2020 Lenten Devotional Booklet

From Ashes to Rejoicing
February 26th
Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18: 12
12 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.
14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God?
15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly;
16 gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.
17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ”

To move toward rejoicing, we must start with the ashes. Too often we skip the discomfort that following Christ can put on our lives. We breeze by with nice phrases and platitudes that help us keep our emotions and spirits at a more surface level rather than diving deep into the depths of our pain, our lament, and our sorrows for our failures. Traditional Lenten practices of prayer and fasting and almsgiving are meant to open us up into those depths. Ultimately, yes, we turn to rejoicing, but let us take time during this season to reflect on what the Ashes look like in our regional church, our local church, our communities, our families, our own spirits. We can move towards transformation and God’s love, but only if we do so together. As Joel says, “…gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children…let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.”

Let us begin with weeping. Let us begin with ashes. To be honest and faithful in this Lenten season, we must begin here.

Prayer: God who mourns, thank you for being with us in our fullest expressions of human emotion. We have pain, loss, sufferings, and shortcomings. You do not hide from us in these times of mourning. You come to be with us and join us. May we turn to you with our whole selves so that we may come to know you wholly as well. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Rev. Alan Dicken
Christian Church in Ohio Program Director
adicken@ccinoh.org
Psalm 1
1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners,  
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and they meditate on his law day and night.
3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;  
everything they do shall prosper.
4 It is not so with the wicked;  
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes,  
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

For me, one of the joys of being part of the church are the wise old trees. In my first full-time role as associate minister, our congregation in Knoxville addressed issues of survival because of declining membership. (This is despite being a loving congregation doing its best to follow the Gospel.) The senior pastor and I had more than one visioning meeting with leaders and elders confronting our difficult reality of paying for an old building while still getting excited about ministry in the downtown. In one retreat, we walked the building in silence giving thanks for our memories we experienced in the building as we considered selling. I perceived members' hearts being stretched. I never witnessed arguments, but feelings were evident. People were anxious, worried, scared, depressed, and resigned. Then, our senior pastor (my colleague and mentor) had a near-death experience fall, which caused him to be away for a couple of months (he survived and is doing quite well now!). What I remember is the night of a difficult elder’s meeting with questions about money and our future. As a pastor, the ground below my feet felt very unsure with a church in crisis, a mentor and friend in peril, and the direction of our church was not clear.

At the end of our meeting we gathered in a circle, and one of the elders, a 6 foot 5 tall slender man in his late 60’s who was the head of the choral department at the University of Tennessee began to pray. Suddenly, I had the distinct feeling of standing under an old oak tree. I questioned how I could feel sure-footed at this time. And yet in that prayer I felt protected from the elements and the presence of a deep abiding tree that said more in his very being than the words he spoke - “We have been here before and we will get through it again”. Standing in that circle, I understood that the “church” was going to be just fine.

In this Lenten season, I give thanks for those trees planted by the water bearing fruit in difficult seasons. I pray I might also give shade, fruit, and love to those in my midst no matter the circumstances. May we listen for the ways God is moving in our midst with trust that God will get us there. Amen

Rev. Audrey Connor
Chaplain, Grant Medical Center
audreyconnor@gmail.com
February 28th

1 Peter 2:4-5
Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

I love this metaphor of the living stones that Peter is making in this letter. The “Living Stones” creates a clear reminder to us that our own contributions in worship — both at a congregation or just at home — may seem like a very small part of fellowship; however, we are all the living stones that are building God’s beloved community. In the season of Lent, we recognize the restructuring that is important in our lives; it’s a time where we rebuild our community. And this rebuilding is not a complete redo in trying to make God’s community; rather, it is mending and moving of living stones that may have fallen or jostled in this last year. The continual building of this community to, in the end, reach fellowship and rejoicing with all who help construct this holy space.

These last few months, I have focused my academic and spiritual life on the study of other traditions that are not accustomed to the Christian Faith and how I can use this scholarship of religions for a clearer understanding of my own faith. Understanding how other people understand religion is important because I feel like it is important to comprehend how people of other religious traditions commit to The Divine in order to see how us Christians might feel more comfortable in our work for God. There are many different ways that we share fellowship with one another; and, for me, studying how other religions partake in their forms of love and fellowship is important for the rebuilding of my purpose in our Disciples of Christ community.

We have been anointed together this past Ash Wednesday, and we share the fellowship of that sacred time, now let us use this time of Lent to allow ourselves to reconstruct as the living stones that creates God’s community so that we can all rejoice in the glory of our Savior. Please join me in a prayer:

Loving and Caring God... Thank you for this day. Another day that we can use to understand the lessons that you give us and for the fellowship that you bring. In this season of Lent, Lord, help us to rebuild — to improve — ourselves in Disciples of Christ. Please God, continue to use us as your Living Stones in the construction of your community. And help us, Lord, to realize that us stones are all necessary to your creation. Guide us to the way that we can, individually, be involved for the betterment of that community. Because we know that all of your Living Stones fit in different ways. Help us, Lord, to find our fit in the structure so we can all rejoice in our name. We ask of this in your name, amen.

Tomas Hernandez
Regional Church Council Member
hernandeztomas01@yahoo.com
February 29th

“Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man’s feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them.” Acts 3:7-8

Somewhere in the recesses of my memory is a Vacation Bible School song whose title I can’t remember, but whose chorus echoes this verse in Acts, “He went walking and leaping and praising God, walking and leaping and praising God. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.” It was a catchy chorus, but that’s all I got! It’s pretty much all I really need when I think about the story in Acts where Peter and John were going about their daily routine, and basically stumbled on this guy laying in the entrance to the Temple. Both parties were expecting the same old, same old for the day; Peter and John the ninth hour prayer practice, and the gate blocker another day of asking for money.

Both took somewhat of a “leap of faith” as I see it; Peter to extend his hand, and the beggar to take it. In the leap of faith was the miracle. Peter pulled him up like a fellow player on a football team, and the beggar stood, gained strength, and began to walk. Then they walked together to church; Peter looking smugly like he knew something no one else did and he couldn’t wait to tell it, and the beggar leaping around and praising God like a kid on Christmas morning after receiving an unexpected gift.

To take a leap of faith means to attempt an endeavor which might seem impossible. Yet that’s what faith is, a belief in the impossible, the unbelievable, the seemingly unrealistic. Putting our faith or life into action may seem like a scary leap, leaving that which is comfortable. Yet we all know we don’t grow where it’s comfortable; we grow in the leaps.

Is there a leap of faith that you have been meaning to take? Something in your life that sounds impossible, unrealistic even? Something nagging your inner being to do? Today is Leap Day! It sounds like as good a day as any to slap the Nike swoosh on your shirt and “just do it!” Leap away! Believe what you have been taught; “Nothing is impossible with God” and “I am with you always!” You do not leap alone. When confronted with a leap of faith, trust God enough to jump. Maybe the miracle will be in your leap. You can do it! Like for Indiana Jones, there is always an invisible bridge called God to get you where you want to be. Maybe, just maybe if you do, you will find yourself walking and leaping and praising God too!

Rev. Mary Jo Bray
Hampton Park Christian Church, Toledo and Grandparents Camp Co-Director
revmjbray@gmail.com
March 1st

Matthew 4:1-11
Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness
4 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 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 to 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.

How often are we tempted to fill our “hunger” with the “rocks” this world offers up to us. Millions, actually more like billions, of dollars are spent on advertising every year telling us what we need to make us, our lives, complete. We wander about in the wilderness of a consumer society trying to fill the hole in our hearts with things rather than the love of God. When we wonder in the wilderness, alone, and not seeking God we tend to get caught up in the things and situations we have no business being in. Whenever you find yourself in a place of the wilderness, it's important to seek God out and see what he is trying to teach you through those trials and tribulations. Just as Jesus fasted and sought God, we must do so also!

For many of us in the United States it is a simple matter to walk into a store, or sit down at a computer, to buy what we think we need to instantly to satisfy our hunger; be it a candy bar, a soda, the newest car or technology or latest self-help plan. The list goes on.

We as a society are so focused on wanting a microwave life, rather than a life built a little at a time with purposely picked ingredients. We are looking for a quick fix to our lives; like a microwave heating up processed food, rather than homemade meal with fresh ingredients. You see, the microwave is so much easier and faster to help us heat our food. Whereas, a home cooked meal is so much tastier. Yes, it's a longer process, stopping in each department in the grocery store or going to a farmer's market to pick the best fresh fruit and cuts of meat. But when you think about it the food tastes so much better which makes the work and time worth it!

If we take the time to pray, read his word and care for others we will begin to see and feel that God is with us, loving us, filling us we don't need to look to the stores and things to fill that hole. We can be whole with God.

Polly Tallos
Ministry Assistant North Eaton Christian Church
Director of Chi Rho Camp Emmaus
polly.tallos@yahoo.com
March 2nd

Co-creators with God.

