sleep. “Look,” he told them, “the time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let’s go. Look, here comes my betrayer” (verses 45-46).

What have you committed to Jesus? What distracts you or pulls you away from keeping your commitment?

**God Is With Us. We Are Not Alone**

Most often, we humans don’t do well all alone. Even when we think we are self-reliant, the sense of loneliness and emptiness in life is an entire other form of suffering that we usually try to avoid.

In October 2013, I was living in Rapid City, South Dakota, while Cheri was living in Fargo, North Dakota—nine hours away—where she found work. One day, it snowed hard in Rapid City. By the time it stopped three days later, over 31 inches of snow had fallen at my house, coupled with winds that gusted up to 71 miles per hour. Two hours after the snow and wind began, I lost electricity, phone, internet, and cellular service.

For three days, I was trapped in the house with no way to communicate with the outside world. An eight-foot by eight-foot by seven-foot-thick snow drift closed off my front doors. It is amazing how quiet
and lonely it can be when you are alone in a house with no power, lights, heat, or anything!

If I never have to experience that again, it would be just fine with me! Sometime into the second day, I spontaneously began to talk to God. I shared a lot of feelings, a lot of ideas, of lot of anger, and a lot of requests for help. On day three, suddenly the power came back on! And then just as quickly, it went out for another six hours. By then, however, I was doing okay. It wasn’t mystical or deeply religious, but I experienced the presence of God with me. God kept saying, “It’s okay. What else do you need besides me?”

God was right. What I needed was the presence of the one who made me and was sustaining me. It was a powerful experience when all was said and done and grew my relationship with and my reliance on God in a good way.

That night in the garden, Jesus had hoped not to be alone. He had hoped for his friends to stay with him, but it was as if he were separated from all of them. That night, however, Jesus did have God. As he faced painful realities alone while his friends slept, with the presence of God, Jesus was able to come to a sense of peace, acceptance, and surrender. He knew that, in all things, God would be with him, even when he would feel that absence on the cross. He knew that God would bring life, even after death.

So it is with you and me. When we take the time to pray, to listen, and to realize that, when no one else is there, God is with us, we too can be filled with that presence and that promise, even when we are forced to drink of the cup from pain and suffering in our lives. God is still with us and will sustain us in all things with the love that will not let us go. This is our faith as Christians. This is God’s grace poured out on us when nothing else seems to work.

“We are not alone,” proclaims “A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada.” “We trust in God. . . . In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.”

Knowing that God will always be with you, how does that change the way in which you deal with suffering in your life?

Hold me close, loving God, even as I suffer in my life, and help me to care for this world of suffering through your love; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 From “A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada,” The United Methodist Hymnal; page 883.
Lesson 3

The Israelites in the Wilderness

Purpose
To confess our often self-centered approach to our relationship with God

Hearing the Word
The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Numbers 21:4-9 (NIV)
4 They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;
5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”
6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.
7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.
8 The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”
9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Numbers 21:4-9 (KJV)
4 And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.
5 And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.
6 And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.
7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.
8 And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.
9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.
Admit it: As cute and cuddly as they are, babies are also self-centered. They believe they should always have their own way: fed and held when they want, diapers changed immediately on demand, full attention all the time. Often, we sit in awe of the miraculous and marvelous new creations of God that they are.

Self-centeredness is a human condition. Nearly every day, most all of us take into account our own needs, wants, and sense of being and often as not place these at the center of our lives and our world. We can forgive this sense of self-centeredness in babies, children, and teenagers since it is part of human growth and development.

But as adults, we are often self-centered when we are sick or have significant issues that arise in our lives. We think of ourselves first when we feel pain or are having trouble dealing with changes. We can think of a thousand different reasons and acts of self-centeredness that we have experienced or observed in others. This is human nature.

However, when self-centeredness becomes our default attitude, we are in danger. We are in danger of losing the best part of our lives when we make everything else a servant of our needs, because we miss the experience of the beauty of things in and of themselves. When I need you to serve me, and I see you only in that light, I never see you as who you are.

Unfortunately, the children of Israel had that tendency throughout their wandering in the wilderness. This lesson leads us to look at their self-centeredness and God’s interesting reaction to it. Their story can remind us of our own self-centered tendencies in our relationship with God.

Feeling Proud

In the verses just before today’s Focus Scripture, we find an important story. The Israelites had wandered into the northern Negev desert, in what today is southern Israel. At that time, it was ruled by a Canaanite king. Israel was not a warrior nation, and the king of Arad fought with them and took some Israelites into captivity. Israel prayed to God to give them the power to defeat the king, and in return they would destroy...
the city. It happened as they prayed, and they experienced another victory over a foreign force (Numbers 21:1-3).

When our son Adam was in elementary school, he played on a good soccer team. They managed to pretty well whip most of the other fourth-grade teams. The inherent danger of being so good, unfortunately, was that they believed they deserved to win every game. Instead of showing good sportsmanship, they grew boastful and arrogant. Every goal they scored became an opportunity to belittle the other team. It was no longer fun to watch them play.

Their coach, embarrassed and frustrated, arranged for them to play a game against another team from a neighboring town. We quickly understood the coach’s mind. Our team held their own for a good four minutes, and then the other team began to play with their own disciplined, incredibly good skills. By the time the half was over, it had become a huge rout. More significantly, when the other team scored over and over against us, they had no reaction; they just went back in formation, ready to score again. It was a marvelously humbling experience for the team and for all of us.

The Israelites had won a few different battles, and after this most recent victory over the Canaanites, we can imagine that they were feeling proud and perhaps a little haughty. Then they started complaining to Moses and to God about their living conditions.

"Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert," they challenged God and Moses (verse 5). Granted, they were in the wilderness, but their basic needs were being met, even by the miraculous gift of daily manna God gave them for their sustenance. In their haughty self-centeredness, they rejected what God had given them: “We detest this miserable bread!” (verse 5). How arrogant, rude, and self-centered could they be to complain after God had brought them out of slavery!

What would we have done in their circumstances? Would we have demanded a change in our living conditions? Would we think so highly and completely of ourselves that we would impugn the gifts of God? What about in our actual circumstances? Have we ever been guilty of similar attitudes toward God’s provisions?

Self-centeredness means that we draw the baseline of what is acceptable for us at such a high level that we demand the world—and God—to shape up and see to our needs, and do so pronto. Self-centeredness creates a hunger in our hearts not for peace but to feed what cannot be satisfied. As a result, the self-centered person is the most miserable being on earth.

Think about a time when you were self-centered. What happened to your inner balance? What about your heart?

**Say What?**

Can you think of a time when, as soon as words came out of your mouth, you wished you could quickly gather them back from the atmosphere and stuff them back down your throat?
At the age of 13, I had lots of activities and friends and accomplishments of all sorts. I never even noticed the transformation growing inside of me from being delighted with the good parts of my life to demanding that the rest of my life get in line with those other parts. Everything, slowly but surely, became things that pleased me or displeased me. It was all about me, the Center of the Known Universe.

One day when I came home from school, I encountered the smell of navy bean soup. I hated navy bean soup. Mom was in the kitchen, and I stomped in and began to berate her for "making such garbage" for dinner.

You can most likely surmise that this was not the appropriate thing for me to say on a number of levels! Mom looked at me for a good minute or so, and then she put down the spoon and walked out of the kitchen. My big, important, self-centered world crumbled. I wished that she had knocked me on the forehead with the spoon, but she just left. I had taken her feelings, thrown them on the floor, and stepped on them—this woman who had often gone without so that the seven of us children could have more. I saw beyond myself, and I saw myself, and it wasn't pretty or even acceptable.

Yes, I apologized, and, yes, we made up; but I never forgot the experience of placing myself above a person who loved me. Even today, I remember it with pain.

So, the Israelites didn't like their manna—their navy bean soup—or apparently anything else God had provided to sustain them in the wilderness. They were so full of themselves that they treated God like their own servant.

Verse 6 is powerfully understated: "So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died." Isn't it fascinating that the same creature who participated in the fall from Eden now wantonly moved through the nation of Israel and killed many of them? God didn't say a word to the people. God's response to their condemnation was powerful, however. What can we think about God's reaction?

Honestly, it was harsh and scary. We tend not to think of God acting this way. Let's set aside the idea that God was just angry and decided to let them have it. Nothing in the Scripture text speaks to how God felt at this point. But what God did was a witness to great power.

Just as God rained down the plagues on Egypt for their denial of that power and authority, so it was even with the children of Israel when God unleashed the snakes on them. When they complained to Moses, all Moses could do was be frustrated and put out by their demands and behavior. When they complained to God, we can see that the response was indeed not what they expected!

Could it also be that God wanted to make a definite point? Notice that God didn't rain fire and lightning down on the Israelites didn't turn their water to blood, or give them boils. God simply let loose the creatures of the wilderness. Poison-
ous snakes would have been prevalent in that region. Even today, vipers are numerous and deadly.

Could it be that God intended with this action to answer Israel’s complaint that they had been brought up to be killed in the wilderness? It’s as if God meant to prove that, indeed, God didn’t have to kill them. There were plenty of things, such as poisonous vipers, to kill and injure the Israelites in this place. Rather than bring them up from Egypt to kill them, it was the other way around. God was the one who had protected them, even in the land of snakes and scorpions and other things that so easily kill.

When God heard Israel’s selfish complaints and condemnation, God seems to have said (and I’m paraphrasing, of course), “Say what? You don’t know what I have done for you, and you complain about the bread I have given you to sustain your life? Go ahead and deal with some snakes for a while, and then we can talk.”

In a sense, God punished the people in a harsh way. But in another sense, God simply allowed them to experience life without the divine presence so they could experience the danger and fatal consequences of acting self-centered before the God who controls bread and snakes.

What have you experienced when you demanded that God meet your needs according to your specifications? How does God sustain your life?

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**Repentance and Healing**

It’s easy, isn’t it, for us to say we are sorry about minor or simple offenses against other people, such as bumping against them or interrupting them in conversation. “Sorry” becomes simply part of good manners, and we ask to be excused from the penalty of inappropriate behavior. Most often, they will say, “That’s all right” or “No problem.”

But when it comes to a major episode of offense, often, it’s incredibly hard for the offender to ask for forgiveness. And it can be equally hard for those who have been hurt to wholly extend forgiveness to those who have offended them. I’ve often said that the most delicious position someone can be in is holding other people’s wrongs against them, standing righteously wounded as a true victim. The trouble is, when we refuse to release others from their imprisonment of wrong, we too are frozen in time and unable to move forward.

It’s hard to forgive, because we have to give away what is ours: our sense of being wronged and our sense of being innocent. However, it is only in repentance and the offering of forgiveness that true healing can begin to occur and our lives once again become more whole.

So, the people of Israel knew they had blown it. With snakes slithering around killing their family members, the people went to Moses. Notice they didn’t go directly to God the way they did when they decided to condemn and fault God for their inconvenience. The people went to Moses and said, “We’ve sinned, for
we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord so that he will send the snakes away from us” (Numbers 21:7).

As before, God did not address the people directly for their behavior. Instead, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live.’ Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole” (verses 8-9). Whoever was bitten by a snake “could look at the bronze snake and live,” God told Moses (verse 9).

We need to realize what God did with this command to Moses. Is there anywhere else in the Bible where, if someone looks at a piece of bronze on a stick, they are healed? Not that I can think of. Could it be that the symbol of the bronze snake is better understood as a call to the people to repent and renew their faith? Would they have faith enough to simply look at a bronze snake on a stick and so be healed? That’s what happened. The snake was a focal point for the people to trust in God once again.

Did they believe God would care for them, see to their needs, and even heal them from venomous snake bites? If they did, then they could go to God humbled and ready to receive, not out of self-centeredness, but with gratitude for God’s grace and provision.

The fact is, we, like they, need God. Their story challenges us to examine our relationship with God and repent of the times and ways we have been self-centered in that relationship. It warns us to avoid becoming haughty about what we think we deserve or complaining about how we have not gotten what we think should be coming to us. It reminds us to respond in gratitude for God’s forgiveness toward us and extend to others the forgiveness we have received.

For what do you seek God’s forgiveness today? To whom do you need to extend forgiveness?

God of the wilderness, protect me and lead me to life as I humbly serve you; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Jesus in the Wilderness

Purpose
To claim the power of Scripture to combat temptation in our lives

Hearing the Word
The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)
1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.
3 The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”
4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”
5 Then the devil took him up to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.
6 “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”
7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”
8 Again, the devil took him up into a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.
9 “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”
10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”
11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4:1-11 (KJV)
1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.
2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.
3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.
4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.
5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple,
6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.
7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.
8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;
9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.
10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.
11 Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.
Temptation. The word always involves the enticement to do something we would otherwise not do, and usually that something is sin. “I’m tempted to try that new dessert.” “I’m tempted to do this or do that,” usually based on the lure of something that exists out there somewhere. I think we can be honest that temptation rarely, if ever, is some force that calls us into holiness or right ways of living. More likely, it’s the “come on” to do what we should not do.

Isn’t it interesting that, immediately after his baptism and the spoken blessing from God calling Jesus God’s Son (Matthew 3:13-17), Jesus was led by the Spirit into an extended time of temptation? It was a time to test Jesus’ own spirit and confidence in God’s power in his life to overcome the need or lure to live like anyone else in the world.

The great news of this Scripture is that Jesus did overcome this temptation. He did what we wish and hope we could do. As we look closely at this incident from Jesus’ life, we can learn how Jesus said no to temptation, and we can find in his example resources to help us grow more fully into Christlikeness.

The Fact of Temptation

Maybe it’s something fairly innocent, such as wanting another piece of chocolate, or not counting that one missed stroke on the golf course. It could be a bit more serious, such as breaking a traffic law or shoplifting. Or even more, giving one’s self over to pornography or acts of violence or vandalism. As we noted in earlier lessons, the lure of temptation is woven into our behavior as humans. We want what we cannot or should not have; and in our self-centered nature, we think we should receive preferential treatment or be allowed to do what no one should do.

It’s important to realize that temptation is not a rational thing. It is always an emotional takeover of our reason and our core beliefs. When we are tempted to do something, whatever it is seems to rise in power and overwhelm normal decisions we would otherwise make.

My beloved wife, Cheri, is one of the more balanced and reasonable people I’ve ever known, except when it comes to shoes. I have three pairs of shoes that I wear, including a pair of sandals for the summer. I just sneaked into our closet and counted over 25 pairs of shoes Cheri owns, not including the pair she is wearing today. This count also does not include the near dozen pairs she is giving away to help others dress more fashionably. Frankly, she has never met a
pair of shoes she didn’t like, and she usually buys them!

Cheri is helpless in the face of footwear. Not me, of course. I’m happy with my eight-year-old dress shoes. But let’s not talk about our collection of antique stoneware crocks, okay? I mean, there is always room for another piece for the house, right?

Our temptations are as varied as our personalities, and we need to understand that temptation never goes away. There are and will always be invitations to do what no thinking person would reasonably do but what seems, at the time, to be a good path to take. Once we are clear about the reality of temptation in our lives, then we can understand its power over us. We can also recognize our need for God to overcome those enticing, sometimes innocent, sometimes horrible ways in which we are tempted to take a path that is not good for us.

Two other things about temptation: First, being tempted usually happens when we find ourselves in dangerous places. That is, we are most easily tempted when we are outside of our normal element.