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it.” - Gen 2:15 (NRSV)

Regardless of your views on exactly how Creation took place, one thing we can likely agree on is that God, the Ground of all Being, had a hand in it. Genesis tells us that after God created the world, he asked us, humans, to take care of it, “to till it and keep it.” Tilling the land breaks up the soil and makes it a welcoming environment to allow newly planted seeds to germinate, grow, and flourish. Think about that for a moment ... God asked us to be Co-Creators of life. We get to be co-creators anytime we help give birth to new life — plants, animals, even little baby humans.

If you do any gardening, your mailbox is probably filled with seed catalogs this time of year. I love planting little seed balls. Last fall I planted milkweed and cone flowers. I’m so excited to see if they start sprouting next month. I hope the milkweed will attract monarch butterflies to my back yard. That will be another way I can be part of the creation, the birthing process.

But our responsibility doesn’t end with the birthing process. The second part of that command is to “keep it.” It is our God-given responsibility to care for God’s creation. To me, that means I must use the earth’s resources wisely. Further, I must try not to introduce toxins or pollutants into the earth or the atmosphere. I am not as good as this as I could be, but I do drive an electric car and I do recycle, and I do support sustainable farming practices. It’s a start.

My prayer for you today is that you will know the joy of dirty fingernails, dirty knees, as you co-create with God, and care for this beautiful world we’ve been blessed with. Then we too can look around and say “It is good.”

Creator God, thank you for the blessing of our beautiful world. Thank you for allowing us to be part of the creation process. Help us be faithful stewards of your earth, and leave it better than we found it. Amen.

Gladys Davis
Treasurer, Christian Church in Ohio
gladysmarie66@yahoo.com
March 3rd

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

As we move from Ash Wednesday to the glorious celebration of Easter, the opening words of this Psalm take on a powerful meaning. We can join with the Psalmist and invoke these words as our own personal prayer.

We are moving closer and closer to spring time. The daylight hours are growing longer and we are grateful for the moments when we can begin to enjoy more of the outdoors. I believe that spring cleaning fits with the season of Lent more than we may realize. Actually, the words of the Psalm above become a part of our soul spring cleaning when we proclaim “blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”

After all, consider what spring cleaning is all about. We may notice dust that has not been removed. We may become aware of unneeded papers that can be disposed of or recycled. Surely, we will take note of things in the yard that need attention, whether it be adding mulch to our flower beds, pruning some bushes to prepare them for new growth, cleaning up the garage or whatever else may grab our attention.

Let’s come back to the words of that Psalm and our own personal lives. What are the cobwebs of bad habits that can be changed? Where is the dirt of forgiveness or of anger or of disrespect that keeps us from fully being what and who God intends us to be? When have we withheld love or failed to offer kindness, mercy, and compassion to another when it is so much needed? Where do we find the clutter hidden in the deep recesses of our hearts and spirits, the clutter embodied in doubt and uncertainty, the clutter of the tasks we know we should have done but left undone, or the clutter of those actions that we regret.

This is the time to look inward, recognize our sinful ways, turn them over to God and then beyond to see the great gift that God has given us through His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. I invite you to read the words of the Psalm again and encourage you to make it your personal prayer and conviction.

Nik Donges
Regional Elder, District 12
pastornik@fuse.net
March 4th

Random Acts of Kindness

We are just into our 2nd week of the Lenten Season. For many, as we continue in this journey of faith, have been challenged to give something up. The usual joke is, ‘Yeah, I’m giving up liver for Lent.’ So, what are you giving up for Lent this year? Is it your favorite desert, skipping a meal, fasting one meal a day, or fasting one day a week?

Let me ask you a very different question, ‘What are you willing to take up for Lent?’ In the Gospel story of Zacchaeus, we find that his redemptive act was more than giving up his wealth to the poor and making amends. It was more than that. It was a change of lifestyle, a change in how we treat other people. It means engaging in random acts of kindness whenever and wherever we get the chance with whoever we encounter.

Are you will to commitment to that kind of challenge for Lent? Tolstoy, the great Russian writer, was passing along a street one day when a beggar stopped him, pleading for a charitable donation. The great Russian searched through his pockets for a coin, but finding none, he regretfully said, ‘Please don’t be angry with me, my brother. I have nothing with me. If I did I would gladly give it to you.’ The beggar’s face lit up, and he said, ‘You have given me more than I asked for. You have called me brother.’

This Lent let us take up something - acts of kindness, of encouragement, of love and compassion in our homes, on our jobs, to our neighbors, anywhere and everywhere we see a need. In so doing, in so giving, we follow in the steps of Jesus. Knowing that with every step toward Jerusalem Jesus was delivering up his life for us and the world. And so, with this understanding, hear these words from 2 Peter 1:3-11.

3 His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. 5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 11 For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

Now if you have not done something little this already, take a slip of paper and imagine it as a piece of our Lord’s Cross (paper is made from wood, right?), and write on it something that speaks to your preparation for this coming Lenten Season. It may be some kind of an act of repentance or doing some Random Acts of Kindness. It may be a promise to yourself for sharing in a time of fasting. It may be a desire to seek forgiveness or to offer forgiveness. Whatever that might be, place it in a special place where you can see it every day. No one else needs to read it, it’s just between you and Jesus.

Prayer: Most Gracious Lord, as we journey through this season of Lent, as we prepare to celebrate the Good News of Easter, let your Holy Spirit guide us. Enable us by your grace and mercy to follow through on our commitment to do something to benefit others. Let the love and peace of your will strengthen us in all our days ahead, that we may never stumble. And it’s in your Holy Name that we pray. Amen.

Rev. Ralph S. Wearstler
Regional Elder (District 15)
RevRalphW@sbcglobal.net
March 5th

2nd Timothy 1:3-7 Common English Bible (CEB):
I'm grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. When I remember your tears, I long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. I'm reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I'm sure that this faith is also inside you. Because of this, I'm reminding you to revive God's gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.

Reflection:
I am sitting amongst the cloud of witnesses. There is a stack of funeral services on my desk; the church has lost several faithful Disciples that have guided and nurtured our spirit for generations. On the other side of this pastor's desk is a much heftier stack of future worship services, sermon outlines and liturgical resources. The prayer list is not forgotten but threatened by its own burial in paperwork. Then there's the sloppy stack of calendars with meeting minutes, agendas and the coming events to which I wish I could give more attention. I am sitting with the cloud of witnesses, but lost in a fog.

I do not fancy working behind the desk. My intentions and comfort are to be out in God's creation in relationship with the next generations of faithful Disciples. My joy comes from engaging people in conversation and pulling more people into a dialogue. After all, the more voices vocalized, the more there is to hear about God's activity in the world.

At a peculiar corner of the desk – it is strangely tidy – sits a small collection of “Covenant Cards.” A fair percentage of worshipers intentionally jotted down promises they felt they could live into this year and were self-motivated to anonymously place the other half of the card in an offering plate. The collection of cards does not appear significant, for they are smaller than a 3x5 and the perforations around the edges give them the aura of a ticket.

If my covenant were to hear more about God's activity in the world, why wouldn't I start by listening to the voices that have been faithful here for so long? All these covenants have the same theme. The people that worship in this space want to be of service, to be used, to have purpose and to become more than they are. These covenanted souls are on a journey to support growth, dig deeper, give more, and seek new duties. There are subtle and glaring acknowledgements of shortcoming within the written statements. These disciples want to pray, extend more grace, be faithful, and keep the promises they make to God.

We are in the midst of shedding tears, figuring out how we are going to make ends meet, and learning to adjust to the new reality for which there is no way to honestly prepare. Our hearts are riddled with voids from what we have lost. There is a yearning for those voids to be filled with joy.

Be encouraged. The generations before us, our ancestors, have been faithful. We are surrounded by faithful Disciples every time we gather for worship, table and fellowship. When we are together the spirit of timidity fades. The spirit of power and love comes over us to free us from the bondage of a broken world.

Action:
As part of your Lenten journey consider your promise to God and know that countless other Ohio Disciples have made their promise too.

Rev. Kevin C. Greenwald
Former Member of the Regional Transition Team
Senior Pastor of First Christian Church, Bellefontaine
revkeving@bellefontainefcc.org
March 6th

Follow the Lectio Divina phases for your devotion today
Praying with Scripture falls into the following four phases. These phases are not air-tight compartments with rigid transitions between them. Lectio offers a natural flow from one phase to the next rather than a lock-step march.

Please read Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Phase One - Lectio: reading. What does the text say?
TURN to the text and read it slowly, gently, out loud. Savor the reading, feel the words in your mouth, listening for the 'still, small voice' of a particular word or phrase that says, 'I am for you today.'

Phase Two - Meditatio: meditation. What does the text say specifically to me at this point in my life?
TAKE the word or phrase into yourself. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Let your imagination engage the text. Images are not necessarily but invitations into dialogue with God.

Phase Three - Oratio: prayer. What does God say to me and what do I say to God through the text?
SPEAK to God. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Experience this God-breathed word or phrase as a means to bless and transform the thoughts and images that God's Word has awakened in you. Give to God what you have found in your heart.

Phase Four - Contemplatio: contemplation. Being still, resting in God's presence, and letting God work through my mind and heart.
FINALLY, REST in God's embrace. Let go of words and images. Rejoice that God is with you in silence, spiritual rest, and inner receptivity. SILENCE - LISTEN - DWELL - ABIDE

As you come up out of the depths of contemplation and prepare to resume your normal activities, first thank God for meeting you in this time. Then ask God to show you what difference can this text make in how you act? What possibilities does it open up? What challenges does it pose?
March 7th

*Please read John 13: 21-32*

“. . .And it was night.” (vs. 30c)

“And it was night.” marks much more than time of day! It applies to everyone. Each knew the NIGHT - Judas, Jesus and each disciple had their personal night ahead.

Eli Wiesel wrote: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. . .

. . .Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”*

We’ve all known “And it was Night.” It may not compare to Wiesels. But, we know Night - health issues, financial frustration, job loss, grief, relationships strained, family stresses, addictions, deficits in spiritual strength.

When It is Night, hope is in remembering words from the beginning of John’s Gospel. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Or, as St. John of the Cross wrote: “In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me, Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.”**

Pray: Holy God help me get through the NIGHT. Give me hope as I anticipate the dawning of your glory and light. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Originally written by, and submitted in memory of
Rev. George R. Reese
1943 - 2013

(*From Night, Eli Wiesel, ** From Dark Night of the Soul, St. John of the Cross)
March 8th

Throughout Epiphany I had been preaching a series based on the world of ‘Star Trek.’ It was not everyone’s cup of earl grey tea, but it was fun for me to be able to share the love of God through the lens of this science fiction story.

I learned a few things that I would like to share.

1. Resistance is futile. No one likes change, but as Mr. Dylan told us ‘the times they are a changin’. The Gospel changes us so we can change the world.

2. We need to Boldly Go. The church likes to stay in its safe buildings and when we do go out, we are often timid. The Church is an agent of God, we must share God’s salvation with boldness.

3. This is the final frontier. This is our life and times. If we are going to reach the world for Jesus Christ we must start where we are. The future is unknown and we must be courageous in our living the Christian life. We must come down from the mountain and go out to serve.

The poem 'Invictus' states that 'I am the Captain of my soul'. I believe that Christ is my Captain and I am more than happy to follow him wherever he leads. With all respect for Kirk, Picard, and anyone else, as for me, I will follow the Lord.

Rev. John Cox
Karl Road Christian Church and the Regional Church Council
krccpastor@gmail.com
“You Have Nothing to Fear” Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 NRSV

1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, 2 will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, 10no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. 11For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. 12On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. 13You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. 14Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. 15When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. 16With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Parenthood causes you to look at life with a different point of view. The lens by which you perceived things once before is almost transformed in an instance. There is no way possible one cannot witness the faith and comfort a little child has when they are in the presence of those who have been gifted with the privilege of caring for them, and see things from a different point of view. In an atmosphere where the child has the opportunity to thrive in the presence of their earthly parents, the child is able to freely exist without worry. You are able to witness this type of faith by seeing their faces light up when they fall hard but recognize that someone is there to pick them up and care for them. This type of faith is expressed and explained through the excitement and joy that is heard throughout the room when they have been away from you for most of the day and they see you walk through the door after a long day at work. Such expressions are moments of validation for them that suggest that they fully understand that their ability to freely function lies in the hands of those who are present when they open their eyes up in the morning and tuck them in when they close those same eyes at night to rest. Without a doubt they know where they can find refuge.

So the psalmist attempts to make plain for us that this type of faith and trust can be established when we know that God is our refuge. With this understanding, like the child has in the comfort of their earthly parents, we can rest in the most high with a faith in knowing that we are shielded from everything that is set up to harm us. When God is your refuge, you can freely let your light shine and trust that there is one whose light shines brighter standing right there with you in the midst of your dark places. And even in the midst of someone else’s dark place. When God is your refuge you can fulfill the call in its fullness and in return God will cover and protect you from those things that possess ill intentions. When God is your refuge, in the midst of chaos you can trust that you will be rescued.

Prayer: Because you are my refuge, the Most High, my dwelling place, God I trust that you will make the burdens of life light. I can rest in knowing that you are there at all times, even when my eyes cannot see you and my ability to hear your voice clearly has failed me. When I go to fulfill the work that I am called to, nothing shall stand in my way. I wholeheartedly believe that this is true, because the angels that you have encamped around me have never let me fall. With long life you will satisfy me and show me my salvation. I am forever grateful. Amen.

Taken from the 2016 Disciples Home Missions Lenten Devotional Resource, written by Rev. Antonio (Tony) Redd.
March 10th

*Please read Isaiah 65:17-25*

Perhaps, it is easier to think of a new creation at the time of year when crocus peep through the earth ... when sunny days outnumber grey cloudy ones ... when birdsong awakens us more frequently. More than the truth of the natural references, Isaiah’s invitation is to account for God's presence in their post Exilic lives. The invitation to the Hebrews celebrates God's promise actualized back in the Promised Land.

Now, the challenge to our faith is to recognize how God's intention is at work transforming our lives into God's divine plan. In the midst of this 20/20 Lenten season, we are invited to gain better insight and to refine our relationship to the same Creator. As followers of the Christ, we seek to discover or to recover our purpose as stewards of time and of all of God's creation. It’s a season to re-focus our perspective. It is precisely for this reason that we are turning our attention to these daily devotions.

In the USA, it is an election year. The divisions are pronounced. The tensions are high. One of the leaders at the recent Clergy/Spouse Spiritual Life Retreat acknowledged that she had virtually stopped the consumption of all news because of the vitriol. I have considered that, too, but think that my desire to be part of what God desires to do in this time of turmoil calls me to be an informed and faithful witness and participant.

I have found Richard Rohr's book, “Everything Belongs” to be an important reminder that nothing is beyond God's concern, even the political scene of the nation. Rohr's observation that the popular notion that God is “out there” creates a dualism that is tearing us apart. Rohr says, “That's why we have raped the earth, why we have such poor understanding of our bodies, our economy, and our health. He goes on to say, “That's why we live such distraught and divided lives. What is worse is that Jesus came precisely to put it all together.” Jesus commissions his followers to be part of this new creation . . . to put into practice the very lifestyles that permit this new creation, this reign of Christ, to be realized. Curiously, it is not experienced necessarily by adding new disciplines. If anything, it is realized by having less of me and more of Christ. It is experienced by my surrender as the “center of my universe.” In Richard Rohr’s words, it is known and expressed by “the release of our current defense postures, by letting go of fear and our attachment to self-image.”

Prayer: O Living Spirit of Christ, lead us to recognize humility as the pathway to You. May there be less of me and more of You, Lord. Guide us to know that You are able to utilize every trait in my character and every experience of my life to contribute to the new creation you are bringing into fruition. Amen

Kerry J. Reed, Columbus
Regional Elder, District 13/14
kerryredekerryreed@gmail.com
March 11th

Please read John 7:53-8:11 The Voice (VOICE)

This passage of Scripture tells the story of the woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a member of an ancient Jewish sect, distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written law, and commonly held to have pretensions to superior sanctity. They also claimed Mosaic authority for their interpretation of Jewish Laws.

In this passage we have a complete cast of characters. We join Jesus teaching in the Temple, the Pharisees dragging the woman caught in adultery before Jesus, and we have the woman fighting for her life. However, there is one person missing. The man who was with the woman when she was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses states that those caught in adultery need to be stoned to death. Deuteronomy 22:22 The Voice (VOICE) reads as follows:

22 If it’s discovered that a man has been having sexual relations with a married woman, both the man and the woman must be put to death. Expel the wicked from Israel this way.

But where is the man? He seems to be absent from the scene of this drama, or is he? Jesus stoops down and writes in the dirt. We do not know what he wrote, but based on the reaction of the woman’s accusers we could speculate that it might have been the name of the woman’s adulteress partner. Is the woman’s partner one of the men accusing the woman? We will never know. What we do know is that the woman’s accusers all leave the scene after Jesus does his writing in the dirt.

Was Jesus writing names or was Jesus writing the sins of the woman’s accusers. Or, was Jesus just writing in the dirt? Jesus’ only comment to the Pharisees is, “Let the first stone be thrown by the one among you who has not sinned.” After Jesus makes this statement, the accusers exit from oldest to youngest. Amazing how those apparently unwilling to address their sins are silenced and leave the woman alone before Jesus.