When I’m in a strange place, even if that’s a shoe store, an antiques mall, or a foreign place I don’t know well, my anti-tempting guard goes down. In the midst of a strange place, I see things that I might not see in my normal life, and those things are tempting and enticing. The strong barricades against moving forward on them slide away.

Now that’s not to say that we should never leave home or travel or go to new places, but it’s critical for us to always know where we are and what we are facing. That helps us make decisions that are less emotional and reactive and more thoughtful, with a level of reserve. If I go to an antiques store with money in my pocket and get carried away, I can assure you I will not only be led into temptation but will embrace it fully and completely, with my cash and credit card!

Second, temptation causes heartbreak when I give in to it. The thing that is tempting me can even try to overwhelm me and take away my reasonable perspective and thoughts. But it is only when I say yes that the temptation and the tempter win. No one makes us fall into and agree with temptation. It’s on us. It is our sin, our fault, our lack of backbone, or our willingness to please ourselves no matter the cost that makes it so horribly effective.

What was happening in your life that made the temptation so easy to agree to?

Knowledge Is Power

When I was about eight or nine years old, the Air Force base chapel my family attended had a junior youth group for children in grades three through five. We had lots of fun with great songs, lessons, and games. One of the more important parts, however, was the ongoing Bible verse memorization. We were challenged to memorize what seemed to be a massive list of Scripture verses.

As we recited the verses we had learned each week, the leaders would check off squares on their large tally board. As we passed certain levels, we would receive precious and valuable gifts, such as rulers with Bible verses on them or Bibles with the winners’ names inscribed on them. These were powerful incentives to learn Bible verses, and they were effective.
Would it surprise you to know that I still have all of those prizes in my possession today? More important, I still can quote a huge number of verses in the Bible that are woven and cemented into my brain. I didn’t realize at the time as an eight-year-old what enormous gifts those leaders had given me: the ability to rely on Scripture when things got rough in my life and to use Scripture in sharing the good news with others.

Matthew wrote the verse so plainly, so matter-of-factly: “Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him” (Matthew 4:1). But Jesus was no victim here. As it was at his baptism, his temptation was “part of his obedience to God.”

Matthew also tells us that Jesus went for 40 days without eating and “was starving” (verse 2). But while Jesus was physically hungry—he was human, after all—his 40-day fast had strengthened him spiritually for what would come next. That’s when the devil first brought the temptation to bear. He painted a picture of what could be if only Jesus were to succumb to the temptation to act in a way that would betray his true identity as the Son of God.

The devil was pretty crafty in inviting Jesus to take advantage of the privilege of being God’s Son, to care for himself, to make God care for him, and to lord over the world: “Command these stones to become bread . . . throw yourself down . . . bow down and worship me” (verses 3, 6, 9).

How could Jesus resist such temptation? It was so powerful, and Jesus was in a weakened state. In those moments of terrible temptation, Jesus recalled his training as a boy in the synagogue. He remembered Scripture verses that must have been woven into his mind and heart. When the devil made a full-on press to get Jesus to fall in the temptation, Scripture took over. Jesus didn’t have to bring a long-winded theological treatise. He quoted Scripture, and the truths of Scripture empowered him to withstand what the devil offered and keep Jesus on the holy path.

One of my favorite hymns of all time is one I expect you know as well: “How Firm a Foundation.” The first stanza says, “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word!” Within the United Methodist tradition are four factors guiding our understanding of God: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The primary resource and standard for doctrine is Scripture, God’s excellent Word.

A great tragedy in a Christian’s life occurs when that person has no knowledge of God through Scripture. Of course, we can understand the grace of God and the gift of Christ in many ways, but a powerful core source comes as we study the Bible, as we learn the verses, and as we weave those verses into our very lives. For many people, all I have to do is write, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want,” and you can complete the sentence and probably many others that follow it. You know the power of those words to comfort, to guide, to reconfirm God’s loving care. Just as Jesus relied on his learning, so we have the responsibility and opportunity to do the same.

What verses of Scripture do you most cherish? How much time do you spend in reading and studying Scripture on a regular basis?
To Say the Right Thing

Can you think of a time when, after the heat of an intense conversation, you came up with absolutely the best retort or response, but it was too late? I certainly can. For some reason, it seems our brains often freeze up when we are in an argument, and we miss the chance to provide a strong comeback. I like to think of it as God guarding our mouths, saying, “That’s enough; time to cool off.” Still, we probably do wish we had thought of those things to say earlier.

Jesus was in a face-to-face battle with the devil. He was exhausted and starving, having spent 40 days alone and now being in a weakened state. The devil came on strong, affirming Jesus’ identity as God’s Son but challenging him about what that actually meant to him. Since you’re hungry, he said, “command these stones to become bread” (verse 3). Would Jesus decide to perform a miracle to assuage his own hunger and that of others (notice the plural “stones”), or would he rely on God to provide for him? Jesus’ reply was simple and direct, and he quoted Scripture: “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God” (verse 4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

Having been foiled in that first test, the devil then took Jesus “into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple,” challenging him to “throw [himself] down.” After all, the devil said, also quoting Scripture, “it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone” (verse 6). Again, Jesus’ reply was simple and direct: “Don’t test the Lord your God” (verse 7; Deuteronomy 6:16).

The devil was still not done with Jesus, taking him next “to a very high mountain” where he “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (verse 8). All of this can be yours, the devil told Jesus, “if you bow down and worship me” (verse 9). Why not trust that God will protect you, even if you do something as careless as jumping off the top of the Temple? the devil said. How about just bowing down to me, and I will give you all of the kingdoms of the world? Think of the power you would have! Strong temptations, to be sure, and ones we might cave into and accept. But the kingdoms the devil offered to Jesus were not his to give.

A third time, Jesus rebuffed the devil by quoting Scripture, this time adding his own words as well: “Go away, Satan, because it’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (verse 10; Deuteronomy 6:13). Finally, the devil left Jesus, “and angels came and took care of him” (verse 11).

Not only did Jesus know Scripture so well he could quote it, he knew exactly what the devil was tempting him to do, and Jesus responded with exactly the right words at the right time. When faced with the test and the enticement to sin, encouraged to place himself and his needs above God’s will and power, Jesus instead used the power of Scripture and the blessing and knowledge of God to overcome the temptation handed to him by the devil.

You see, Jesus knew at that moment what overcomes temptation. His love for God, his humble respect for God’s call and claim on him, his knowledge of Scripture that contains the story of God’s interaction and grace for this world from the beginning of time—all of these
empowered Jesus to withstand temptation. Jesus had one thing more: He had faith in God's power and provision.

Notice the three Scripture verses Jesus quoted. They all deal with our relationship with God and how we are to live and trust our lives to God in all things. That's what defeated the devil. That's also what will defeat the temptations in our lives, no matter how delicious or enticing or reasonable they seem to be.

Anything that does not draw us closer to God is a temptation to lead us farther away from God. We have been given the power to overcome it, by God's grace and loving hand. It is our call to live as Jesus lived, in love, respect, knowledge, and trust in the one who has created us and who sent his Son to free us from the burden of being powerless in temptation.

Trust in God empowers us to live in our world as holy, loving, and hopeful children. To try to go it alone will bring only the certainty of broken hearts and broken lives for ourselves and others.

What helpful words from Scripture might you share with someone you know who is in the midst of a time of temptation, in their wilderness, who needs to find a better path with God?

God of our firm foundation, allow me this day to find my solid ground in you. Give me the desire to know your Word more completely and to call on its truths when temptation comes; in Jesus' name. Amen.

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1. From The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII (Abingdon Press); page 163.
2. The United Methodist Hymnal, 529.
2 Kings 25:8-21 (NIV)
8 On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.
9 He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.
10 The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.
11 Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon.
12 But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.
13 The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord and they carried the bronze to Babylon.
14 They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes and all the bronze articles used in the temple service.
15 The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and sprinkling bowls—all that were made of pure gold or silver.
16 The bronze from the two pillars, the Sea and the movable stands, which Solomon had made for the temple of the Lord, was more than could be weighed.
17 Each pillar was eighteen cubits high. The bronze capital on top of one pillar was three cubits high and was decorated with a network and pomegranates of bronze all around. The other pillar, with its network, was similar.
18 The commander of the guard took as prisoners Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank and the three doorkeepers.
19 Of those still in the city, he took the officer in charge of the fighting men, and five royal advisers. He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land and sixty of the conscripts who were found in the city.
20 Nebuzaradan the commander took them all and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah.
21 There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed. So Judah went into captivity, away from her land.

2 Kings 25:8-21 (KJV)
8 And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem:
9 And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire.
10 And all the army of the Chaldees, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about.
11 Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away.
12 But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen.
13 And the pillars of brass that were in the house of the Lord, and the bases, and the brazen sea that was in the house of the Lord, did the Chaldees break in pieces, and carried the brass of them to Babylon.

The People of Judah Are Exiled

Purpose
To understand that suffering comes in many forms.

Hearing the Word
The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.
Lesson 5

I love action movies. You know the kind: An average guy gets thrust into the role of hero to try to save someone or something. He eventually overcomes the evil with only a scratch over his eye and maybe a bruised shoulder. At the beginning of all of these movies, however, the bad guys seem to have all of the power. They attack everyone who gets in their way. Then they methodically loot the bank or seize the nuclear weapon or kidnap an unsuspecting soul and head for a secret location, where they think they'll never be discovered.

It happens every time. And every time, I am taken to the edge of a cliffhanging moment. Then the hero miraculously wins the day; all are rescued; the world is saved; and, usually, the hero gets the girl. Make-believe stories and movies like these are meant for entertainment; and even as dramatic as they get, we know they are not real. The suffering and struggle we find in them are just part of the script. We can imagine that, after the director yells “Cut!” the villains and the hero go to lunch together and have a good time.

With 24/7 access to global news,
much of it involving suffering, it might be
easy for us to turn this real suffering into
a sort of screenplay. But real suffering is
just that, a real, horrible, agonizing experi-
ence that can destroy lives and destroy
hope. Suffering can be personal, but it
can also be found in a community or in
an entire nation, as we experienced on

Second Kings 25:8-21 offers a plain
and chilling account of the suffering of
the nation of Judah and the fall of the
great city of Jerusalem at the hands of
the Babylonians. It describes suffering on
a massive scale that forever changed and
informed the people of Israel about their
life in this world. As you read this account,
pay close attention to the incredible detail
the writer offers. It’s a sad and powerful
story, with an important meaning for us
today.

A Bit of Background

I’ve always read with interest the sto-
ries of German men, some in their 90s
now, who are finally arrested for having
served during World War II as Nazi guards
at concentration camps. Even more than
70 years after their crimes, after having
lived entire lives, the consequences of
their actions arrive with significant accu-


Judah. Israel was then conquered by the
Assyrians in 722BC. Judah, as we read in
2 Kings 25, was conquered in 586BC and
the people led into captivity by the Baby-
lonians.

This explains what happened to the
region, but it doesn’t explain why. The
“why” unfortunately is simple: The people
turned away from God, and the rulers did
evil in the Lord’s eyes. We can all recall
the wonderful story of the Israelites cross-
ing the Jordan River into the promised
land of Canaan, a land that they believed
God had given to them through Abraham.
They were God’s chosen people, chosen
to be a blessing to the world. They were
the example of how people can be in
covenant with the God of the universe
through the commandments and the Law.
They were a nation founded by God.

Sadly, over the course of generations,
over and over again, the chosen people
chose not to follow God. Instead, they
chose to follow their own devices and
desires. They broke the commandments,
including worshiping false foreign gods.
They, and especially their kings, continu-
ally acted as though God didn’t matter.
They shattered the covenant time and
time again. Sure, there were some kings
like Josiah who worked to lead the people
back to God; but after their deaths, the
people reverted to living apart from God.

Second Kings 23:26 says that, in spite
of Josiah’s faithfulness, “the Lord didn’t
turn away from the great rage that burned
against Judah . . . and said, ‘I will remove
Judah from my presence just as I
removed Israel. I will reject this city,
Jerusalem, which I chose, and this temple
where I promised my name would reside.”

Whether we consider it to be a consequence or a punishment levied by God doesn’t matter. After generations of the people rejecting the prophets’ calls to turn back to God, God decided to send them away from all they knew and all that was comfortable. This means of suffering was laid upon them to change their hearts and minds to live more humbly and faithfully as God’s people.

If you had been living in Judah at that time, what would be the last thing you would expect to happen? It probably would be to lose your sense of normal: food, shelter, language, possessions, and the Temple. The Judahites’ impending suffering was greater than anyone could have imagined, especially since woven into their cultural minds was the promise of the Promised Land. That was God’s key gift to them, and soon they would no longer have it.

What suffering might you undergo but never expect? What emotions would arise for you and others?

Ruthless Destruction

One of the parsonages we lived in was situated on a corner lot. It had been nicely landscaped, with large areas of trees and bushes dividing up the grassy areas. It took forever to mow and water, but it was pretty, almost like a park.

One morning, after a rainy couple of days, I went outside to get the paper, and I saw it. Someone, in the middle of the night, had driven their truck right across our yard and had dug deep ruts in the grass. Instead of simply using the street, they cut across our yard. It wasn’t an accident. They purposely decided to be vandals.

It doesn’t take much for me to recall the feelings I had inside. I was furious and helpless at the same time. We had no way of finding out who did it, and it would take a lot of time to repair the damage; and there was no guarantee they wouldn’t do it again. The action by someone who thought they would just have fun or use their power to destroy brought a real measure of suffering to my heart for a while. It was a bad thing, and I could do little about it.

Nearly the entire reading of the Scripture for this lesson sounds chilling. It recounts a step-by-step progression of destruction of Jerusalem and all that the nation of Judah held dear. The act was recorded in careful detail (2 Kings 25:8). First, this “commander of the guard” and “official of the Babylonian king” burned everything, from the Temple to the palace to all of the houses (verse 9). Next, he and his army tore down the city wall (verse 10). Then, they exiled all of the people, except for a few to farm and work the vineyards (verses 11-12).

We find the greatest detail in the description of the utter destruction of the beloved Temple Solomon built. The Chaldeans (another name for the Babylonians) ransacked and looted it, taking “the bronze . . . the pots, the shovels, the wick trimmers, the dishes, . . . the fire pans and the sprinkling bowls, which were made of pure gold and pure silver” (verses 13-14). “The bronze in all these
objects,” the text tells us, “was too heavy to weigh” (verse 16).

Finally, the commander of the guard rounded up the leaders of the Temple and the officers and military personnel and drove them to Riblah, in what is Syria today. Verse 21 is brutal in its simplicity: “The king of Babylon struck them down, killing them.” Those who would possibly have had the power to regroup the people or maintain the traditions were wiped out.

Please understand the grave meaning of these actions. The city was not just taken over but was ransacked and then torn down. The Temple, the center of worship life, was also torn down, and the precious holy things were stolen and carted off. The leaders were murdered. Can we understand suffering on this scale, not only the immediate pain of losing so much but also the suffering of losing the connection with the past and the sense of being set adrift?

It indeed was a ruthless act. The king of Babylon wanted to be completely thorough in his control of that region, and the way to do that was to disintegrate the entire culture of Judah and take those with any type of skills or talents and use them to further build up his own kingdom. If this were the only part of the Bible we had available to read, our faith would most likely be found only in despair and great sadness.