Even more interesting is the fact that Jesus has dialogue with the woman, but has no dialogue with her accusers. Apparently, Jesus knew that his conversation with the woman would be of some benefit because she is willing to own her sin and talk to him. Whereas, the Pharisees were good at testing God, but not willing to enter into discussion for further developments and truth.

Through prayer during this Lenten season we have the opportunity to come to Jesus with our sins, resentments, and disappointments. In doing so, further developments will emerge as we converse with the Lord and gain truth about our sins and receive the healing words of Jesus, “I do not condemn you either; all I ask is that you go and from now on avoid the sins that plague you.”

Prayer:
Lord help us to come to you when we are caught in our sins or when we are caught up in our sins and realize that your truth as the only way out. Amen

Pastor Wally Burman
pastorwally@yahoo.com
March 12th

Scripture for Reflection: Psalm 51:1-10

Have mercy on me, O God,
   according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
   blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
   and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
   and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
   and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
   and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
   a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;
   therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
   wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
   let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
   and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
   and put a new and right spirit within me.

Prayer Points:

- Create in me a clean heart, O God.

- Before I can move forward, I need a new and right spirit.

- What is my own sin? From what do I need to repent?

- I have sinned against the Lord. I seek forgiveness.
March 13th

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our maker! Psalm 95:6

Every morning at camp, cabins of Chi Rhoers gather together for morning prayers. As candles are lit, this verse is read out loud together by campers and their counselors. Thinking about this, I wonder at how many campers have shared in this devotion through the years. Was this prayer liturgy, and this verse, used at the very beginning of Camp Christian's ministry? Even back in the days when there were 8 (yes, 8!) weeks of Chi Rho every summer?! Hundreds, even thousands, of campers, every morning for a week, every summer for generations, have begun a time of prayer in the morning seeking God's presence in that moment, and by extension for the entire day ahead of them. This is significant, really it is. If we call Camp Christian holy ground with straight faces, it can only be because we have joined together seeking God's presence, and God has answered our prayers by providing it.

In Lent, we all, just like the Chi Rhoers in the summer, kneel before the Lord our maker in worship. We kneel not as if we were compelled by an oppressive force, but as an expression of devotion to the One who embodies the seemingly great chasm between love and authority, between love and power. This is our God, who made us in love in order to love, and who then calls us to love as a reflection, an offering, of our devotion.

Today, my wish for you is that you become more aware of the love that draws you to your knees in worship. May this then draw you to give thanks for that love, and commit to share it with everyone you meet, everywhere you go.

Happy 26th birthday, Patricia! I love you, and I am so proud of you!!

Rev. Michael Doerr
Pastor, First Christian Church, Wauseon
Director, CYF Conference Week 2
pastordoerr906@gmail.com
March 14th

*Please read Psalm 27*

Loving God, through Jesus Christ you bring light and life to a dark and dying world. We give you thanks and praise for your love which he reveals to us, even today, and for the hope which his life and death and resurrection unfolds for our world. Even as you love the world so greatly and sacrificially in Jesus, help us in his spirit to live and to love your world today, especially as we lift to you the lonely, the hurting, the sick and the dying.

Where there is injustice, renew our mission to do your will and bring about reconciliation, healing and peace. Where there is pain, make us agents of your regenerative power and your healing caress. May we discover and shed abroad your great love among those we encounter who are alone, or grieving or lost. Make us, as your church, your hands and feet and voice in this world, especially as we pray for those whose lives are closely linked with our own and for the needs we bring with us this day which we offer to you in silence.

As we celebrate your presence with us this day and commit ourselves to you afresh within the covenant of your love, help us to be a willing church—ready to do whatever the day demands, in order to bring the joy of your resurrection to those of our world who have no cause to celebrate. In this Lenten season, awaken us, empower us, renew us, to be faithful to you in the Spirit of Christ.

Taken from [Life in Liturgy](https://www.lifeinliturgy.com), a ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia.
March 15th

“28 Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
31 but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.
Isaiah 40:28-31 (NIV)


Yet into this weary, drained, exhausted world come these promising words from the prophet Isaiah. Have you not heard what the Everlasting, Creator God will do? These thoughts move the reader from weariness to hope, from ashes to rejoicing, from wearyly bending down under the world’s weight to rising up with renewed energy and scouring the horizon for the renewal of God's creation.

Look around, world! The beauty of God’s creation is seen in so many places and witnessed in so many ways. On this part of the planet look outside in spring and see buds on trees, greening grass, returning birds. Listen to songs of birds or noises of spring peepers. Smile at true belly laughter or children's joyful shrieks, playful lambs jumping in the pasture. And when you become weary again and are unable for a time to see God's beauty because something is blocking your awareness – burdens, jobs, duties, worries, negativity, life circumstances, depression, fatigue, world events – keep looking. Be on the lookout for God’s beauty seen in creation, and it will be revealed to you! And your weary, anxious heart will be lifted up! May it be so!

Rev. Cynthia Klingemier
Regional Elder District 4
Commission on Ministry Team 1
revckdoc91@gmail.com
March 16th

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, 'Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' Matthew 17:1-9

Don't we want to just stay where we are? To not go any farther than we have (or than we have to), especially when we may feel we've already come a long way? Can we really blame Peter for his enthusiasm here: Lord, we have been with you, you have invited us to this journey, this place, this moment. And now this incredible thing has happened – this revealing of our forebear and our prophet, and of your own divine being. Let's just hold this in place. I have to wonder if he not only stood amazed at the moment, but maybe kind of glad that it had finally happened (and now he could be done?).

And then a voice is heard, the confirmation of what they were beginning to understand: Jesus’ mission and meaning is not just in the world but for the world. How could they do anything other than drop to the ground in fear? And THEN to be told But don't say anything to anybody for a while yet. I'm not sure if that would be the harder part or the easier: Because after all, how would we say Here is what happened and here is what I think it means.

How DO we do that? In our own lives, day to day ... how do we say I believe in Jesus and try with all that I am to follow him as he would have me.

Do we do it by insisting that we know the way? Are we so sure that we are faithful that we cannot conceive of other ways to get to the same place? Do we demand mountain top experiences every time we're in worship and look with skepticism at the value of what we don't think is 'good' church?

Or do we listen first and speak after? Do we invite conversation instead of cultivating monologues? Do we draw on a spirit of faith rather than fear, of community rather than competition, of inspiration rather than desperation? Can we find it within ourselves to meet Jesus on the mountaintop, to gather the richness of that moment, and to hold and carry and use it wisely, at the right time, in the right way, not for our own glory and attention, but for the good of God's world?

Prayer God of revelation, Christ the revealed: When I am ready to stay put, nudge me forward again. When I am stunned or awed, transform that into active faith. When I am weary or afraid, say again that I have nothing to fear. Use me as you will, through light and dark, on mountains and in valleys, that your will may be done in your world for your sake. Amen

Taken from the 2017 Disciples Home Missions Lenten Devotional Resource, written by Rev. Courtney Richards.
March 17th

For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,
‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’
- Acts 13:47 (NRSV)

Saint Patrick is a Christian figure who floats into and out of our consciousness from the mists of time, and of
legend. He’s associated with Ireland, and the day is an observance that has a pretty spectacular secular
association, but the good saint and bishop didn’t convert water into green beer.

Patrick was a victim of slavery and oppression who chose not only to forgive his captors, but to commit his life
and ministry to their benefit. Patrick, in short, wasn’t Irish. It was Irish pirates who captured and sold him, and
it was from his home in England and his adopted land of France where he was trained for ministry, out of
which he dedicated his life to return to the Emerald Isle.

That’s a tough calling to fulfill. We have only fragments to tell us about how Patrick must have wrestled with
God over this call, to go to the place he had escaped, and work for the good of those who had hurt him. It may
be enough to know that someone can, with God’s grace, do such a thing.

How to forgive people who have hurt you, and in many cases are unrepentant, is a pastoral question that has no
short or easy answers. And it’s a process of recovery and redemption that you can’t just pretty up with a few
shamrocks and green hats. There’s no happy veneer of “yeah, it’s in the past, let it go” which can really hide the
pain. Some victims never hear an apology, and some offenders never really do get it. “Avoid them” is the cop-
speak answer; “give them over to God” is a faith response that’s accurate, if incomplete.

And surely we’re not all called to be Patricks, or even to be Jesus. We have our own mission fields to find, our
own crosses to bear. What the essence of St. Patrick offers, as a gift for us in Lent, is the way his choice to
accept his missionary field shows how forgiveness and reconciliation and redemption are all necessary parts
of the work of mission. If you engage in any mission or ministry worth doing, you will encounter injustice and
pain, sorrow and suffering, and yes, even evil. Some of that encounter will evoke for you parts of your own
history that has brought you to the present moment; sometimes it does seem as if God uses our experiences to
bring Good News into the world to help us deal with our own unhealed wounds.

If we are to be bearers of good news, which is what evangelist means in the original Greek, just someone
carrying word that others need to hear, we have to be ready to face those obstacles. If our buttons get pushed
by the bad news we’re pushing back against, we can find ourselves trapped in a cycle of reaction, stuck in
recriminations even inside our own heads, turned aside by past fears that make present challenges loom larger
than they are. Henri Nouwen famously asked us to consider “the wounded healer” in all of us, and how we are
often called to be healed in the midst of healing work we’re doing for others . . . and they can’t be separated.

With God’s help, Patrick dealt with his own pain, and ministered not just through it but used it to empower a
ministry to Ireland that likely no one else could have done as well. We can try to follow Jonah, Patrick’s
opposite, and run in the opposite direction as far as we can from our own call, but the Book of Jonah lets us
know that our need for healing will travel with us. The Feast of St. Patrick tells us that our hurts can be healed,
and our wounds might be a way others can see the journey we’ve taken, and why we are willing to be
vulnerable in the places the Gospel puts us today.

Oh, and Slàinte to you!

Jeff Gill
Pastor, Newark Central Christian Church
knapsack@windstream.net
Please read John 4:1-26

The repeating of this scripture would be a lesson in history. This scripture could also be a source for negative preaching. I recommend that a person look at the whole chapter to discover something positive and challenging.

The message I receive from this scripture can be summarized in two great hymns. “Come unto me ye weary, and I will give you rest” and “In Christ there is no east or west”.

“Come unto me ye weary, and I will give you rest”
O Blessed voice of Jesus, which comes to hearts oppressed!
It tells of benediction, of pardon, grace and peace, of joy that hath no ending, of love which cannot cease.

“Come unto me, ye fainting, and I will give you life”.
O cheering voice of Jesus, which comes to aid our strife!
“and whosoever cometh, I will not cast him out”.

In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north: But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere their high communion find his service is the golden cord close binding all mankind.

In Christ now meet both east and west, in him meet south and north. All Christly souls are one in him throughout the whole wide earth.

Prayer: Dear God, we our thankful that your love includes everyone. Your son Jesus has given us this great message. Bless us as we try to share this good news with everyone. Amen

Originally written by, and submitted in memory of
Rev. Paul A. Johnson
1925 - 2010
March 19th

Please read Psalm 32

Lord of all that is silent and all that is spoken, because our lives are full of detail and deadlines, much to be done and little time in which to do it all, we find few moments in which to savor the beauty of the world, to contemplate the fierce endurance of everything that lives, to enter that timeless realm of divine mystery which surrounds us, entered only in silence. Yet we know that this place exists and is close to us. O God, grant us a glimpse of this inner sanctuary, and the desire and calm to dwell there in prayer.

As we continue this journey through Lent, help us to make more time for study, and more time for silence, that we may hear your voice in our lives. Open us to hear the words of Jesus in new ways, as they were new to those who first heard them. Challenge us and renew us in this holy season that we may be worthy to be called your children.

Hear our prayers for all who are ill and who suffer in these days, those we name to you in our silence. Touch them with your peace and help us to be arms of compassion, strength and hope to them. We ask your peace with all who mourn. May we all have comfort in knowing that indeed you have prepared a place for all who live as your children.

Build a road in the deserts of our hearts, O God—a road of worship and thanksgiving—and guide us in our journey of faith in this and every season of our lives, that we might be ever closer to you and to your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Taken from Life in Liturgy, a ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia.
March 20th

Please read Romans 5:1 - 11

As we read what Paul wrote in Romans 5:1 - 11 we come up against many of the sufferings that Paul went through for his devotion to Jesus. Paul was originally Saul until he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and instead of being vilified or harshly put down for his persecution of Christians, he found a love so deep and forgiveness so genuine that it changed his life and his life’s direction. Paul never preached that Christianity was easy or without the need for great endurance, and through this he found hope in the presence of the Christ who was with him even in the worst of times. What could have meant ashes in Paul’s life became great rejoicing as he learned the loving way of the Christ no matter what was happening in his personal life. Through this love was born hope and Paul went from ashes to rejoicing and continued to invite others to join him just as he reaches out now to you and I to put our trust in the Son of God as we travel this Lenten journey with him.

Prayer:
Gracious God your love lifts us from the darkness to the light and gives the gift of your holy presence as we journey toward the cross. May we rejoice in your presence and find ways to thank you through serving others. In Christ’s name we pray and offer thanks.
Amen.

Rev Harry Bolen (retired)
Member of Regional Spiritual Life Committee
revbolen@gmail.com
March 21st

**Follow the Lectio Divina phases for your devotion today**
Praying with Scripture falls into the following four phases. These phases are not air-tight compartments with rigid transitions between them. Lectio offers a natural flow from one phase to the next rather than a lock-step march.

*Please read John 9:1-41*

**Phase One - Lectio: reading. What does the text say?**
TURN to the text and read it slowly, gently, out loud. Savor the reading, feel the words in your mouth, listening for the 'still, small voice' of a particular word or phrase that says, 'I am for you today.'

**Phase Two - Meditatio: meditation. What does the text say specifically to me at this point in my life?**
TAKE the word or phrase into yourself. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Let your imagination engage the text. Images are not necessarily but invitations into dialogue with God.

**Phase Three - Oratio: prayer. What does God say to me and what do I say to God through the text?**
SPEAK to God. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Experience this God-breathed word or phrase as a means to bless and transform the thoughts and images that God's Word has awakened in you. Give to God what you have found in your heart.

**Phase Four - Contemplatio: contemplation. Being still, resting in God's presence, and letting God work through my mind and heart.**
FINALLY, REST in God's embrace. Let go of words and images. Rejoice that God is with you in silence, spiritual rest, and inner receptivity.

**SILENCE - LISTEN – DWELL – ABIDE**

As you come up out of the depths of contemplation and prepare to resume your normal activities, first thank God for meeting you in this time. Then ask God to show you what difference can this text make in how you act? What possibilities does it open up? What challenges does it pose?
March 22nd

Ephesians 5:8-14
For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’

“Sleeper, awake!”

What a perfect theme for a Lenten devotional. We walk through this life half-asleep, barely conscious of the glories all around us. The darkness seems to wrap us up, and we drowse through the sunrise.

“Sleeper, awake!”

The wonderful thing about this passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus is that it has the potential to remind us that worship precedes Scripture; that the assembled church comes before the Bible, living into the Living Word even before the words of God are put down on papyrus or vellum or paper or pixels.

Most students of the New Testament agree that Paul is quoting an early hymn of the church, and one that emphasizes baptism, at that. It could be a reference to Isaiah, and the Koine Greek doesn’t have handy punctuation to make us as certain as the NRSV or ESV might that this is a quoted passage, but the consensus is there. “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” It reads and feels like a familiar hymn Paul knows he can quote to the Ephesians the way he could have to Ohioans “calling to you, and to me, come home, come home.” We’d know what he’s talking about.

“Sleeper, awake!”

The waters of baptism, which some fortunate few will experience at Easter, are a participation in the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of the Christ. Laid down in the waters like one going to sleep, and raised up like someone whose alarm is going off on the bedside table, sitting up to face the day. Awake, alert, and ready to get going.

The light is shining, the birds are singing, Christ is opening up the door to new life, and it’s time to get out of bed. There are always so many reasons to stay in bed: giants outside, evil kings and faithless princes rule, wanton dancers ask for the head of our friends while our own friends betray us. Pull up the covers and stay asleep.

“Sleeper, awake!”

But if we know someone is coming to pick us up at 7:30; if there’s a friend who has promised to stand with us in court; when people are counting on us and we know what has to be done – you get up. You get out of bed. You make your dang bed. And you find the inner resources to get up and get going.

Continued in the next page
“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine . . . in, and on, and through you.” Before doctrine and theology and memory verses and textual criticism, the gathered Christian community came together and sang as someone beloved of God who had come to realize that they are indeed beloved is raised up out of the waters, and with one voice they, we, all of us sing: “Sleeper, awake!” And shaking the water from our ears, rubbing the sleep from our eyes, stretching out our arms and standing up, if wobbly, on our own two legs, we arise. Each new day is a resurrection, and a down payment on the promise of new life yet to come in full. When we, with Jesus, will die; and so shall we, with Christ, rise again.

“Sleeper, awake!”

Jeff Gill
Pastor, Newark Central Christian Church
knapsack@windstream.net

March 23rd

Please read Psalm 55:22-33

Reflect on the Hymn “If You Will Trust in God to Guide You” by Georg Neumark

If you will trust in God to guide you,  
and hope in God through all your ways,  
God will give strength, whate’er betide you,  
and bear you through the evil days.  
Who trusts in God’s unchanging love  
builds on the rock that will not move.

God will embrace your pain and weeping,  
your helpless anger and distress.  
If you are in God’s care and keeping,  
in sorrow will God love you less?  
For Christ who took for you a cross,  
Will bring you safe through every loss.