Let’s recall the context once again. Why would God allow this to happen? It’s important to acknowledge that God was not being mean in this situation. The chosen people had become a covenant dis-aster, with the entire nation living in a way that seemed to say, “We care nothing for God.” The only way left to somehow preserve the chosen people was to destroy everything that might come between them and the God who loved them.

Even the Temple had become a substitute for their relationship with God, since the people, if they worshiped at all, simply went through the motions of worship without making it real. God acted to allow the suffering that would eventually bring the people to a new relationship with God.

Would there be a reason for God to allow this kind of suffering for us?

The Exile

Our family lived in Australia when I was a boy, and it was a marvelous time. I enjoyed my friends there and the “funny” way they talked. Although, since we were the only Americans on the base where we lived, our English dialect was probably the funny one!

It was later, as I learned more about Australia, that I discovered a sad and fascinating fact: The first British arrived in Sidney on a fleet of 11 ships in 1788, carrying convicts, exiled for life from their homes to a faraway land. I wonder what that would have felt like.

I remember how strange it was to move from the Red River Valley of North Dakota, populated by Scandinavian descendants, to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where on Sunday mornings you would find the tops of coat racks filled with cowboy hats. A number of times, I thought I should click my heels and find
my way back “home,” because the manners, interactions, and even the cultural expectations there were so different from North Dakota. I wasn’t exiled, but it seemed close. The times I went home were wonderfully familiar and gave my heart joy.

Second Kings 25:21 closes with another simple but chilling and profound statement: “So Judah was exiled from its land.” An entire nation, an entire culture, was ripped away from them. Remember that Babylonians and Jews did not speak the same language, nor did they eat the same food or keep the same calendar. The Babylonians also did not understand the idea of sabbath or any of the other commandments and rules the Jews followed. Nothing in Babylon felt like home.

Perhaps you’ve seen the musical Fiddler on the Roof and can recall that as the people are being forced from their village of Anatevka, they sing of the sense of mourning from having to leave their longtime home. The need for the familiar in a sea of foreign is critical for all of us. Even after a wonderful vacation, people often say, “It will be so nice to sleep in my own bed.”

After the killing and slaughter of the leaders of Judah, when the people were taken to Babylon, they were not tortured, brutalized, or imprisoned. They were the same as they always had been, except for one thing that brought incredible suffering, sadness, sorrow, and pain. They couldn’t go home. They couldn’t experience the normal of their normal life. And even if they went home, there was nothing left of what they had known as home.

So the people of Judah, in one chapter of Scripture, experience death, destruction of their home and center of worship, and exile to a foreign land, so different and strange from what they had known.

We live in a far different time. Because of our ability to travel and to know the world through television, print, and internet sources, we are better connected with people and places that seem strange to us. When I go to the mall and walk around, I can hear people speaking as many as 10-12 different languages. The people of Judah knew only Judah. Their suffering was honest, true, and heartbreaking.

It would eventually end. In 70 years, over two generations later, the people would finally be free to return home to a place most of the nation had never seen. Perhaps that would have been the greatest moment of suffering, the feeling that the place to which they returned was not home, but it felt like it since their parents were born there. It should have been home, but it too felt like a foreign land. But God was still their God.

Have you ever experienced a kind of exile from all that you know or love?

God of all, keep me safe, and let me always find my home in you; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 From gutenberg.net.au/first-fleet.html.
Jesus Dies on a Cross

Purpose
To recall the unprecedented sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Hearing the Word
The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Mark 15:22-39 (NIV)
22 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”).
23 Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.
24 And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.
25 It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.
26 The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.
27 They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left.
28 It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors...
29 Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,
30 come down from the cross and save yourself!”
31 In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!
32 Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.
33 At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.
34 And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).
35 When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”
36 Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.
37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.
38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.
39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Mark 15:22-39 (KJV)
22 And they bring him unto the place called Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, The place of a skull.
23 And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not.
24 And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take.
25 And it was the third hour, and they crucified him.
26 And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.
27 And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.
28 And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.
29 And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days,

30 Save thyself, and come down from the cross.

31 Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save.

32 Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him.

33 And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?

which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

35 And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, Behold, he calleth Elias.

36 And one ran and filled a spunge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down.

37 And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost.

38 And the vail of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

39 And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.

Lesson 6

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Passage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td>Psalm 22:1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 31</td>
<td>Psalm 22:12-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1</td>
<td>Hebrews 9:1-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2</td>
<td>Mark 15:22-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 3</td>
<td>Mark 15:33-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 4</td>
<td>Mark 15:38-41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 5</td>
<td>John 19:31-37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Seeing the Need

I have always loved Palm Sunday! The hymns are so happy, and worshipers celebrate Jesus as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. I imagine the patchwork quilt of coats laid on the street as he entered Jerusalem that day, carefully placed so that not even the hooves of the donkey that carried Jesus would touch the ground.

One year when I was a child, we received a special gift on Palm Sunday at church. Someone had taken palm branches, cut them into little strips, and then stapled them together in the form of a cross. We each got one as we went in for worship. It was the first time I remember feeling the conflict between Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday or remembering the death of Jesus on the cross.

As I held the pieces of palm fronds, I could feel, right in the center, the hard, sharp edges of the staple that held the fronds together. It felt for me like the sharp edges of the nails that held the crucified Jesus to the cross. In the midst of that grand celebration of the procession of palms, I held the symbol of what would come to be the saddest day of the year. I
grew up a little bit that day.

As you reread the Passion story, do so a bit more slowly than usual. Try to recreate in your own mind the events on the day Jesus died. Doing so can help us come to a deeper gratitude for what the Son of God endured for our eternal sake and life.

A Matter of Fact

One of my hobbies is to explore my family history. I’ve made connections to the Mayflower and even to King Charlemagne (mostly for boasting rights!), but the more fascinating parts have come as I’ve discovered various death certificates of my long-lost family members.

They are stark in their descriptions, usually simply stating the date of death, the location, and the specific time. They also usually state the cause of death: cancer, cancer of the stomach, heart attack/stroke, pleurisy, brain disease, or old age. Quite a few relatives were killed in battle. There are lots of ways we can die, aren’t there? My extended family seems to represent a wide variety. However, nowhere do we find “died by crucifixion” as a cause of death.

Mark’s way of writing his Gospel involved wasting no words. He almost seems to have been in a hurry to record only essential details. He didn’t create any flowery illustrations or images. For example, read Mark 15:24, which bluntly states, “They crucified him.” Simply horrible but plainspoken, just as it was to read of the process by which the soldiers determined who would get the only things left that Jesus owned: “They divided up his clothes, drawing lots for them to determine who would take what.”

Jesus had been taken to Golgotha (verse 22) outside the city walls, most likely close to where the burial site was located. The word Golgotha comes from the Aramaic, gulgulta, which, as the Bible states, literally means “the place of the skull.” Some scholars say that the actual location somehow looked like a skull, but others simply connect it as a place of death. The word Calvary comes from the Latin calva, which means bald head, or skull. Different languages but the same essential meaning.

The Romans had a passion for maintaining order and did so through a wide variety of execution methods. Beheading, stabbing, strangling, stoning, burning alive, and worse were all in the repertoire of the Roman executioners. Only they, however, would use the tool of crucifixion, and they used it as a political weapon. One could be crucified, not for stealing or adultery, but for sedition, which was the attempt to overthrow the government.

Some believe that the two men crucified with Jesus (verse 27; “thieves,” King James Version; “bandits,” NRSV) were “outlaws” (CEB) or “rebels” (NIV) against the government since there were dozens of rebellious groups in Palestine at the time. Even though the high priest believed Jesus should be executed for blasphemy, Rome didn’t care. It wasn’t their religion. However, they did agree to crucify Jesus for committing a civil crime, of making statements and promoting the belief that he indeed was King of the Jews and a civil threat to Roman power.

However we might interpret the reasons for his execution, there is no doubt of the humiliation, pain, and agony that Jesus experienced that day. Imagine the incredi-
ble sacrifice he gave himself over to experience. For us as followers of Christ, we believe this act of self-giving, as horrible a way as it was for Jesus to die, brought eternal life and salvation to this world.

As you think about the plain, simple facts of Jesus’ crucifixion, what does it mean to you personally to know he died for you? What is the best way for you to respond to Jesus’ death on a cross?

**My God, My God!**

When our two sons were growing up, Cheri and I often took them on hikes through various areas of the Black Hills of South Dakota. One day, we decided to hike to the top of Bear Butte, an ancient mountain-like formation.

It was a long walk uphill. By the time we reached the top, we were a bit winded. On the way down, Adam, seven years old at the time, was curious about everything. “Dad,” he asked, “do you think there are any rattlesnakes around here?” Without thinking, I responded, “I’m sure there are some.” Before I finished the sentence, Adam transformed into a human pogo stick, jumping back and forth, hearing for certain a thousand rattles, ready to strike. He was terrified and could not get back to the car fast enough.

We all have been through times of fear and terror in our lives, and some of them were legitimate, even life-threatening. Keep in mind that fear is always a future-directed emotion. What might happen creates the fear, not what has happened or what is happening. Even if it is moments away, it’s still in the future and undetermined.

Do you think Jesus felt fear on the cross that day? He knew he was going to die, but he had never experienced death and only knew that pain and agony awaited him. It must have been terrifying. I think that’s why he turned to Hebrew Scripture and recalled what he had learned as a boy: “My God, my God, why have you left me?” (Mark 15:34; also Psalm 22:1). Jesus recalled the words appearing in the psalm just preceding the one that states, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1, KJV).

Psalm 22 is a long psalm, with 31 verses in contrast to the six verses we find in Psalm 23. When we read it in its entirety, we discover that it is a song of agony and suffering. “I cry out during the day . . . even at nighttime I don’t stop,” the psalmist said (Psalm 22:2).

But the psalm does not end there. Beginning in verse 19 and through the rest of the psalm, we find praise of God and affirmation of trust in God’s presence and care, even when things are horrible. This was the psalm Jesus offered as he hung from a cross. In his sacrifice, Jesus called out in pain and suffering. But just as surely as the psalmist’s words, expressing feelings of abandonment, were part of his life and heart, so also were the words of affirmation and trust that followed.

How naturally do we employ that kind of faith when we are faced with times of agony, grief, and loss? Some of us have experienced incredible pain, and it perhaps makes us cry out, wondering why God has forsaken us. The circumstances themselves are painful enough, but that pain and suffering are multiplied by the sense that God has abandoned us, leaving us to try to endure it alone.

That’s why investing the time and effort to grow in our faith is so critical. Studying
the Scriptures, spending time in prayer, nurturing our relationship with God, learning in community with others, and understanding more fully the gift Jesus is in our lives—all of these things combine to create a different posture from which we live. When things seem hopeless and without purpose, we can trust that God has indeed not forsaken us. Beyond the momentary feeling of loss, we know that God is with us in all things, and we are not alone.

That assurance comes when we take our Christian faith seriously and make the growth of our faith a core priority for our lives. Our faith is not simply an add-on to living a good life. It is the center of living during times of abundance and in times of suffering, because in all things, we do so with God’s love.

How might you live in the upcoming Easter season that would give you the firm foundation for living a life of faith in the months to come?

The End of the Temple

My dad died July 21, 1993. He died in the morning in the hospital after a fitful night flooded with morphine that was supposed to ease his pain and calm him. It didn’t. Outwardly, Dad had been fine up until late spring that year. What eventually appeared to be cancer was insidious and difficult for the doctors to determine.

Dad’s dying was a powerful and significant part of all of our lives, but his death created a new reality for the Cross family. As a retired lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, Dad was the squadron commander for our family. Mom certainly was a leader as well, but where she expressed her love through tenderness, reason, and conversation, Dad expressed his through order, routine, and a larger-than-life presence. When he was gone, it was as if pieces of his life and gifts were suddenly spread around to the rest of us.

Granted, oldest brother, Ray, thought he would simply take on the mantle, which is typical of firstborns, but it didn’t turn out that way. We have survived and done pretty well, but we are different now. What was on that day in July, simply wasn’t anymore. We often talk about “what used to be” and even laugh at the ways in which our family organization lived out its mission. But today, those days are done. It’s not better or worse; it’s just different.

Mark 15:37 uses the same stark simplicity we find throughout the rest of the Gospel: “But Jesus let out a loud cry and died.” It was over. The life of the itinerant preacher and teacher from Galilee, who led and taught and healed and brought a new understanding of the kingdom of God, was gone. Even before Resurrection three days later, the world changed. The sacrifice of the Son of God was complete; and the world, although it didn’t know it quite yet, was offered a new way of living and existing, as the sin of the world had been also carried into death and destroyed forever.

In the Temple, “the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom” (verse 38). Some traditions hold that the Temple curtain was 60 feet tall, four inches thick, and made of blue, purple, and scarlet fine linen. Where Jerusalem was the heart of Jewish life and the Temple the heart of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies was believed to be the earthly dwelling place of God. Only the high priest could enter there, and then only on occasion, to offer the sin offering on behalf of the people. Because of sin, the people were symbolically and lit-
erally kept apart from God.

On that Friday, Jesus’ sacrifice became the once-and-for-all sin sacrifice, and it also meant for Christians that the Holy of Holies no longer need keep us away from God, nor would the Temple be needed as the symbol of the old covenant. With the tearing of the curtain, the new covenant with Jesus Christ was ushered into the world.

In one sense as we read this Scripture, we may be struck in awe over the incredible sacrifice of Jesus. In another sense, we can see that the sacrifice also changed the world forever. Also notice that the change in everything was not by human effort. This was done by God’s hand. Some imaginative writers have suggested that the curtain was torn from the inside of the Holy of Holies, as God tore the barrier between where God was believed to have dwelt and the entire world outside of that place.

We celebrate and affirm that the work of Good Friday, although physically done by the hands of Roman executioners, was accomplished by the grace of God, who has freed and reclaimed this world through the gift of God’s Son. We know that this time next week, we will celebrate a different reality and experience as we will rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Let’s not, however, miss the solemn opportunity to rejoice in this week’s powerful and loving gift of God. Nothing we have done has enabled this to happen, but certainly everything we do can be known as a grateful response for the gracious gift of God through Christ.

What is your own response to God as you have considered the events recorded in this Scripture?

Gracious and loving God, grant me today the powerful understanding of your love for me, given through Jesus; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Matthew 28:1-10 (NIV)
1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.
2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.
3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.
4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.
5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.
6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.
7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”
8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.
9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.
10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Matthew 28:1-10 (KJV)
1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.
2 And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.
3 His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:
4 And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.
5 And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.
6 He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.
7 And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.
8 And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.
9 And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.
10 Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.
Seeing the Need

Candy, baskets, new clothes, a great meal, and hymns of triumph and celebration. Did I hear trumpets playing? I should, because today is a day unlike any other in our year. It is Resurrection Day!

One year when our family was living in South Carolina on an Air Force base, the Easter sunrise service was held on the tarmac where the planes landed and were kept. Parents brought their bleary-eyed children out into the dewy, almost chilly early spring pre-dawn; and we all stumbled our way across the grass and found our way to the cold folding chairs. No lights were lit. Only darkness.

After what seemed to be an awfully long wait, as we looked east, we saw the sun come up over the horizon. Nothing stood in the way of the sunrise, but soon we realized that a large object had been placed before us. As the sun continued to break through and light the new morning, everyone’s eyes opened wide. Gasps rippled through the congregation. In front of us, life-sized and covered with lilies, vines, and everything beautiful was an empty cross.

Nine years old at the time, I don’t remember a thing the chaplain said, nor any part of the service, but I will never forget the incredible sight of the cross at sunrise on Easter morning. It spoke to me, and still does, more deeply than words, filling me not so much with fear but with excitement and awe. This is what the angels proclaimed. This is what God promised.

Resurrection is something we can claim and experience in our own lives, especially on this first day of the week. As you reread the Scripture of this miraculous morning, my hope is that you will once again experience this for your life and find the joy of this day in the company of Christian brothers and sisters. Let’s celebrate!

Nothing New

Cheri is a women’s health nurse practitioner, and she sees dozens of expectant mothers each year. She is amazed at how many couples seem to believe that the child to be born to them will be unlike any other and that no family in history has or will experience what they are experiencing. Not to mention, the child will be the most handsome or beautiful and most talented and intelligent—far above average! When she tells me that, we just smile, because we know that our two sons were the most hand-
some and intelligent and talented children ever created.

Even though humans have the ability and desire to believe that our lives are singularly unique and our experiences are unlike any one else’s (the truest love, the most important work, the best grandchildren), when we stop and think for a moment or two, it’s humbling to realize that there is nothing new. Granted, there are still things that are special and dramatic, and they catch our eye and attention; but in terms of “totally new,” we are varieties of the same theme, the same human joys and sadness and successes and tragedies. Yes, in one sense, we are all unique, but we are all unique together.

Today’s Scripture holds the unique story upon which we Christians build our faith, God’s miraculous act on Easter morning. Resurrection means “raising from the dead.” It comes from the Latin resurgere, to “resurge” or “to rise.” We know of other instances in Scripture when persons were brought back to life, including by Jesus’ hands.

Lazarus is perhaps the most well-known case, as Jesus called him back to life from the tomb. Many Bible scholars say that Lazarus was resuscitated, brought back to life by Jesus’ act, whereas Jesus was raised to life as a new creation. In doing so, he opened the gates for each of us to experience life that is eternal in nature (2 Corinthians 5:17).

When Lazarus was brought back to life, he eventually died again. When Jesus was resurrected, he was then raised to heaven and lives now eternally at God’s right hand. Jesus is the one who has brought not simply a more abundant life but also eternal life for you and me.

What difference does it make that Jesus has been resurrected by God’s power and lives today?

Fear

As a staff member of the Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church and serving as a superintendent for 19 years, I have managed to wear out four and a half cars with all the driving I’ve had to do. With nearly 145,000 square miles in the two states, my tires have become acquainted with plenty of interstates, highways, and little back roads. In all these years, I have never had an accident nor hit a deer, moose, or other such animal, although I have had to replace a few windshields due to rocks and the occasional pheasant.

One thing I have decided is that I hate to drive long distances after dark. In fact, I have prayed when I’ve had to drive at night that God would protect the sweet creatures that roam at night and keep them in the ditches or the fields or the forests rather than on the roads. I believe in prayer. I also believe in prayer when filled with fear. Besides breaking my car, it would also break my heart to hit and hurt one of those beautiful creatures.

As we noted in an earlier lesson, fear is always based on a future event. What may happen is what seizes us. Fear is also based on the pure unknown. When we come up against something so strange that we have never before known about or experienced, fear is a totally legitimate emotion.

In today’s Scripture, it’s not a matter
of deer in the headlights but instead a matter of experiencing the power of God in a way never seen before. Following Jesus’ death and burial, Pilate and the chief priests posted guards at Jesus’ tomb (Matthew 27:62-66), which already had “a large stone” at its door (verse 60). They further secured the entrance to the tomb by “sealing the stone” (verse 66), almost, it seems, to make sure Jesus stayed dead. But God was involved. A little something like a boulder was no match for the incomparable power of God.

“There was a great earthquake,” Matthew tells us, and “an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it” (Matthew 28:2-3). It was almost as if God were saying, “This is all you have?” With a glimpse into the glory of God, the angel’s shining face and clothes dropped the guards of the tomb into terror and left them shaking and acting like dead men. Quite a sight and quite an experience! I imagine I’d be right there with them, shaking, quaking, and dropping at the vision of such a holy, powerful moment.

Isn’t it interesting that the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection were Roman guards? Neither these important soldiers—instilled with the power of Rome and with official authority to maintain order—nor a closed and sealed tomb were any match for the power of God. In the face of God’s might and glory, all of the human, puffed-up, and oh-so-very-important actions of Rome were set aside, as though they were of no consequence at all. All that was left was for the soldiers to experience fear in the face of holiness, as their work came to a sudden end.

However, it’s more than opening a tomb that can elicit fear. “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb,” Matthew says (verse 1). Instead of encountering what they thought they would see, they also witnessed God’s power and glory, as well as the terrified guards. They also had a conversation of sorts with an angel, certainly not your typical Sunday morning activity.

The angel must have known what his appearance looked like, because his first words were words of good news: “Don’t be afraid” (verse 5). It’s okay, he reassured them. You are looking for a dead body? He’s not here, because he has been raised by the very hand of God to new life! He’ll meet you in Galilee. You can meet him there.

How might we have responded to meeting an angel and hearing such incredible, remarkable, almost unbelievable words? I’d be scared, even if the angel told me not to be! The women experienced great fear for all of the right reasons that morning; but as we will see, that wasn’t the last thing they experienced, was it?

As you place yourself into this Gospel story, what might your first reaction have been?

**Excitement**

Like me, you’ve probably experienced times when fear and excitement ran hand in hand before you. Perhaps it felt as if your heart leaped out of your throat, and you were so happy and so terrified at the same time.

I remember the first time I held
Cheri’s hand as we walked in the snow behind her parents’ farmhouse. I remember each time we discovered we were going to be parents. The fear and the excitement of those events and others were so closely matched together, almost like breathing out and breathing in. The exhale was the fear, the inhale was the excitement, as I was filled with hope and expectation and still had to gasp a little at being uncertain about this future that came crashing down on me.

Verse 8 of today’s Scripture seems to capture that feeling: “With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples.” The women were overwhelmed by what the news might mean, but at the same time, they were filled with incredible energy and the power to “summon forth” or “call out,” which is the original meaning of excite. They almost couldn’t stop themselves, because they were excited to tell the disciples what they had heard!

Isn’t that the case with you? When you have heard or experienced something amazing or life-changing, don’t you quickly call someone or maybe take a picture on your phone and then text it to all of your friends?

You may remember, like me, waking up in the middle of the night as a child. The shadows seemed to be active, and the house creaked, and our first instinct was to run to those persons who could help take the fear away. It was something to get rid of, and we found that relief in the arms of someone bigger and safer than the danger of the night. The fear that claims us is best shared with others who have the power to remove it from behind our hearts, where it seems to sit.

Excitement, though, is so far different, which makes it amazing that the women would have felt both emotions so close together. When we are excited, we will talk with a server in the restaurant or a stranger in line or almost anyone, not to take the excitement away, but in a strange way, to grow the excitement by having others join us in joy. The women hurried with excitement, because they couldn’t wait to tell the disciples! We consider the women to be the first evangelists of the Christian faith, because hearing the incredible news, their only goal was to share it with others.

They were stopped for a moment, though. They were stopped by an even greater moment, as they encountered the risen Jesus, who greeted them on Resurrection morning. All the women could do was grab his feet and worship him. Jesus’ response was just what they needed: “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there” (verse 10).

Imagine the meeting between the women and the disciples, their emotions ranging from disbelief to fear to excitement. The news changed their entire world. Joy replaced sadness, and excitement overwhelmed the fear they faced when Jesus was crucified.

What is your reaction this Resurrection morning? The ancient greeting for this day that we still repeat is “Christ is risen!” thus announcing the good news and sharing the excitement. And the response is, “He is risen indeed!” affirming this life-altering, world-changing news.

At least one dictionary records over
125 languages and cultures that offer this greeting on Easter. All of them use exclamation points. These words bring the power of the Resurrection into our midst: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! That’s not something to shrug off!

May we offer that greeting today with joyful voices, calling out the power of God’s grace and love by offering the affirmation of the Risen Christ in our midst. Easter should change us, and not only for the day, or because we wear a new dress or shirt. Easter has the ability to transform us from living day-to-day with a component of fear to becoming persons who are filled with God’s Spirit, excited for the present life and the eternal life ahead. Thanks be to God and the risen Christ!

Who needs to hear from you, with affirmation and joy, that Christ is risen indeed?

God of resurrection, fill my heart with the promise and proof of your Son in my life, and show me the opportunities I have to give the gift of Jesus to another today; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Rebuilding the Temple

Purpose

To affirm the power of God to bring new life out of ruin.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Haggai 2:1-9 (NIV)

1 ...on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai:
2 “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them,
3 ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?
4 But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the Lord. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the Lord, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.
5 ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’
6 This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land;
7 And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty.
8 ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty.
9 ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

Haggai 2:1-9 (KJV)

1 In the seventh month, in the one and twentieth day of the month, came the word of the Lord by the prophet Haggai, saying,
2 Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, and to the residue of the people, saying,
3 ‘Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?
4 Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts:
5 According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.
6 For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;
7 And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.
8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts.
9 The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.
Seeing the Need

It might take most of us a few minutes to find the Book of Haggai. It probably does not make it into the top ten in the list of favorite books of the Bible for many people. The two chapters comprising the book are nestled between Zephaniah and Zechariah. Still, there are eight biblical books that are smaller than Haggai.

The book deals mostly with encouragement to the Jews to rebuild the Temple, which was destroyed in 587 bc. By 520 bc, the Jews’ exile in Babylon was coming to a close. The important work ahead was to try to rebuild the holy center of the nation after nearly 70 years when its people had been separated from the land. At first, it was not going well, so God sent prophets to call the people to a holy response and to give their resources, efforts, and skills to be about this important work.

As you read today’s Scripture, try to read it as someone who needs encouragement. Read it as a pep talk, as a new vision offered to you as you might participate in actually putting God’s house back together again. Imagine for a moment that your church building was destroyed in the time of your grandparents and has been in ruins for all of these years. Now you and your friends have been given the task of rebuilding it, sparing no energy or resources to do so. As you read the words of the prophet Haggai, consider the ways that God can work to bring new life out of those places of ruin that we find around us.

Different Than Before

When our sons were young, most of their waking time was not spent in front of a computer, phone, or television. Cheri and I always believed they would have much more fun just making believe and enjoying their own adventures. We have loads of wonderful pictures of the boys looking important in their outfits created from digging through the big costume bin we kept handy. Oversized boots, coats with sleeves rolled up, hats that fell over the ears and had to be pushed up and back on the head so the hero could see clearly—-they were all part of the game.

To be a true hero, of course, they
always needed a place to live out that role, so that meant the creation of a fort, a spaceship, a boat, or some other kind of setting. At that point, the two adult developers and laborers were often called in to create that place.

Now, I'm not bragging (much), but it did seem that often I managed to build the better site than their hard-working mother. I even remember once getting a call at the church from across the parking lot. As it was transferred to me, I answered, and a small voice said, “Dad, we need your help. Mom's not doing it right.” I took a break, built the fort, and then went back to doing the Lord’s work. Although if the truth be told, I have to think that the Lord enjoyed watching us create a wonderful, imaginative world.

“It doesn’t look right.” The Bible describes the Temple Solomon built as a magnificent wonder. You can read about it in 1 Kings 6 and following. It was the center of the Jewish faith, created and adorned, sparing no expense, as a place God would actually want to inhabit. Unfortunately, Nebuchadnezzar was an expert at tearing apart and destroying such a thing of beauty. Nothing was left in place as the Babylonians sought to break the spirit and the soul of the Jews in order to dominate them as part of their rule.

Later, God granted those in exile the gift of returning home. The great work ahead, of course, was to rebuild their homes and their cities. The focal point of reconstruction was to be the Temple. The people had spent most of their time, money, and effort on building their own homes upon return while the Temple still lay in ruins. Now the moment had come to join together and do the holy work of restoring the Temple.

“Go up to the highlands and bring back wood. Rebuild the temple so that I may enjoy it and that I may be honored, says the Lord,” Haggai told the people on God’s behalf. “The Lord moved the spirit of Judah’s governor Zerubbabel, Shealtiel’s son, and the spirit of the high priest Joshua, Jehozadak’s son, and the spirit of all the rest of the people. Then they came and did work on the house of the Lord of heavenly forces, their God” (Haggai 1:8, 14).

However, upon review, the Temple did not resemble what they remembered or what had been described to them by those who had seen it in its glory days. “How does it look to you now?” the prophet asked them. “Doesn’t it appear as nothing to you?” (Haggai 2:3).

Perhaps you’ve experienced that feeling about the second incarnation of something. Maybe you spent a great deal of time and effort on something but later had to redo your work. The second attempt somehow just didn’t seem to match the first wonderful, exciting product, and you felt let down and disappointed. We sometimes hear about one-hit wonders in the music business. They record a great piece of music that sells a million copies or more, but they just
can’t seem to recreate that same special formula for another hit. Granted, many times we grow more competent in doing something over and over again. But when it comes to the once-in-a-lifetime projects we believe we will never have to duplicate or repeat, when the repetition becomes a requirement, it often fails in comparison. It’s just not as good as the first one was.

But there’s another way to look at what seems to be the disappointment of a second try. It’s actually what’s known as “another right answer.” Part of our nature as humans is to strive to come up with that perfect thing, that great right answer to a question or a challenge. However, one aspect of learning how to create honestly and hopefully is to realize that often we can find more than one right way to do something. Sometimes another, new creation can replace the one that seemed to be so right in the first place. When we allow our eyes and hearts to focus on seeing what could be, even though it is different than what was before, we are opened to a whole world of possibilities.

The Temple was going to be rebuilt. No, it wouldn’t be the same and might only be similar. But because it couldn’t be exactly as the first one was, should there be no effort to try to build the new one? Of course not. By keeping in mind the Temple’s purpose, the people could give it their best efforts and build something that would honor God and become a blessing for those who had returned from exile.

When have you been aware that God brought something new in your life, perhaps following a tragedy, failure, or difficult season? How did you learn to embrace and accept that new thing as equally precious and welcome in your life?

**Work, For I Am With You!**

Have you ever run like crazy behind the bicycle of a beginning rider, hanging onto the seat because the little biker thought he or she needed you there to give the bicycle balance? You may also have experienced the moment of letting go and seeing the rider achieve the awesome gift of balance or the horror of an immediate crash, with skinned knees and a broken spirit!

I’m not sure who first coined the phrase: “Do your best, and God will do the rest.” It certainly seems to fit the American spirit. Our can-do attitude, our make-it-so eagerness to accomplish what we set out to do—these are all wrapped up in our cultural self-understanding. Certainly, it’s important to believe we can accomplish what we set out to do—but these are all wrapped up in our cultural self-understanding. Certainly, it’s important to believe we can accomplish what we set out to do and be willing to work hard to achieve it. But just because we work hard to achieve something does not necessarily mean that God is pleased and will help us in that work.

We find a more humble and more faithful approach in the message God delivered through Haggai to the people working to rebuild the Temple. “Be
strong,” God said. “Work, for I am with you, says the Lord of heavenly forces” (verse 4).