Sing, pray, and keep God’s ways unswerving;  
so do your own part faithfully,  
and trust God’s word; though undeserving,  
you’ll find God’s promise true to be.  
God never will forsake in need  
the soul that trusts in God indeed.

Chalice Hymnal 565  
CCLI #225547
March 24th

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NRSV)

Things were easier in elementary school. Milk came in single servings, we had designated times for naps, and I always knew what season it was just by glancing at the bulletin board boarders. October had jack-o-lanterns, November was turkeys, December evergreens, January snowflakes, and in February little red hearts abounded. I learned in elementary school that February is a month dedicated to love. We would set aside a day to pass out cards letting everyone know that we loved them. We passed out little inspirational sayings on candy hearts that I think were made of chalk dust and sugar. And I learned that love is best expressed by sharing food, preferably sweets.

As an adult things are a bit more complicated. We’re rarely reminded to take a nap, let alone to love one another. And even when our brains are prompted to consider the nature of love, it is so often contextualized to focus on only one small aspect of the inbreaking power of unbounded love. Consider Valentine’s Day. This global holiday with Christian roots dating as far back as the third century which originally honored the sacrificial love of others has gradually become pigeonholed into something celebrating romantic love and consumerism. (Thanks Chaucer) Can we love one another without buying anything on February 14th? Without a doubt, though I think Hallmark and Daffins would argue the point.

Or consider that most famous chapter from 1 Corinthians. The Love Chapter. Chapter 13. Even the one who has never graced the sacred spaces of a sanctuary would know this text. And just like our other reminders of love, this text is too often found exclusively in wedding halls, oriented nearly exclusively toward romantic love. But Paul had a more grand vision in mind. All love, not just romantic love, but love between neighbors, friends, partners, families, strangers and even enemies falls into the vastness of this thirteenth chapter.

All love begets kindness, patience, and truth. All love benevolently challenges arrogance, rudeness, pride, envy, and wrongdoing. Any community where love truly exists must seek beyond knowledge, beyond prophesy, beyond flowery eloquence, the hallowed quest for unity. Because that love, in fruition and maturity, demands that we see each other as we see ourselves. That we love each other as we love ourselves. That we recognize the spark of the Creator in each of us and insist upon that dignity which comes with being a child of God. And that love never ends.

Though we now are struggling with how best to live out that love that has been given to us by our Creator in the exact same way that the church in Corinth was struggling, we yet hear the powerful proclamation that Love never ends. It is only our childishness, our lack of maturity, which has caused us to see irreconcilable differences with the other. It is only the dimness of our sight, the warped and bubbled reflection of the world as in a cracked and dirty mirror, which has caused us to see someone as wholly other.

Now it is time to grow up. Now it is time to seek knowledge of the other, just as we have been fully known. Let the partial come to an end as we seek fullness of an all embracing community, with recognition of the fullness of Christ’s presence, and let our hearts be full to overflowing with the love that binds us one to another. Pass out valentines if it helps, break bread with strangers that the other might be known in our midst, and tell someone that you love them without hope of reciprocation or fear of reprisal. Because now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Rev. Christopher K. Stark
Niles First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
pastorchrisstark@gmail.com
March 25th

Please read Philippians 2: 1 – 11

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.
Philippians 2: 2 - The Message Bible

Complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other.
Philippians 2: 2 - Common English Bible

One need not scroll very far on a news website or listen very long to a news broadcast, before there is a story illustrating the brokenness and factionalization of our world. Over and over again, we are bombarded with “us” verses “them” mentality and an attitude of protectionism and isolationism. Our world is marked by an increased tribalism rather than a sense of unity, and competitive rather than cooperative spirit.

While this is true outside of the church, it can also be the case within the church. Philippians 2 serves a corrective, admonishing the community of faith to live in unity. In this section of Philippians, the community is called to consider its inner life. In verses 1–2 the community is instructed to relate to each other as Christ related to God.

The wild goose is the Celtic symbol for God’s spirit and the symbol for unity. Alone a wild goose can only fly one-third as fast as it can when flying in formation.28 Traveling at up to 70 miles an hour when in formation, the constant honking of the wild goose is a call of encouragement to others in the group. The V-pattern that is characteristic of geese in flight also aids the group. It assists with wind resistance boosting efficiency and range. When the lead goose tires, that goose will fall back and another goose will take the point. We can learn an important lesson from the wild goose. We are stronger when we travel together and encourage one another along the way.

How are you like the wild goose? Do words of encouragement and appreciation come easily? Are you willing to assist another on the journey? When you see a need do you step up for the good of the community? Today, be the honking goose. Express gratitude to and for others. Identify when others are vulnerable, weary and fatigued, and seek to assist them so they may be stronger because of your presence. Look for win–win options. Practice consensus-making. Assess your gifts and talents and look for the place the world needs them, be ready to take the point.

Let us pray.
God, it is indeed good when brothers and sisters can live together in harmony. Forgive us when we seek others vulnerabilities as points of advantage. Forgive us when we believe that the interests and wants of our affinity group are more important than the concerns and needs of others. Fill us with the Spirit so we may live as wild geese. We pray in Jesus name.
Amen.

Taken from the 2015 Disciples Home Missions Lenten Devotional Resource, written by Rev. Dr. Beth Rupe.
March 26th

Luke 3:10-11

10 The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11 John replied, “Whoever has two tunics should share with him who has none, and whoever has food should do the same.”

Lent is a time for “ALMSGIVING”

“The Lenten call to almsgiving means making the needs of other people our own. One of the central lessons of the cross is compassion; the heavy burdens we carry help us to appreciate the suffering in others.” - Teaching Catholic Kids

Jesus, on the cross, bore our burdens.

At The Free Store at Camp Christian, we invite folks from our local community to come and get what they need...not as an act of charity, but as an act of solidarity in their burdens, an act of brotherhood, an act of compassion for our neighbor, and an understanding that his or her burden is ours. We are there to help bear their burden and hopefully make it less, through an offering of a towel, a blanket, a hug or a listening ear.

You may have seen through social media a 40 day Lenten closet clean out. The charge is to take a bag and fill it with 1 item each day and at the end of the 40 days, deliver your bag to a Thrift or Free Store. If you are looking for a practice this Lenten season, this may be right for you.

I like this idea a lot. But I will take it one step further. Each day, remove an item, (something of value to you, not something you hate.) Pray over it. Bless it. Send it out in love to reach someone in need. They need your prayers as much as your towels. Then, deliver your bag to your local Free Store or Thrift Store, or if you can, send it on to Camp Christian. If you would like to take your offering one step further, bring it down and spend the day working with us and meeting folks who visit. We would love to have you. It is here, in community with each other, where the true soul transformation takes place.

Bless you during this Lenten season.

Wendy Taylor
Camp Christian Food Services Coordinator
wtaylor@ccinoh.org
March 27th

“3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with God in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. 4 I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: “Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps God’s covenant of love with those who love God and keep God’s commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. 6 We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.” Daniel 9:3-6 (NIV)

Destruction making its way, creeping stealthily along, sneaking into the crooks and crannies, snaking along every passageway, filling up narrow spaces and wide fields, smothering the breath from the living and carrying on its tide all that is dead. Such is what happens when humanity turns from the ways of peace, departs from the paths that lead to God, and seeks instead the way that embraces sin, the road that turns away from God, the rugged track that leads only to mayhem and desolation. In this scenario, ruins and ashes abound.

But there is a way through this destruction, a way out of this ruin, a way to move from ashes to rejoicing. These verses from the book of Daniel help us along this road proclaiming that the remedy to utter destruction is this: We turn to God and confess our sins. Indeed how numerous our sins have become! The list is endless; the topics covered are many. The mound of sin grows to a hill, the hill to a mountain, the mountain reaches to the skies. So then let us say with heartfelt sorrow, “We repent and return to you, O God.” And before too long, all in God’s time, let us hear God lovingly say, “I forgive you. Welcome home.” And then, bathed in forgiveness and compassion, our shame turns to rejoicing, our fasting to a feast, our sackcloth to royal robes, our ashes to wholeness. Such is the great work of the Lord our God who is merciful. Thanks be to God!

Rev. Cynthia Klingemier
Regional Elder District 4
Commission on Ministry Team 1
revckdoc91@gmail.com
March 28th

*Please read John 15:1-8*

Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches... Abide in me as I abide in you.”

*We come to reaffirm and renew our connection with the life-giving Vine.*

Jesus said, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit... fruit that will last.”

*We want to be fruitful, productive people whose lives make a difference.*

Jesus said, “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.”

Christ, you are the Vine. We are the branches. We will bear your fruit. We will abide in your love and share it!

How wondrous is your great forgiving love, mighty God. How wondrous is your life-giving power. With joy we revel in the glow of the sun this day, and we wonder at the life everlasting that you have opened for us in raising Jesus from the dead.