When we commit ourselves to doing what we have discerned with prayer and humility to be God’s will and intention for us and our world, when we then place our efforts, energy, and resources there, God will certainly be with us, direct our paths, and give us the ability to do that good thing. You see, it’s God’s good thing. When we honestly and openly find our way to God’s way, God is indeed with us.

That was the challenge and the gift God gave the Jews as they gave themselves over to the important task of rebuilding the Temple from ruin. “Work, for I am with you . . . my spirit stands in your midst,” God promised (verse 5).

What are you building in your life today? Have you started something but perhaps have begun to feel a bit exhausted or discouraged? Have you become distracted from the things you ought to be doing? Has something sat idle because other things have taken priority over it? Are you afraid of not succeeding? Or are you concerned that what will result may not be what you had hoped?

When you are committed to doing God’s work, the promise God made to the people long ago is the same promise God makes to you: “Be strong. . . . I am with you. . . . My spirit stands in your midst.”

What do you feel God calling you to begin or resume today?

Heavenly Forces

When our family lived in South Carolina, the entire region would shut down on those rare times when it would snow. I remember waking up to two inches of snow and not going to school for two days! Here in Fargo, North Dakota, if it snows a foot, school may be delayed for an hour. But a snow day in South Carolina meant spending the entire day outside building snowmen and snow forts and having snowball fights.

One time, three older and bigger boys ran up, tore down our snow fort, and threw big snowballs at us, all completely unprovoked. As we younger kids tried to withstand the assault, throwing snowballs back that fell terribly short, my older brothers suddenly burst out of the house and began to pummel and decimate the enemy forces. It was a battle for the ages. In the end, the mean boys ran off, and my brothers were vaulted into glory as our heroes.

Fourteen times in two chapters of the Book of Haggai, the prophet identifies God as “the Lord of heavenly forces.” Other translations render this term as “Lord of hosts” (KJV, New American Standard Bible, NRSV) and “Lord Almighty” (NIV). These names for God come from the word Sabaoth, which is the transliteration of the Hebrew word. You may recall singing that word in the great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our
God.” It means “hosts” or “armies” and is understood to depict God as the leader of Israel’s armies.

The image set before us and before the Jewish builders was not only that of the all-powerful God, but also that of God in charge of an overwhelming army of angels who will protect and secure the safety and lives of those who follow God. To those working to rebuild the Temple, Haggai promised that it and they would be defended by angelic forces and by the utter power of the Lord of hosts.

What incredible images these are! God’s faithfulness and care of the people, especially in the face of those who would do us harm, is unstoppable and irresistible. The God who is with us is always greater than those who are against us. With this promise, the Jewish people continued working to rebuild the Temple for God on the site of ruin.

We also face places of brokenness and ruin in our lives, resulting from broken promises, disease, death, severed relationships, and other great disappointments. God has promised to take our brokenness and create a new life, a new purpose, and a new way of living and relating as we affirm the power of God through Christ in our lives. Look to what power and assurance God offers to your life, even if right now you feel exhausted or weak or unable to do much of anything with your broken spirit. The Lord of heavenly forces is with you!

With this promise given to us today, what can we build in those places where we have found ruin in our lives? Where are we being called to re-create in the name of God?

Lord of heavenly forces, lead, empower, and protect me as I seek to follow your will in the efforts of my life today; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
John Prepares the Way for Christ

Purpose

To acknowledge how God offers a new start to the world and to our lives.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,
2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—
3 a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the ways for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”
4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.
6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.
7 And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.
8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark 1:1-8 (KJV)

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God;
2 As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.
3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
4 John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.
5 And there went out unto him all the land of Judæa, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.
6 And John was clothed with camel’s hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;
7 And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.
8 I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.
You may recall hearing the song that opens the musical *Godspell*, which premiered in early 1970. In it, the shofar, a ram’s horn trumpet used by ancient Jews, blows to call the people to attention, and then we hear the first piercing tones, which are the same as Matthew 3:3: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” The phrase is repeated over and over as the music grows and the actors begin to gather, joining in singing the song. I wish it were that easy to get new members into a church!

The first verses of Mark’s Gospel confront us with a powerful statement: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah” (Mark 1:1-2). Mark chose to spend no time telling the story of Jesus’ birth in his Gospel, instead rushing headlong into good news by quoting from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s original message announced freedom for Jews held in exile. Here, Mark claimed these words to announce the coming of the Messiah, the new beginning of the good news for this generation and generations to come.

As we quickly move into the Gospel of Mark, keep in mind the profound and utterly life-changing and world-changing events that happened in first-century Palestine, events that claim us and our world 20 centuries later. This good news of what is and what is coming call us to prepare the way of the Lord, maybe even singing a song as we do.

Sending the Messenger

I was in ninth grade, gangly, uncoordinated, and sort of a nerdy brainiac who was terribly shy around girls; but I also wished every day that I had a girlfriend. One day as I was waiting for the bus, a small contingent of girls approached with what appeared to be a serious mission. The spokesperson for the group asked me, “Do you like Mary?” (The name has been changed to protect the innocent.) Mary was cute, with long hair and a captivating smile, and was in most of my classes, although we had never spoken a word to each other before. Still, among the 20-30 girls I had selected in my mind as appropriate girlfriends, she was definitely near the top of the list.

At that moment in my life, I was so glad that I had watched hundreds of dra-
matic movies and read loads of books about adventure and romance. This had prepared me for such a time. I responded to the contingent of Mary’s lieutenants: “I think I would only tell that to Mary!” It came out well. The girls were suitably impressed and retreated, I was sure, to inform the now object of my attention. When I got on the bus, Mary was sitting alone. Shaking and sweating, I sat down beside her, and for the 30-minute bus ride, I said absolutely nothing to her, nor even looked at her until I got up to leave, and said, “Bye.”

Messengers play a critical role in our life together. They convey the intention of another and offer a word of insight, but they often offer a word of invitation. Throughout the Bible, we see that God used messengers of all sorts to bring a holy word to human beings. The word angel in Greek means “messenger,” and angels certainly played an important role in delivering news. But God also often used prophets to share divine intentions with leaders or even an entire people. In fact, much of Scripture follows the pattern of delivering and receiving news from God.

The messenger in today’s text is John the Baptist (Mark 1:4). Luke’s Gospel records that he was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a miracle child born of aged parents. “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth,” the angel told his father before John was born. “He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. . . . He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:15-16, 17). That’s just what he did.

John claimed the prophecy of Isaiah, and in the Judean wilderness outside of Jerusalem, he called to the people to prepare: “Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight” (Mark 1:3). The Lord is coming! God’s kingdom is coming! God is doing a new thing and offering a new start to this world and to you! Prepare the way of the Lord!

We’ll look more carefully at John’s message and the people’s response, but for now, consider how you might have reacted to seeing and hearing a man in the wilderness calling out and making such a statement about God. Did he mean that following the law of Moses wasn’t enough anymore? Was he calling people to make changes in their lives? It sure seemed so.

Frankly, anytime someone enters our lives unannounced or uninvited and begins to lay claim to a possible change in who we are and what we do, it requires us to make a decision. When the call doesn’t seem to have urgency, or it doesn’t pertain to us, we can simply reject it and go on with our lives. However, when the call is urgent, we often will change our lives, at least for a time, and abide by the urgency or the importance of the call.

Beyond those concerning physical safety, what calls have you received that urged you to change, to turn around, or to respond in some way?

What difference does it make as to
who the messenger is when we receive such a message?

A New Reality

One of the top ten greatest days in human history was June 13, 1981, my wedding day! Besides the gifts, the great tasting cake, and the chance to wear a tux, why get married? Why bother with the cost and effort just to affirm what we already knew to be true, that we loved each other and were committed for life to each other? The reason, frankly, is that the wedding ceremony did indeed change everything. Yes, we were in love and committed, but to stand in a holy place and before God to speak the words, “I take you . . . ,” was our best possible response to the invitation to make something permanent that was before that moment only a hoped-for intention.

We have taken each day since then to reaffirm that permanence, and I’m fully aware that for some people, the vow and the relationship can certainly die. For us, however, it created a new reality. At that moment, we were married to each other, before God, as a response to our love and a response to the call to live holy lives together before God.

Mark’s Gospel tells us that “John was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins” (Mark 1:4). John was a true evangelist, sharing the impending future of God’s kingdom and Messiah coming to be among them. Many people heard John’s proclamation and answered the call with yes. They wanted to repent and to live new lives with new beginnings. That’s why John baptized.

In one sense, John’s baptism of the people made no difference. Physically, nothing changed. However, this was not simply some physical adjustment that the people of Judah were taking on, like going to the chiropractor or having a hip replaced. John’s baptism was a powerful, spiritually transforming moment for the people.

When someone answered the call to repent, to ask for forgiveness of their sins, and to begin to live a new life, the physical act of baptism represented the spiritual act of dying to the old life and rising to the newly changed heart and life. Just as our wedding practically changed nothing, the spiritual power of that moment for our lives did indeed change forever the path and the relationship of our life together. So it was with baptism.

While Mark doesn’t give us an exact number who responded to John’s message, he does say that “everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins” (verse 5).

Can you imagine the powerful sense of God’s Spirit in that region? What people once saw as important and as the guiding force in their lives was no longer important because they had started their lives anew. They began living a new reality.
Did that remain the case for everyone? We can’t know. We can’t know if some went through the motions and were baptized with no change of heart. But for those who took the baptism seriously, it’s exciting to wonder how that act changed not only their own lives but the lives of everyone around them. God’s love and our faith in God produces incredible fruit in this world that needs so desperately to know love, justice, and peace.

When have you felt the need to change your life? When have you been given the opportunity to experience a new beginning?

Some of us were baptized as babies, and we were brought into the family of faith at that time. Later, we were able to confirm and affirm our faith and take our place among the community of believers. We don’t need to be baptized a second time or a third. God has already claimed us. But we can experience times of repentance and recommitment, trusting that God will allow us to begin again, to restart, and to know the love of God that indeed will never let us go.

What would it mean for you to recommit yourself to God at this point in your life?

Someone Stronger

With two full-sized sons and one fun-sized petite wife at home, the ritual of the opening of difficult jars often falls to me. Cheri will try and fail, and then each of the sons in turn will grab the jar and try to twist the lid and fail. Finally, they will ask the old guy to see if he can open it. One secret my dad taught me was to work on having a strong grip.

I also learned that, when opening a jar, most people give up too quickly because it hurts. So I will take the jar, tap the lid on the counter, slap the bottom of the jar, and then twist. And sure enough, the sound of the victory pop follows, and I hand the newly opened jar back to a son and just smile.

Physical strength is a wonderful thing, but the spiritual strength we embody is even more powerful. We discover it when we make sure we don’t quit too soon.

John must have looked like a wild man. He “wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). But he must have exuded power and the sense of being in charge of the situation. He was the “voice shouting in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’” (verse 3). Still, he was quick to say that he was not “the one.” “One stronger than I am is coming after me! I’m not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals,” he announced (verse 7). Quite a powerful image, as well as a prediction. John, of course, was describing the coming of the Messiah, which he believed was a moment away.

The Messiah was the answer to the cry of the Jews—and in fact the whole world—for a new kingdom not based on Roman rule or even the Temple law and sacrifice. This Messiah would bring justice, peace, and love to each person. His power, John explained, is seen in the
baptism he offers. Recall that John’s baptism was a symbol of changed hearts and lives and a desire that God forgive sins.

The “one stronger” who was coming would not simply invite people to change but would also usher in the very kingdom of God on earth. And “he will baptize with the Holy Spirit” (verse 8). As the followers of John became soaking wet with the water of hoped-for repentance, those who come into God’s kingdom through the act of the Messiah are enveloped and renewed in life through the very Spirit of God that pours into them and that makes all things new.

Each day, we can start anew because of Christ’s power and love for us and in us. Filled with the Holy Spirit, our lives can show this world the love of God and the hope that is ours in Christ.

What change does God want to bring into your life? What do you need to do for God to make that change in you?

Lord of my life, fill me with your Spirit, and use me to prepare the way for you in the hearts of those who need to know you; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
The River of Life-giving Water

Purpose
To respond with gratitude to the future hope God promises.

Hearing the Word
The background text is Revelations 21:9—22:5

Revelation 22:1-5 (NIV)
1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb
2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.
4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.
5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 22:1-5 (KJV)
1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.
2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.
3 And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him:
4 And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.
5 And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.
Seeing the Need

Uh-oh. The Book of Revelation. The only other books of the Bible that make my head swim are parts of Daniel and Ezekiel. All three of these biblical books are known as apocalyptic, which comes from the Greek word meaning to “uncover,” or “disclose.” The Book of Revelation was written to help Christians who were in desperate straits under the rule of a horrible Roman emperor named Domitian, who led a tremendous persecution of Christians. The images of the end of the world and the creation of a new heaven and earth we find in Revelation helped to strengthen the faith in those Christians’ lives, even as they saw their entire world collapsing before them.

Like all Scripture, the truth of one writing in a particular time for a particular people holds truth for people living in other times throughout history. This is true for Revelation.

Because it is apocalyptic, that means it carries with it a great deal of mystery and hiddenness. If you hear someone say that they have the Book of Revelation all figured out, they most likely do not, since much of what is written is indeed mysterious and ancient.

In spite of the terrible persecution Christians were experiencing at the time Revelation was written, Revelation 22:1-5 offers scenes, not of destruction and cataclysmic war, but of hope. These verses offer us a beautiful and awesome picture of what the future will hold, and they are packed solid with all sorts of images. Take the time to explore some of the images God holds before us in the future.

One other important thing to understand: When John described this magnificent place, a city paved with golden streets with pearly gates, he was talking about the New Jerusalem, “a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). John described it as God’s dwelling. God will “wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (verse 4).

What Is Life-giving Water?

When Aaron and Adam were in their teens, I was always amazed at the number of cans of pop/soda/cola they consumed. I began to wonder after a time if indeed they had tried that clear liquid that comes from a filtered tap. If what they had was life-giving, it certainly wasn’t water! I could imagine them, parched...
and stranded in a desert, crawling through the sand crying out the name of their favorite beverage.

You know what it is like when you are thirsty. I still recall childhood summer days when we had run ourselves dry. When we went back home, Dad would have the hose on and would kink it so that a full but not blasting stream would pour out for us to drink. We would be recharged, rehydrated, and usually soaking wet. Water is one of the best things in the world because it brings us life, and it sustains us. Experts say that often when we feel hungry, what we actually are is thirsty—dehydrated and needing to be reenlivened by the gift of water.

In Revelation 22:1-5, the angel shows John “the river of life-giving water” (verse 1) that flows right through the middle of New Jerusalem’s main street. This is more than a scenic view! This river feeds and grows the very tree of life, which “produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month” (verse 2). Even more, “the tree’s leaves are for the healing of the nations” (verse 2). All of this comes from the life-giving water, which becomes eternally life-giving. The image we receive is so rich and inviting that it ought to fill us with hope in our lives, to know that God will make such a creation for us.

But maybe what we sometimes feel is not so much physical thirst as something else, a kind of spiritual thirst. Maybe it is our hearts that need new life once again. What happens when we are so parched inside that we feel almost like the dry bones Ezekiel saw in the valley (Ezekiel 37:1-14)? When we are dried up inside, nothing seems to be bright or vivid or joyful.

We’ve probably all experienced seasons when we seem to be walking in dust that chokes us and clouds our vision. This may come after the death of a family member or a close friend, another tragedy, or a chronic illness that results in ongoing pain. What we want is water. We want the water that can bring us back to life. We yearn for the life-giving water that feeds the tree of life and that can feed us once again and make us whole and able to thrive, even when we are struggling in other ways.

I won’t try to fool you by saying you can just snap your fingers and it will all be better. Not at all. But I will affirm that God’s life-giving water is available to you, even now. Through humble prayer and reliance on God to give us life and get us through, we can receive that gift, even when it feels as though we have been thirsty a long time. Sometimes it takes more than a sip to be revived. Sometimes we need to linger by the river until we are restored. But God promises this to us and to those we love as an eternal gift.

How spiritually thirsty are you right now?

To See the Face of God

Seven children playing hide and seek in a three-bedroom house required a bit of work, stealth, and planning. My favorite hiding spot, which I carefully withheld from the others, was in the bottom of the linen closet where big towels and blankets were stacked. I would pile the stuff in front of and on top of me so it looked like I wasn’t there and then pull the door closed from the bottom. Then I would lie curled up and silent in the dark. The problem with being curled up
in a bunch of blankets in the dark in the warmth of a closet is that more often than not, I would fall asleep and remain hidden long after the the game ended!

Various biblical accounts talk about the “hiddenness” of God’s face. But “when all the people saw the column of cloud standing at the tent’s entrance, they would all rise and then bow down at the entrances to their tents. In this way the Lord used to speak to Moses face-to-face, like two people talking to each other” (Exodus 33:10-11), but that was a rare event. Often, the Bible tells us of angels speaking the word of God to people. They didn’t see God’s face. Art, literature, music, and nature can try to describe or hint at God’s face, such as Michelangelo’s painting of God on the Sistine Chapel. Or perhaps you recall the line from Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, which says, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

Something about the absolute holiness and otherness of God makes the possibilities of seeing God seem to carry a threat of great danger. But Scripture makes clear that God wants a relationship with us. God seeks us even before we are aware of God. Our prayers, our faith, our belief in God are our pathway to connection and relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In the New Jerusalem, however, “There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face” (Revelation 22:3-4). The curse of sin will no longer separate people from God’s presence. We will see God’s face!

Do you hear the good news? Finally, after so many millennia of not seeing God, even drawing so close with God’s Son, now in the new creation, the New Jerusalem, the nations and people of this world will see God’s face. We will see what has been hidden and unknown.

When Dad served more than a year in Vietnam and Thailand during the Vietnam War, Mom seemed to have lots of photos of Dad in different places in the house, almost as if she wanted to make sure none of us forgot what he looked like. Even today, as she lies bedridden, Mom still keeps in front of her a picture of the man she spent her life with and will always remember.

If the power of having an image of another human captivates us so well, imagine what it will be like when all of our poor images of God are replaced with our own eyes being granted the joy of fully seeing God! Can you see how Revelation was so important to the early Christians in helping them hold on to hope in the future that is held by God? Can you see how important it also can be to us as we hold the same hope?

What difference does it make to you to know that someday you will see God’s face?

Let There Be Light

In my work as a district superintendent of a district that is over 35,000 square miles, I spend a number of nights each year away from home since it’s too far to drive back from the far ends of the district. My home becomes a hotel room. Hotel rooms are never arranged the way your own bedroom at home is arranged.

Apparently, there is a rule stating that
a small table with steel legs must be set in the middle of what should be a normal walkway from one part of the room to the other. And the best efforts to make the room dark enough to allow sleep without a beam of light piercing the darkness also means that the room will be too dark for you to see said small table as you get up in the middle of the night.

When we lived in Nashville, we received over 18 inches of rain in one day, which meant the Little Harpeth River became a flooded and flooding entity. Our electricity was out for three days. Because of all of the hills, when it gets dark in Nashville, it gets really dark. We had only two fair-sized candles to help us see. We felt like the people who walked in darkness.

When light comes into such situations, however, all seems to be like a new creation! We depend on light as humans. Our senses of hearing, touch, and smell seem second to the sense of sight. I am quite amazed whenever I am in the company of someone with sight limitations. Their ability to move across a room that is always dark for them humbles me, as I see how they use the other gifts God has given them.

Revelation 22:5 gives us yet another great promise of the future: “Night will be no more!” No more fumbling in the dark, and we won’t need a lamp or even the light of the sun, because all will be illuminated by the very presence of God.

In Genesis, we read that God’s first powerful creation was light, good light, which, when separated from the darkness, brought order and clarity to what was without form or shape. Now, at the end of Scripture, only a few verses from the end of the Bible’s last book, we find light that is everlasting and no longer dependent on “a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine” (Revelation 22:5). It is an image for our future hope.

So, what difference does light make to your world? What does it bring to you? For me in those dark hotel rooms, light brings clarity and a sense of safety. Light brings the ability to see things as they are without having to squint. It helps us know that we are going in the right direction. Perhaps light gives you comfort, like a night light, or the sense that everything is going to be okay. People in the Dakotas often make use of a “happy light” during the long, dark winter days. It’s a bright white light that bathes their faces and skin in light and can help ward off depression. Most who use it strongly affirm its value. That’s how powerful light is to our existence.

The day is coming, Revelation promises, that all will be light. All will be well; hope will be answered with joy; night will be no more. These are the promises of tomorrow that we can claim and hold as God’s children when today isn’t going so well. Jesus called us the “light of the world,” meaning that God’s presence and love can shine through us to others who also need the light. We can point others to that future hope when we will see God’s face, and “night will be no more” (Revelation 22:5).

What promises about light from God can you claim and share for yourself and for others?

God of light and life for all, grant me
today the ability to trust in your promises, not only for the future but for today, in whatever circumstances I find myself. Use me to share your life-giving water and your illuminating and guiding light with others; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

1. From goodreads.com/quotes/49720-to-love-another-person-is-to-see-the-face-of.
God’s Grace Toward Adam, Eve and Cain

Purpose
To identify God’s grace in the worst of our life’s experiences.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Genesis 3:21; 4:10-16 (NIV)

Genesis 3:21
21 The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

4:10-16
10 The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.
11 Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.
12 When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”
13 Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear.
14 Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”
15 But the Lord said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.
16 So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Genesis 3:21; 4:10-16 (KJV)

Genesis 3:21
21 Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

4:10-16
10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.
11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand;
12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.
13 And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.
14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.
15 And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.
16 And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.
From Revelation’s images in the previous lesson of the New Jerusalem, the life-giving river, and the tree of life, with this text from Genesis, we go back to where it all began. Because the man and the woman disobeyed and ate from the tree God had told them not to eat from, God banished them from the garden of Eden so that they would not “take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). It’s important to hold these two ends of Scripture together, knowing that we now are somewhere between Eden and the promised place where all of creation will find its new home for eternity.

Reading Genesis 3 quickly reveals how humans messed up paradise. The man and the woman had it so good. Genesis 4 is also a heartbreaking chapter, because it reminds us of how fragile life is and how seemingly easy it is to kill something or someone. These two chapters, so early in the story of humankind’s existence with God, ought to bring us to our knees, if for no other reason than we can so clearly see how easy it is to mess things up. How easy it is to sin, to take what we want in this world with little or no consideration of where we fit in this world and what we have been created to be and do.

But there is good news! The theme of the five lessons in this unit is grace. While we will look at the sin of the man and the woman and at the horrible thing Cain did to his brother, Abel, we will not stop there. We will celebrate the overwhelming love and grace God pours out on us. Allow these ancient stories to show you how to look for and find God’s grace, even in the worst of life’s experiences.

An Act of Love and Grace

Each of us can probably describe a time when we made a mess of things but someone came along and made it a little better. I was a Latin major in college, and Dr. Palanca was my professor. In my second year, we had a pretty significant test. I should have studied. Frankly, I was too smart for my own good and chose to do other things instead. The night before the big test, I glanced over the material and called it good. When I looked at the questions on the test the next day, the translations to be made, and the other parts of the test, I had a sick feeling inside. I went from question to question, and I didn’t have an answer for any of them. I sat for an hour, trying to carve out a little bit of sense from something in front of me that made no sense. When I turned in...
the test, I knew I had totally blown it.

Two days later, we got our tests back, and I looked at mine. Dr. Palanca had given me an A. I should have received an F. With a great burden on my heart and my shoulders, I went to see him for an explanation. He said, in his wonderful Italian accent, “Yes, your answers were poor. However, I know what you have done in my class and what kind of student you are, and so I gave you the grade I assumed you would have earned if something had not gotten in your way.”

With a penitent heart, knowing I didn’t deserve the gift, I experienced love and grace from a professor who was more interested in my life than a test. You can guess I never ignored a test again, but I also have never forgotten the gift of grace I received.

Flash back to the garden of Eden after the man and the woman had eaten from the forbidden tree. “Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). Have you ever sewn fig leaves together? I can just imagine it was a mess and only showed how pitiful the humans’ efforts were at trying to hide themselves and their sin from God. With their self-centered and disobedient decision, everything changed. I don’t know what would have been worse: banishment from the garden or coming face to face with God’s disappointment.

Notice, however, what God did not do. God didn’t set the garden ablaze and destroy it all or get rid of the humans and start again. It might have been much easier for God simply to push the restart button and once again have a pure and holy world.

Instead, we see from God a simple but tender and incredibly caring act, even before God banished the couple from the garden. “The Lord God made the man and his wife leather clothes and dressed them” (verse 21). Like a heavenly tailor, the incredibly loving and gracious God made sure that the creatures who so horribly broke away from paradise would still be cared for and clothed in a way that would last and provide them with what they needed. It was a gracious gift from God, made without comment, to cover the shame and vulnerability of the humans.

An act of love is more than simple charity. It arises from deep in the heart and brings the possibility for forgiveness and new life. Just as we have received such acts of love and grace, we also have opportunities to extend them to others. Our loving and gracious God set the example for us.

When have you received or extended grace in the form of an act of love?

An Act of Justice

Most of my work as a district superintendent in the church is enjoyable. I get to be part of celebrations, dreaming, and discernment of the direction ministry and mission should go. However, sometimes what I have to do is difficult and unpleasant.

Occasionally, I am called to have a conversation with pastors who have made messes in the church or who have failed to live according to our high standards as leaders of God’s people. Frankly, the messes are easier. Usually, what has happened is what I like to refer to as the pastors “lighting a match in a room full of gas.” Things blow up often because they didn’t think about the con-
sequences of saying or doing something that was unwise. They knew better but slipped, and we have to find a way to clean up the mess.

However, when pastors have true ethical breaks that call into question their basic fitness for ministry, heartbreak is often the result. I once received a call of concern because a significant amount of pornography had been found on a pastor’s office computer during a standard maintenance. I met with the pastor, who admitted to the practice of logging on to various pornographic websites. He had found himself going further and further into that dark part of the internet.

The hardest thing for me to hear, however, was when he said he didn’t think there was any harm in what he had done. “It wasn’t hurting anyone,” he said. I tried to help him understand how unholy and wrong such behavior was, but he refused to take responsibility or admit it was even inappropriate.

I asked him to surrender his credentials and leave the ministry. He was angry, then scared, and then upset. I only wish he had been at all remorseful or even embarrassed. I hated to change his future and his work in such a profound way, because there was no room left for that to occur and keep faith with the laity of our church and the standard of our conduct. I had to be “just, when I must.”

The act that day was not one of kindness, because there was no room left for that to occur and keep faith with the laity of our church and the standard of our conduct. I had to be “just, when I must.” The act of justice to remove him from ministry was important not only for our church but, in a real sense, for his own life, so that he would realize what he had given up in order to live out that behavior. We did provide counseling for him, but it had to happen outside of the covenant of called ministry. He couldn’t be a pastor anymore.

Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve. You probably know the story well. “Cain presented an offering to the Lord from the land’s crops, while Abel presented his flock’s oldest offspring with their fat. The Lord looked favorably on Abel and his sacrifice but didn’t look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain became very angry and looked resentful” (Genesis 4:3-5). Scripture describes how God warned Cain about his anger and resentment and the “sin waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you,” God told him, “but you must rule over it” (verse 7).

Cain did not master the sin waiting at the door; his anger and resentment grew to the point that it overtook him, and he “attacked his brother Abel and killed him” (verse 8). God, of course, knew what Cain had done and asked him where Abel was. “I don’t know,” Cain replied. “Am I my brother’s guardian?” (verse 9). Then “the Lord said, ‘What did you do?’” (verse 10). Again, God knew that instead of scattering seed in the field where he farmed, Cain had scattered Abel’s blood there. Such a shocking and horrible thing for Cain to do, an act that most assuredly had consequences.

Can you imagine what it would be like if we were allowed, without any consequence, to take another life any time we saw fit? We don’t like the way a neighbor mows his lawn, how a coworker chews her gum, or where a fellow church member sits in the sanctuary. So does that mean we are free to kill these people? Of course not! That attitude is completely
opposite to God’s intention for our world. When Cain acted this way, strangely enough, God acted out of grace, to bring an act of justice to Cain.

It’s important to realize that grace does not mean that everything is okay. Grace is always costly. God’s grace to us through Jesus’ death on the cross was grace at the highest cost. Sometimes the only way grace can come to this world is by upholding justice, as in the case of the pastor I counseled.

Perhaps it seems incredibly severe that God punished Cain by taking away his ability to farm the land. It would no longer be fertile for him to grow crops since it contained Abel’s blood, and Cain would become a nomad on the earth (Genesis 4:11-12). But we need to ask what less should and could be a just response to Abel’s murder by his brother? In this act of justice, Cain bore responsibility for his terrible action, just as Adam and Eve bore responsibility for disobeying God’s commandment regarding the tree.

Although we will explore a second response of grace by God below, for now it’s important to consider that this action by God toward Cain was the best thing possible. To have forgiven without any consequence would have changed our relationship with God forever and would have also changed the claim on us as humans to act with a sense of justice in our own lives. Enacting justice often creates space for grace to flow.

When have you experienced God’s grace to the world through an act of justice? Where in your life do you need for justice to be offered as an expression of God’s care?

An Act of Protection

“String him up, boys!” As the mob decides to storm the jail in the old West dusty town, it’s up to the marshal to stop their desire, not for justice, but for retribution. It’s a typical theme of Western movies and television shows. I imagine I’ve seen dozens of brave marshals, sheriffs, deputies, or even that noble cowboy stranger keep an entire crowd away by demanding that real justice be served, that the crowd obey the silver star of the law. As a result, the mob is dispersed. “You all go on home now, y’hear? This ain’t the way we are going to act in my town!”

Isn’t it peculiar that, so often, the guilty one needs protection from others wanting to carry out what they believe is justice by their own hands? In our justice system, when someone is accused of a crime, or when someone is convicted of a crime, an incredible amount of effort is made to ensure that the guilty person is kept safe until and while the punishment is administered. Occasionally, we hear of instances when someone is murdered in prison; but as horrible as someone’s acts may be, the entire institution of the justice system breaks down if that person is harmed simply because someone decides he or she has the right to inflict his or her own level of punishment.