As people born of his spirit, we are awakened to a world that is caught still in the night-shades of sin, and broken by its suffering. And here, in the midst of all death, we long to bring life; we would see Jesus, and we would lift him up as a beacon of your love and promise to our world.

Hear our prayers for those who are suffering this day—the hungry and homeless, the sick and imprisoned, the angry, the lonely and lost. We pray that you would not let our concern pass from our hearts as these words pass from our lips, but rather that you would empower us to do your work of healing and reconciliation in their lives.

We especially lift to you this day all those who are close to our hearts, whose needs we are so often reminded of, and for ourselves in our own needs.

As you made a fearful and disjointed band of disciples into your holy church, we pray that you would make us anew, that we, your body in our world, would serve you in joy and hope and thankfulness all the days of our life together in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose glorious name we pray.

Taken from *Life in Liturgy*, a ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia.
March 29th

Please read John 11:1-45

Every single one of us has known death and grief, haven’t we? We can put ourselves in the place of Mary and Martha, and the friends who are weeping at the death of Lazarus. We also may be familiar with the disappointment of Mary and Martha, who had sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill and he had not come until now, when Lazarus had been dead. For four days the family has been waiting, as their feelings of grief are compounded by disappointment and perhaps anger. We too may feel disappointed and even angry that our prayers have not been answered the way we wanted. After four days, the initial shock and disbelief is still raw but perhaps beginning to fade just a tiny bit. And now, here is Jesus, at last, too late they think. And Jesus, seeing the pain and grief of all those present, wept at his friend’s tomb before calling him forth from the tomb. I think that is one of the most comforting verses in the Bible (and also the shortest, depending on your Bible translation). Jesus weeps with us, in all our pain and sorrow and grief, through our feelings of disappointment and lamentation and anger, through the whole span of our lives. Even though we know and believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, even though we believe in him, even though we believe that when we die, we will yet live, it is the human thing for us to have all these feelings. It is good for us to remember that even Jesus, who knew who he was and what he was about to do, had a heart that was so in tune with the pain of everyone there, that he himself wept.

When we grieve the death of our loved ones, life might feel like nothing but ashes as we lament there will be no more memories to be made together, no more hugs to share, no more glimpses of our loved one’s face in this life. We all know this feeling because we’re human beings on this earth for a short time. But when we sink into the heart of our grief, we will find God. In all of the ashes of our life, God grieves with us. In all of our despair, in walks Jesus who speaks to us of love and resurrection and new life with tears streaming down his face. Jesus understands there is no avoiding our human condition. There is no avoiding the pain we so often inflict on ourselves and others. There is no avoiding the pain of separation when our loved ones die. But we are invited into this story of Lazarus and his family and all the other stories in scripture to draw near to the heart of God, who bears our pain with us and calls us to rise again. In our story, Lazarus does rise physically from the dead, and as word of that miracle spreads, the fate of Jesus is sealed. Although there was danger for himself, Jesus chose to come near to grieve with Mary and Martha and remind them that he is the resurrection and the life . . . and he will always come near to us. Nothing ever stops Jesus from coming to us, through every valley that is shadowed by death, through every horror and injustice we face in the world, through the ashes of all our grief and despair, to share our sorrow and remind us that he is the resurrection and the life, and that death is not the end of any of our stories. When we decide to follow Jesus, we have indeed begun our own journey into eternal life. We know that rejoicing comes in the morning, no matter how deep the ashes get during the night. During Lent, as we draw ever nearer to the foot of the cross, let us remember that it is into the hands of God that we commend each other, knowing that God enfolds us all now and forever.

Gracious God, though we may feel our world is spinning out of control, we are comforted that you know our pain and never leave us to face our troubles alone. We are comforted that you call us forth from the ashes of death into the rejoicing of new life. May we follow Christ’s lead to comfort and encourage one another as we journey together in Christ’s name and for his sake. Amen.

Rev. Deb Bolen
Minister, First Christian Church of Cambridge
Spiritual Life Committee
revdebbolen@gmail.com
March 30th

Please read Isaiah 55:1-9

Mighty and merciful God, giver of grace and goodness, we come as grateful children this day. We come confessing that we are not always grateful to you or as gracious to others we encounter in the twists and turns of our lives. We thank you that you have promised your forgiveness to us as we place our trust in you. Hear our prayers that we might be forgiven, renewed and restored to a fuller life—the life you have shown us in Jesus the Christ.

And hear our prayers for the people you have called to be your church throughout the world. May we together become what you would have us be in fulfillment of Christ's mission. Help us to lead the way in justice and peace, to help the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison and other kinds of trouble. Help us to serve those who surround us as we would serve Jesus.

We pray, O Lord, for those who seek you or who seek to draw closer to you, that they may find you and be found by you. We pray for those near to us in their needs, as we have named them this day, and for those we name in our hearts, and for our own needs.

We praise you, O God, for you give us grace to glorify you with our whole lives, through the power and strength of Jesus the Christ.

Taken from Life in Liturgy, a ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia.
March 31st

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13 (NKJV)

From Ashes to Rejoicing: The Story Is Not Over!

We as Christians understand the story of Jesus' resurrection. Because Christ died on the Cross, we thank God, his story did not end at the cross, it was just the beginning. When thinking of ashes, the ideology that comes to mind is something has been destroyed and the ashes are the remains. When you have ashes normally they cannot come back together as they once were. Some people thought once Jesus died on the cross, that Jesus story was over, but that was not in God's plan. God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him life eternal with Him. Ever since the day of Jesus resurrection, we have victory, hope, and rejoice that we have a right to the tree of life. We celebrate from ashes to rejoicing! Let us remember that we serve a risen savior, Jesus story continues to this day and he will return! Amen.

Prayer:
Our Father which art in heaven, let us always be cognizant of the fact that we serve a risen savior! We have hope in you! Thank you for loving us so much that you gave your son to save us!

Rev. Dr. Pamela Barnes-Jackson
Associate Pastor, Frist Christian Church
Middletown, Ohio 45042
revdrpamela@outlook.com
April 1st

The God of the Living

Matthew 22:23-33 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
23 The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection;[a] and they asked him a question, saying, 24 “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’ 25 Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. 26 The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. 27 Last of all, the woman herself died. 28 In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.” 29 Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels[b] in heaven. 31 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 32 ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” 33 And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Have you ever heard people being described as so heavenly focused until they were no earthly good? I sure have! There have always been strong contingencies of believers who assert that Christianity is concerned more about the afterlife of adherents than the lives they lead on earth. After all, for many, eternal life is the compelling reason they became and remain Christian.

Maybe the Sadducees in today’s text, being people who did not actually believe in the resurrection, had formed their version of a “got’cha” question designed to trick Jesus into publically stating that his vision and voice were empty of earthly hope as they were aimed at the afterlife with no meaningful implications for day-to-day earthly interactions, policy making, and governance. Perhaps they hoped no critique of the Moses-inspired yet sexist tradition of men passing on their wives to their brothers as they would houses and land would be found in the vision of Jesus.

In redirecting the strategic questioning of the Sadducees, Jesus gave his listeners, and also his readers, a lesson for the ages. At the resurrection, traditional yet demeaning sexist and hierarchical practices will be checked at the door as human bodies will be transformed into angelic beings with no systems of angel-over-angel privilege or dominance. As he continued, Jesus astonished his crowd by indicating that God is not the God of the dead but of the living.

This sermonic point from Jesus serves as a declaration of hope, one that indicates that God’s investments in human affairs are not confined to the past and are not only heavenly focused, but are real and available to those of us who continue to live in the here and now.

While we rejoice over the promises of God that point to life with Jesus in the heavenly realm, we must never allow ourselves to become so heavenly engaged until we forget our earthly responsibilities to love one another, and live as God’s agents of holy change who advocate and agitate for the establishment of the beloved community right here and right now. The God of the living wants all people to flourish through social and economic systems sparked by justice, animated by peace, and transformed by equity right here and right now, in the land of the living, as they do in heaven. Amen

The Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr. is the Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches. He was awarded the 2020 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Social Justice Award by the State of Ohio MLK Holiday Commission. Jack can be reached at JSullivan@ohcouncilchs.org.
April 2nd

Scripture for Reflection: Revelation 21:1-5a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Prayer Points:

- Trusting in the Lord, who makes all things new.

- Trust in the Lord whose home is among us. The Lord will be with us. (Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. Psalm 23)

- The writer of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time to die and a time to be born: a time to pluck up what has been planted and a time to plant...there is a time to build up.”
April 3rd

Joy in a New Reality

*Please read Romans 8:6-11*

In this text Paul believes that here and now humans can live in the Spirit (verse 9). Paul believes that this new reality is not something people dream about in their heads, or must work hard to pretend that they are living in. It is not a reality that exists somewhere else or in the future. Paul is certain that it is real, it is here, and it is now. Paul is convinced that because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection that a new reality exists. This is not to say that people continuously have occurrences of Spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues or prophesying. It is to say that believers in Christ live in a new environment, a new place with new reality structures. Instead of living a life structured by sin and death, we can live in one structured by Christ, by the Spirit, by life. We can live in the Spirit because we are “in Christ Jesus” (8:1).