Cain was inconsolable when he heard the justice placed upon his life by God. Yes, he had killed his brother. Yes, that was horrible. But Cain imagined the consequence, not of his actions, but of God’s decree! “My punishment is more than I can bear. . . . Anyone who finds me will kill me,” he cried to God (Genesis 4:14). I have nothing to protect me from the worst possible act, he wailed.
Lesson 11

Sometimes we feel hopeless, too. When the consequences of our actions bring destruction to our lives, we are consumed with fear and think of how lost our future seems to be. It’s not remorse; it is simply our belief that we are defenseless and powerless against whomever takes their revenge on us.

The greatest good news of Cain’s horrible story is that God didn’t say, “Serves you right. You made your bed; now lie in it.” No, God’s response to Cain’s hopeless words was that his worst fears would not happen. I’m in charge here, God essentially said to Cain, and that’s not going to happen. The punishment of banishment was enough.

Cain’s defenseless life would be protected by God’s mark on him. “The Lord put a sign on Cain so that no one who found him would assault him” (verse 15). Scripture does not tell us what the sign was or how those who encountered Cain would know what it meant. But we know that Cain settled somewhere east of Eden, “in the land of Nod” (verse 16).

Nod means “wandering” and is also related to the Hebrew term that is translated as “nomad” in verse 12. Although Cain was no doubt sad and lonely, he was safe from violent acts. The grace of God that cares for us when we have sinned is amazing. God is just, but in administering justice, God still loves and cares for us.

What does it tell you about God that, when we have done something horrible, God still offers grace? How well do we extend grace to others, the way God does, when they have offended us?

God of grace, put your sign on me this day, and protect me by your great love. Show me ways to extend your love and grace to others; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Lesson 12 68 May 17

God Provides Food in the Wilderness

Purpose
To contrast our human nature with God’s grace.

Hearing the Word
The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Exodus 16:2-15 (NIV)

2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

4 Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.

5 On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt,

7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?”

8 Moses also said, “You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.”

9 Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.’”

10 While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud.

11 The Lord said to Moses,

12 “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.’”

13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.

15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.”

Exodus 16:2-15 (KJV)

2 And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:

3 And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full;

4 Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no.

5 And it shall come to pass, that on the
sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.

6 And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the Lord hath brought you out from the land of Egypt:

7 And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord; for that he heareth your murmurings against the Lord: and what are we, that ye murmur against us?

8 And Moses said, This shall be, when the Lord shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the Lord heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord.

9 And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the Lord: for he hath heard your murmurings.

10 And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

11 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

12 I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.

13 And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host.

14 And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.

15 And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat.

Seeing the Need

Are we there yet? I’m hungry! I have to go to the bathroom! Ray is bothering me! I think I’m going to throw up! Lisa is hogging all of the cool air! So went the melodious songs from the back seat. Dad, with Mom as copilot, drove the nine of us and Fritz the 40-pound dachshund across the country each summer. Our destination was always a campground where we would spend the better part of the week enjoying nature. But how we could complain along the way! Someone was always in someone else’s space, or it happened that some other offense or slight discomfort was shared with the entire crew.

Dad, in his typical fatherly manner, would periodically issue the statement “If I hear one more word, I’m going to
Lesson 12

pull this car over, and then . . .” That’s how Dad dealt with insurrection and unruly passengers. When I look back on those trips, they were perhaps the most wonderful experiences of my young life.

As you read the biblical accounts of the Israelites, do you sometimes wonder why, as God heard their whining, God too did not threaten to pull the caravan over if there was one more complaint? Certainly, the Israelites knew how to raise a fuss. What seems most amazing, however, is that the focus of their whining and bad behavior was centered on their opinion that God did not care about them, made mistakes, or somehow was not “God enough” for them. Isn’t it remarkable to think that they would not trust in God for their very lives? Who would act in such a way?

Today’s lesson is another in our series of understanding God’s grace. It invites us to revisit the Israelites and take time to see how different their (and our) approach to life is from God’s nature.

The Academy Award Goes to . . .

Children typically do not have a strong inner sense of governing their behavior, so they can sometimes be overly dramatic. Adults can, too, but when we hear an adult whining and offering their woes to the world, we are apt to say, “Oh, grow up!” That’s because they are acting like children, who love to act.

It’s no wonder, then, that God’s people were called the “children” of Israel. That was their style, their mode of operating. Exodus 16:2 tells us, “The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert.” Can you read the drama in their complaints?

“Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead you’ve brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death” (verse 3).

Good grief! Keep in mind that this whining happened “the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt,” roughly a mere 45 days after they were set free from over 400 years in slavery (verse 1). And after only that short amount of time, they were in agony and distress because things were not exactly going their way.

Notice, too, that their complaints were not against one another, like riding in the middle of a car seat with two big brothers invading your space. Their complaint was against God. “Who are we? Why blame us? . . . Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord,” Moses challenged the people when they complained to him and to Aaron (verses 7, 8). The people inferred that God was not just absent or didn’t care; their tone almost seemed to suggest that God was the actor in their pain and responsible for their woes.

We would never do that, right? It’s not in our nature to whine to God, is it? If the temperature is not quite right or the sun is shining in our eyes, we would never make such a fuss, would we? Of course, I’m being facetious. Certainly, we would—or at least, I would, along with so many other humans throughout time.

It’s tempting for us to make the baseline of our lives our personal comfort and having all of our needs met. It can be easy when something is lacking in our lives to determine that all is lost and that
Lesson 12

life is hardly worth living. Sin is not just being disobedient and doing things we know we should not do. Sin is an orientation in our lives that says we are most important and that we deserve all that we want and hope for. It says that life is all about me, and if I don’t get everything I need and want, then someone is going to be blamed.

Remember that the whining of the people occurred while they were living in freedom, being led across a sea on dry land, as God protected them from Pharaoh’s army. Clothed in freedom, filled with the presence of God, they still felt hungry, so nothing was right.

While we can easily read this portion of Scripture and shake our heads in disapproval, criticizing the children of Israel, we ought also to read it as a caution not to get so carried away with a “me-first, me-only” attitude. That way leads to death—the death of joy and the death of gratitude. It also serves as a good reminder to us to take stock of what God has done in our lives, ways God has provided for and delivered us, comforted us when we have been heartbroken, and undergirded our hopes and efforts.

How can you reframe a bad or uncomfortable personal situation in light of God’s care for you?

God’s Ear

It appeared from my sister Amy’s text that Mom had had another small stroke. Already bedbound for a couple of years due to cancer, Mom had been suffering with what seemed to be strokes, which further kept her from talking in complete sentences or sometimes knowing her children.

I was 1,000 miles away when Amy cautioned that Mom wasn’t doing well. I can’t think of a more helpless feeling than hearing that news when you are so far away. I immediately texted Cheri to let her know and to share the pain and frustration I was feeling. Her response was just as I expected: She was going to pray right then.

At 90 years old, Mom’s life had been a long one for sure, so Cheri’s prayer, which I joined, was for Mom to be without pain and to live until she no longer was able. It’s as if we picked her up and plopped her right into God’s hands. Of course, that’s where she had been all along. I checked the next morning, and Mom was doing much better. She was eating and alert. Was this an answer to prayer? Did God do what I asked for? I think better that God heard me but already knew what I desired. Hopefully, our prayers simply aligned our hearts and minds more fully with God’s will for this situation.

God said, “I’ve heard the complaints of the Israelites” (Exodus 16:11). Notice that God did not call them “my children” but instead gave them a title that seemed to put distance between them and God. God said, in effect, “What I will do is what I, the Lord, am able to do. I will rain down bread from the sky! What you will fill your bellies with will come from my hand, so that you will know that your life is in my hands as well.”

Scripture tells us that God not only provided one miracle but two. In addition to bread (or “manna,” as the people called it, verse 31), God sent a flock of quail that “covered the camp” (verse 13). What a huge flock that must have been, and it was enough for every child of Israel to be fed.
When morning came, so came the manna, as thin as frost but carrying the promise of God to care for them in the wilderness. The gift of manna continued for 40 years until the nation crossed over the Jordan and arrived at the border of Canaan (verse 35).

What does this tell us about God? Certainly, we have to use the word grace again. All that they received after their complaining was a gift. They didn’t earn it, didn’t work for it, and maybe didn’t deserve it; but God was gracious to them and sustained them by miraculous means. That is who God is. God is the one who sustained an entire nation and did so simply out of the love and devotion God has for them. God has the power and the inclination to love and to do so in concrete and awesome ways.

Perhaps you can recall times in your life when what you desperately needed or what you hoped for came to be and could’ve come only as a gift from God. Each of us has been sustained by God. That’s not to say that God is a heavenly wish-granter or subject to our whining. It is to say that God’s very nature is to care. God has cared for us in the past, cares for us today, and will care for us in the future.

The very grace of God means that we don’t walk through the wilderness alone or without what we need to survive. When we experience desert times, the claim of our faith allows us to thank God for the gift of grace that sees us through and helps us survive, with meat in the evening and bread every morning, in whatever forms they take. God knows our needs and is at work in our lives to provide the grace we need to live this day.

What do you need right now in your life?

Just Enough

When things break around our house, somehow the “victim” always ends up in front of me on the kitchen table. It’s in my family job description. I have been ridiculed and mocked for searching for the best “break-fixers” I can find. To that end, I have amassed a large number of effective (and some not effective) glues, pastes, epoxies, and other substances. As I think about it now, I recall that Dad also had a rather large variety of mending devices at his disposal.

What I have learned when it comes to these fixes, through many trials and many errors, is that more is not always better. When it comes to putting something back together, adhesive wise, just the right amount makes all the difference, holds well, and looks good. When I have squirted, squished, or dumped too much adhesive substance on the broken item, it doesn’t stay together; it simply falls apart, and I have to start over. The principle of “just enough” sometimes looks like we should try more, but the difference between failure and success lies in faith that just enough is enough.

Remember that God showered the Israelites with manna each morning, but it was good only for that day. “The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day,” God told Moses. “In this way, I’ll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction” (Exodus 16:4). They could eat their fill of that holy bread, but “on the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days” (verse 5). Would
they be obedient to the God who sustained their lives, or would they try to protect themselves by amassing more than just enough?

We find later in Scripture that, indeed, some of the Israelites did try to collect more manna than they needed for one day, and it became infested with worms (verse 20). Others tried to collect what they needed on the sabbath, but none fell that day. God, of course, was displeased with the people in both instances.

Every morning for 40 years, the Israelites woke up to bread for the day, daily bread. Every morning was an opportunity for them to thank God for what was provided to them, although it appears, as we move through Exodus, that still, the voice of the Israelites was more complaint than praise.

What is just enough for your life? When I am honest, I can name a number of things I wish I could amass or things I think I need more of. I can identify other things I would like to have in order to protect my future.

Perhaps the finest example of living in grace and knowing the grace of God is to continue to discern what is just enough in so many parts of our lives. I’m not talking about doing without what we genuinely need. But I believe we offer a greater witness of faith when we are not weighed down by the “too much” of life—anything that we crave more than need.

Let each day’s manna be an exercise in faith, and know that God will provide for your needs, so long as we trust and are obedient to God’s instruction. Grace abounds.

What do you have in your life that is indeed “just enough”? Where do you see evidence of the grace of God in your life today?

God of Abundance, give me this day my daily bread, and give me faith to wait upon you for tomorrow’s blessing; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.
33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

39-43
39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”
40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?
41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”
42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”
43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”


32 And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.
33 And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

39-43
39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.
40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?
41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.
42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.
43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.
Lesson 13

Seeing the Need

It was March 28, 2017. I was in the northern end of my district for one of those typical church meetings, discussing with people the kind of pastor they hoped we could appoint there. My breathing was a little wheezy when I started the meeting, and throughout the hour, things just seemed to get worse. I thought I was having a panic attack for some reason. I just couldn’t catch my breath.

I cut the meeting short and decided to drive and relax on the way to the next meeting in a town about 40 miles away. I couldn’t even get to my car. Someone from the meeting asked if he could take me to the emergency room. By the time I got there, I was pale, and I learned that I had about an inch of space for breathing in my lungs. The medical staff did a wonderful job of pushing oxygen back into my lungs and started me on treatment to open things up again. Then they transported me to a city about 60 miles away, where I became a guest of the hospital there for about four days. Today I feel better than ever, but before receiving treatment, I was probably about five minutes away from death.

We are all going to die. Most, if not all, of us have experienced the death of someone we know and love. We may have been present with someone at their time of death. Is it scary? It was for me. Going through all of that just wasn’t on my calendar. What is the most important thing someone needs as they go through the process of dying? What would clearly be the best gift anyone could offer them?

Today’s text may seem like a curious choice for this last Sunday of Easter, because it looks back to a particular event surrounding Jesus’ death on the cross. But it was chosen because it strongly illustrates God’s grace. It reminds us to listen for and share Jesus’ words of grace and hope, especially at life’s most difficult moments, even at the point of death.

Demanding Prayers

Come on, Lord! Can’t you just do this for me this one time?

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? I have to confess that I have, but the prayers were not for me. The times when I have made such demands on God were to intervene for someone I love. Whether it was for Cheri, our sons, my mother, or someone else, my mind and heart took over my reason, and I became almost angry that they were suffering.

Cheri had morning sickness during...
both pregnancies. It wasn’t just nausea; she couldn’t keep a sip of water down. It started at the beginning of each pregnancy and continued for seven months. Both times, she ended up in the hospital with IVs and a scared husband.

Do you know why we only have two children? Because I wanted them to have a mother. My prayers during those times were not gentle or “let it be your will” types of prayers. I demanded, I pleaded, and I expected God to do what I wanted. These were probably the poorest seasons of prayer I have ever had, and it was only later, when bouncing baby boys were happy and healthy, that I realized indeed that God had taken care of my lovely wife, in spite of the rude prayers I offered out of desperation.

My faith tells me that God hears and receives all of our prayers, even when we offer them in ways other than the manner Jesus taught us to pray. God can handle it, and in the same way a parent can absorb the tantrums of a child, so God loves us and cares for us, even when we are demanding. It’s important, however, to remember that God doesn’t work for us. The breath we use to complain to God is first placed in our lungs by the one who cherishes us.

Scripture tells us that “two other criminals” were executed with Jesus (Luke 23:32). It’s interesting that the word Luke used is different than the one Matthew and Mark used. Their word is more precisely translated as “thieves” or “robbers” and is the same word used to identify those who beat the man in the story of the good Samaritan. Another interpretation of the word Luke used is “revolutionary.”

Barabbas was supposed to be crucified with these two criminals. Barabbas wasn’t just a thief; it was believed he was part of the whole insurrection movement against Rome. He “had been thrown into prison because of a riot and murder” (verse 25). Pilate had wanted to release Jesus, but the crowd demanded the release of Barabbas instead. The chief priests had brought Jesus to Pilate, saying that he had been “misleading our people, opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming that he is the Christ, a king” (verse 23).

Luke tells us that “one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ ” (verse 39). In other words, he said, we are all in this together, condemned for the same reasons, and so bring your power and do it now! Arrogant, demanding, and ignorant. Honestly, though, if I were hanging on a cross next to Jesus, I would probably make the same demand. Perhaps we all would.

Death from crucifixion was agonizing. Those subjected to it basically strangled to death because they could not hold themselves up by their legs and allow breath into their lungs. While we tend to look down on this first criminal, it’s difficult to say we would not react in the same way, even as people of faith.

“Save yourself. Save us!” A mouth full of demands, with a heart perhaps full of desperation and a pair of lungs unable to sustain him for long. As we peer into this account, let’s not walk too nobly by the first criminal, because Scripture says, “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23). Let’s take at least a moment and recognize that hanging on that cross is also our own possible demand or plea when we are faced with the reality of death in our own lives.
When have your prayers seemed demanding? What were the circumstances?

**Remember Me**

When playing board games, adults usually have the ability to look ahead at different moves other players might make and figure out a strategy to thwart their success and maybe punish them a little. Frankly, that's hard to do when you are the daddy and your opponents are your young children.

So, as my children and I played fierce games like Candyland or Hi Ho Cherry-O, when they were young, they would sometimes get themselves into a pickle. I could see it coming, but they never did. Often, when that happened, “we” would quickly amend the rules so that the player could stay in the game and not break down in tears. But when I would accidentally find myself in nearly the same predicament, they would only grin, their eyes twinkling, and force me to face the inevitable. They had no capacity or no desire to remember the good deal they had received, especially when it came to winning the game.

The second criminal on the cross beside Jesus that day offered a peculiar prayer. But first, he berated the other criminal, saying, “We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong” (verse 41). He then focused on Jesus and called him by his name.

That’s a rare thing to read in Scripture. In all four of the Gospels, even when the disciples addressed Jesus, it was not in such a familiar way. He was called Rabbi, Teacher, Master, Lord, Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, or the Christ. But addressing him by his given name was uncommon.

On the cross, however, this criminal staked no claim to the Son of God as his own. He did not know him as Lord or Master or Teacher or Christ. All that was left was for him to address Jesus as Jesus. In that moment, as we eavesdrop, we hear an intimacy and a sense in which all else is stripped away. There was no time left to use formal titles and polite address. The man simply called to Jesus, assuming nothing in terms of what he could claim from this person beside him.

But he asked, and the request recorded as the last words directed to Jesus in his life on earth were, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (verse 42). When you usher in your kingdom, please remember me, Jesus.

The words are stunning in their simple plea. The criminal didn’t ask for any special treatment or privilege. He didn’t demand front row seats or business class or the better table at a restaurant. He said, “Remember me, Jesus,” hoping that with his simple plea, he somehow honored Jesus.

These words have become for us in the Christian faith a cherished prayer. We use them as a form of meditation and in song. I believe that is because the prayer is so simple, with everything stripped away. No pretense, only honest and humble recognition of who was on the cross beside him and who would have the power to remember a criminal being crucified. Today, as we study God’s Word, we also remember this person, because he asked Jesus to remember him.
What did the criminal mean? Perhaps he was only asking that when Jesus came into his kingdom, Jesus would think kindly upon his life at least as one who offered respect and recognition of who Jesus was. Some understand his request to mean that he was asking Jesus to count him in when the kingdom was established or that he was striking a deal with Christ for some kind of favoritism.

I want to believe that it was far simpler, far more straightforward than that. “Remember me, Jesus. Let my existence on this earth have been worth at least something, to be in your memory.”

If you were to pray, “Jesus, remember me” today, what would you mean by that?

**I Assure You**

May 24 is a special day for United Methodists. On this day in 1738, John Wesley went to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. As he was listening to a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to the Letter to the Romans, Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed,” and he experienced the assurance of salvation for his life. He knew that he could trust in Christ and Christ alone to take away his sin.

This event happened after Wesley had spent two years in America and had gone home terribly defeated and depressed over his failure to evangelize. After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley’s preaching seemed to take on a new vitality; and within another short span of time, he began to organize followers into classes and societies and to spread the “spiritual holiness” that identifies The United Methodist Church today.

On this same day, our Focal Passage invites us to hear Jesus’ words “I assure you” (verse 43). Jesus was about three hours from death, but he was not alone. On a cross next to him was a criminal who had made that simple request for Jesus to remember him when the Lord entered into his kingdom.

The word assure means “to make secure.” I will make the future secure for you, Jesus told the man. It is in my power to do so. You can move forward with a real sense of trust and hope that what you have heard is absolutely true or will come true for you.

So what did Jesus assure the criminal that day? Phrases like this can be a lot of fun in translating Scripture. The original Greek writing has no commas, and most of the ways things are translated are by the endings of the words or the context of the words. So preachers take this opportunity to change the comma placement and talk about the different ways we might understand what Jesus meant. It’s either “I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” or “I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.”

The first sounds as if, when Jesus died, the criminal joined him in heaven. The second sounds as if Jesus offered a promise for the future. I’ll leave it to you to decide for yourself what is “right,” since we have no way of knowing.

What we do know, however, is that these are words of Jesus’ assurance to the criminal and, by extension, to each of us who will also come with humility and simplicity, not demanding or expecting, but simply requesting this of the Messiah. “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.” That’s the blessing to grasp. Jesus, his last breaths labored
and painful, nonetheless offered such a blessing to a criminal.

It’s curious as well that Jesus would use the word *paradise*. The word is not usually used to describe heaven but something closer to the garden of Eden. What we do know is that paradise is a setting of wonderful joy, peace, beauty, and gentleness, which are all aspects of an existence without sin and pain anymore. It would have been the finest blessing and benediction for the criminal.

As we hear Jesus’ words of grace and hope to the dying criminal, it’s my hope that you also hear those same words offered to you. As we find ourselves at times in difficult circumstances, or even facing death, we can claim this assurance, this blessed assurance, that Jesus knows us and knows our needs, even today.

How would you describe the assurance you have in your life today concerning the grace of Jesus Christ? How might you grow in that assurance?

Jesus, remember me this day, as I bring my heart and life to you; in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Lesson 14

The Holy Spirit Inspires Jesus' Followers

Purpose

To affirm the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the world.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Acts 2:1-21 (NIV)

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.
3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.
4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.
5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.
6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.
7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?
8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?
9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome
11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”
12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”
13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”
14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.
15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!
16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
17 ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.
18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.
19 I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.
20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

Acts 2:1-21 (KJV)

1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.
Lesson 14

5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilæans?

8 And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?

9 Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judæa, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia,

10 Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes,

11 Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.

12 And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?

13 Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.

14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judæa, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:

15 For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.

16 But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

17 And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

18 And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

19 And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:

20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come:

21 And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Seeing the Need

Happy Pentecost! Maybe you wore red today, the official color of Pentecost, which is also known as the birthday of the church. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish festival called Shavuoth (shav-u-OT). It celebrates the grain harvest and the occasion of God giving the Law, or Torah, to the children of Israel. The word Shavuoth means “weeks.” There were seven weeks between the second day of Passover and this festival.

In New Testament times, Jews came from all over the region to offer their grain offerings to God in the Temple in a time of wonderful celebration. That’s why Jerusalem was full of “pious Jews from...
every nation under heaven” on the occasion Acts 2 describes (verse 5). They were pilgrims, ready to be part of something important in the Jewish faith.

Christians claim the Day of Pentecost for what it means in the Greek language: 50 days. Fifty days after Easter, after Jesus had ascended to heaven, the disciples had returned to Jerusalem and were waiting for the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised would come and give them power to be his witnesses “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We recognize this day as the birthday of the church, because it was on that day that the disciples changed from being the followers of Christ to being the witnesses of Christ.

How could or should you celebrate today? Wear red, the color symbolizing the power of the Spirit! Release doves, if you have any, or recognize the symbol of the dove as the Holy Spirit descending. Recall that the Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:10). Sing the praises of the Spirit with hymns and songs for this day, and do so with joy, enthusiasm, and inspiration. This is the day of the coming of the Spirit to the followers of Jesus!

Inspiration

I was a Latin major in college and have always loved to find out the origins of words. Many of the words we use today commonly hold much more power and significance if we keep in mind their origins.

Take the words inspire or inspiration, for example. They come from a Latin word that means “to breathe in.” (Respiration means “to breathe again.”) We lay upon the word inspire pretty powerful and weighty values. When we say that someone is inspired, we suggest that they are changed or empowered to do something they otherwise would not do. An inspiration gives someone an idea or a resolve to do something important. When we talk about an inspired idea, we refer to something out of the ordinary, something special.

When we receive the Holy Spirit, we receive a special kind of inspiration. The breath of God is breathed on us, into us, and the powerful presence of God’s Spirit with us gives us the imagination and the power to do what God calls us to do. It fills us with resolve and insight and the assurance that this direction, this action, these words, are of God.

The opposite of inspiration is exhaustion. You know the feeling of having no energy or vitality left and the heavy exhale that comes with that feeling. But we never talk about the exhaustion of the Holy Spirit. How the Spirit inspires is the real mystery. We can read about the Spirit coming upon different prophets in the Old Testament or the Spirit coming upon Mary to create the new life who would bring salvation to the world. What does this power and inspiration look like? It’s certainly tough to describe.

But Luke tried to do just that in the account we read from Acts 2. Notice the images: “Suddenly” (verse 2). It was a
powerful moment, not a gradual strengthening.’ A sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind” (verse 2). There is a real power! This wasn’t the soft breeze of a nice summer day. It was like a North Dakota afternoon, with howling winds! As the disciples looked around, Luke says that “they saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them” (verse 3). It was a supernatural moment, God-given, and could happen only because the Spirit had come.

Some people may spend a great deal of time trying to explain these happenings out of a natural world phenomenon. But I say, let this moment on Pentecost Day belong to the power of God to transform these people into confident and strong individuals, ready to be evangelists (“a publisher of good tidings” or “one who brings good news”).

Luke explains not just that this happened but the effect of the coming of the Spirit: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (verse 4). They did this, not because they had studied, but because the Holy Spirit enabled them.

These early followers of Jesus were not highly educated, literary scholars. They were fishermen or held other physically demanding jobs. But they were suddenly and powerfully transformed so that a dozen or more different languages came out of their mouths. That effect, we will soon find, became only another cause to a greater purpose that day.

When have you felt inspired? What were you able to do because the inspiration was in you?

The Mighty Works of God

Most all pastors think they are good public speakers and can preach well. The proof of that, of course, actually rests in the ears of the congregation. However, before I became a pastor, I studied speech; won awards in high school for radio broadcasting, speech, and debate; and have tried to continue to hone that important craft. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively is vital.

When my son Aaron was in eighth grade, we went to his spring band concert. Suddenly, he stood in the spotlight behind the microphone, where he was transformed into a poised, articulate, excellent speaker who introduced the next piece the band would play. I’ll never forget the way our son, with absolutely no coaching or training from the master, managed to sound like an experienced, professional emcee, with no gaffs and no misspeaking, nothing but a mighty performance.

As the disciples and others were filled with the Holy Spirit that morning, they too suddenly became experts in speaking, particularly in foreign languages. This is not what today we sometimes refer to as “speaking in tongues.” The latter refers to those who are “caught up in the Spirit” and begin to say things that no one can understand. That indeed is one of the
spiritual gifts the New Testament names, and it too is pretty mysterious.

The tongues of the disciples that Pentecost Day caused a sense of mystery among the crowds of Jews who had come for the festival, not because they were strange and unknown but because the disciples were speaking to all of these people in their own languages. They could understand what the disciples were saying. The reaction was surprise and amazement.

Luke took the time to list the different nations, cultures, and languages represented in Jerusalem that day. That the followers of Jesus were able to speak to the crowd in those distinct languages and the crowd was able to understand them was a true miracle of God. However, when we realize the message that was spoken that day in all those different languages, we then are met face to face with the overwhelming holy significance of the coming of the Spirit.

“We hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” (verse 11). The reason the disciples were given this gift was so that those gathered would first be amazed at the ability of the disciples and then overwhelmed by hearing of God’s mighty acts.

It is appropriate on this Pentecost Day to ask what “mighty works of God” we have shared lately. How often do we tend to keep quiet about those miracles, those occasions when we have experienced the hand of God or known the power of the

Spirit our lives? How willing are we to speak with others about how God’s love has transformed our lives and how God is using us to transform the lives of others?

We may use the cultural substitutions of saying, “Boy, I was lucky,” “As luck would have it,” or “It was an amazing coincidence.” It’s more than a pity when disciples of Jesus attribute what happens to the mighty works of fate, luck, or happenstance.

Do you believe God through the Holy Spirit is active in your life? Do you trust that God is guiding and leading you and opening paths to deeper faith and to miracles in your life? If we believe this, we must not keep our mouths closed and simply let the mighty works of God—in and through us—go by in silence.

The world needs to know of the power, love, and incredible grace of our God who will not let us go or simply sit by idly. God is intimately involved in our lives and loves this world. We should claim the power of the Spirit, especially this Pentecost Day, and recommit ourselves to declaring the mighty works of God.

Where in your life has God been at work this week?

Know This!

She’s my mother, so I think she signed a contract that she has to do it. The tag-team that includes her and my wife does a pretty great job of lifting me up and encouraging me in my life’s work. In their gentle but firm ways, they remind me of what I should already know. When I am
faced with a large challenge or a larger disappointment, they manage to bring the best word to me and help me see a new path through or around what is in front of me. They are blessings, women who speak truth and inspiration that transform my life on a regular basis.

We come to the climax of Acts 2 when Peter takes the stage. First, recall precisely who this Peter was. Peter was a fisherman in Galilee, at that time pretty much a backwater, as uncultured and hillbilly land as you could get. When Jesus initially called Peter to follow him, Peter questioned Jesus’ advice to take his fishing boat out a little farther in order to catch fish. “Their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting” (Luke 5:6). Peter was often hard-headed and slow to understand what Jesus said.

On the evening before Jesus was crucified, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (Luke 22:54-62). After Jesus’ resurrection and appearance to the disciples, Peter decided to go back to fishing (John 21:1-3), until Jesus caught him again and set him on the path as a leader of this new faith. Peter went on to become a leader in the early church, just not the one we would likely have picked.

What we see that morning, after the disciples had been proclaiming the mighty works of God to the vast crowd, is a transformation. Almost before our eyes as we read, we see a fisherman become a prophet. Peter began to speak, and the words were different than any other speech he had ever made. He spoke with authority, passion, and spiritual power.

I love his first words: “Know this! Listen carefully to my words!” (Acts 2:14). Peter had a message for the crowd, and he presented it with a presence that went beyond catching their attention. His sermon, when completed, yielded “about three thousand people into the community on that day” (verse 41).

What did Peter say that was so captivating? He reminded them of the prophet Joel and the promise that God would “pour out [God’s] Spirit on all people” (verse 17). The pouring of the Spirit was what the people were seeing before their very eyes. Not only that, Peter shared the incredibly good news that all who called upon the Lord would be saved, that is, brought into God’s arms and restored to the relationship God desires for us.

This Pentecost event, Peter seems to have said, is transformed from the celebration of a harvest or the giving of the Law to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It utterly transforms and changes all that has been. It offers new life, new hope, new power, and a new relationship with God as was promised through the prophet, now come to reality.

“Know this!” is the clarion call of Pentecost. Know that the Spirit of God has come, and all that you have ever hoped for in your life of faith is now reality. Know that, if a group of people from Galilee can transform that crowd, certainly God’s Spirit in you can transform your world, and your life, and your future. We
are Pentecost people. Our heritage is one in which we trust in the saving grace of God, in the inspiration of God’s Spirit, and in the powerful gift of Jesus Christ. How can you carry the power of Pentecost forward throughout your life? What is one thing you can do today to demonstrate Pentecost power?

O God who sends the Spirit, send your power and grace on me today, that I may speak of your love to my world; in Jesus’ name. Amen.