The “flesh” here I this text refers not to the skin of our bodies but to a way of living, in a universe that is dominated by death (verse 6). The “flesh” is for Paul a force, that works alongside sin and death. The purpose of the ‘Flesh’ is to produce death and hostility to God (verses 6 and 7). The ‘Flesh’ seeks to confine people in a way of life that has everything to do with death. Paul helps us to recognize that because we are “in Christ” we have been unshackled from the “flesh”; we do not need to live our lives that are turned towards death and away from God. Because of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and by virtue of living “in Christ,” people are liberated from the “flesh” and freed to live in the Spirit.

We need to open our eyes even though we are already believers -- to the reality of where we are. We are in the Spirit and so we can allow our deepest desires and the focus our lives to be about God’s life and peace.

The Spirit is in us. It is the Spirit of God that lives in us (verses 9, 11). In this new reality, God has made available God’s own Spirit through the work of his own Son. God’s Spirit is the Spirit of life and of the power of life. The Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in believers (verse 11a). The power of God’s Spirit is such that even the inevitable deaths of our bodies cannot deny the life of God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit will give life to our bodies in the same way as God’s Spirit did to Christ’s body.

Rev Dr. Claudella (CJ) Koen Th.D  M.Div  MAR
Associate Pastor
Kemper Road Christian Church
Forest Park OH
claudellajk@gmail.com
April 4th

*Please read Matthew 21:8-11*

Reflect on the Hymn “All Glory, Laud, and Honor”

All glory, laud and honor
to you, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring.
You are a child of Israel,
Great David’s greater Son;
you ride in lowly triumph,
Messiah, blessed One!

The company of angels
are praising you on high,
and, we with all creation
in chorus make reply.
The people of the Hebrews
with palms before you went;
our praise and prayer and anthems
before you we present.

To you, before your passion,
they sang their hymns of praise;
to you, now high exalted,
our melody we raise.
As you received their praises,
now hear us as we pray.
Since you delight in goodness,
rule in our hearts today.

Chalice Hymnal 192
CCLI #225547
April 5th - Palm Sunday

The Back Story

Please read Luke 19:28-38

If you read the gospel of John the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem sounds like a flash mob, something that just sort of happens. John says “The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-- the King of Israel!’ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.

When I was younger, I could have bought that, I could have accepted that, I could have believed that. Not anymore. I know now that there is more involved to things seemingly as simple as a parade. There is more involved with everything in life. Everything I can think of has a back story, including Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

Fortunately, we have more than one gospel to draw on for insight into the life and teaching of Jesus. In this case Luke gives us more of the details we need. Luke reminds us of the back story, that being a follower of Jesus requires from time to time some grunt work. In Luke we read, When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

Wow. Does it interest any of you that Jesus sends his disciples out to do this? It is a bit bold don't you think. Put yourself in the shoes of this animal's owner, or God forbid, the neighborhood vigilante. How would that hit you? This parade, as described by Luke, is a far more complex enterprise than the gospel of John suggests.

Jesus authorizes his disciples to take bold action in his name that others are likely to question. “If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it’.”

Wow. We are authorized. We are sent. The Lord's purpose is fulfilled through us. There is more to this Palm Sunday story than we sometimes think. On the surface it is just a momentary parade, but like everything else in life there is a back story, in this case a reminder to his disciples that they are authorized to act.

Did you know that? Did you remember that? Are you prepared to check in and get your assignment for the way in which you will assist in equipping Jesus' ministry in the world? Or did you just saunter by to watch a parade?

There is nothing wrong with the latter, and there are certainly moments in our life when simply watching from the sideline and offering our cheer is enough. But for most of us, most weeks, we are called to remember that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem didn't just happen. There was a back story. Some preparation was involved, including the acquisition of the animal on which he rode.

If we have enlisted as Jesus followers, and are not simply observers, then there is some work to do both before and after the hosannas. Somebody's got to get the donkey, and somebody's got to get it back and a whole lot of other stuff. Justice and joy and health and hope don’t just happen. It takes some work. But hear this good news: you are authorized. Jesus sends you. Jesus empowers you to act in bold ways in his name to fulfill his purpose. You—his disciples.

Richard L. Spleth
Visiting Regional Minister
rick@indianadisciples.org
**April 6th**

*Please read John 12:1-12*

This Jesus has to die! There’s just no getting around it. He’s disrupting our agenda. He’s affecting our livelihood. He’s challenging our authority. He’s dismantling our influence. Either he goes or we’ll all be undone. That was the motivation behind the sinister conspiracy to kill Jesus of Nazareth. The religious and political bosses had met and the decision was made. Come Passover we’re going to abduct this Jesus and rub him out before anymore of this gets out of hand. We owe it to ourselves, our institution, and our nation to remove this upstart reformer from the equation. As such, we’ll send out spies to infiltrate meetings and gatherings in order to learn of his whereabouts. And when the time is right, we’ll make our move.

That is the contextual setting for the lesson John presents here. Jesus comes to Bethany knowing full well what is about to unfold. He is not deterred. He understands completely the implications of his mission and he will not be frightened off. The will and work of God will continue, regardless.

A brief respite takes place. In honor and appreciation for what he did for Lazarus, Martha and Mary host a banquet. It is a moment of worship and thanksgiving. Both followers and guests are present. The mood is festive. The meal is delicious. The conversation is pleasant. It has all the markings of a warm reception.

Suddenly, Mary decides to infuse the proceedings with a personal display of affection and appreciation. She brings out a jar of expensive perfume. Falling to her knees before him, she breaks open the seal, and begins to anoint Jesus’ feet. That act in itself would have caused eyebrows to raise. Women back then were not permitted to make such audacious displays before rabbis. What’s more, she does the unthinkable. She removes her head covering, unbinds her hair, and begins to wipe his feet with it. That was even a worse taboo. Only within the intimate confines of a marriage was anything like that permissible. Yet such was the worshipful offering being made. It was extreme as well as extravagant and Jesus fully embraced it.

It didn’t take long before the rest of the assembly to notice what was going on. The fragrance alone sensitized the guests to what was begin shown. It was an experiential moment. And all took it in. All, except one. And what is amazing is that the criticism comes from one of Jesus’ closest companions. Judas sees this not only as being disrespectful but also excessive. Forget about the intention and who it was that was being so honored, this is a total waste of a good resource. And then, in a note of self-righteous piety, he remarks, “it could have instead been used to help the poor.”

Jesus defends her action. He not only graciously accepts Mary’s worship, he also points out that there is a difference between being socially sensitive and spiritually respectful. Both are equated by the sincerity of the action. And when that is not considered neither service is blessed.

The lesson ends as it began, with the conspirators seeking to destroy the influence of Jesus. But now with an added twist. It’s not enough to simply kill him, we’ve got to get rid of any incriminating evidence. We’ve got to kill this Lazarus too. When self interest becomes the norm suppressing the truth soon becomes the standard. Not a very uplifting lesson, to say the least. But it’s accurate and its authentic. It calls to question our own response to Jesus and the sincerity of our worship.

You would think by now we would have longed settled the issue. Unfortunately, twenty-one centuries later, whether within local congregations, regions, or denominations, we repeat the same mistakes and so is it any wonder we suffer the same affects? Lord, open our eyes and sensitize our hearts. Unlike those who seek to supplant you, may we, like Mary, come to affirm you and appreciate you without fear or intimidation.

Mike Valentine,
Regional Elder
feb14-3hearts@mindspring.com
Mark 14:3–9 (NRSV): While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

We open Holy Week with a story of anointing. A woman comes to the house of Simon, a leper, to anoint Jesus, to prepare him for burial, as Mark tells us. But there is so much more going on than a simple anointing. There is risk, there is challenge, there is frustration, and there is remembrance.

Something that gets lost in the story is that Jesus tells the disciples that what this woman has done should be told in remembrance of her wherever the good news is shared. This now unnamed woman is to be remembered for her act. Why is it that Jesus wants her to be remembered? Amy-Jill Levine suggests in her book *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week*, that this woman took risks to do what the others, what the men wouldn’t and couldn’t. She takes the very scary risk of entering the home of Simon, a leper, who is unclean. She is a uninvited guest, and so she also takes a risk be entering a stranger’s home. She is not a woman without means, given the ointment she possesses, and so she risks her status and her place by simply walking through Simon’s door. But she also takes a risk by anointing Jesus as a king. In a world where Caesar is the ultimate power, this woman risks acknowledging that Jesus is her king. This woman should be remembered, as Jesus tells us, because she is willing to risk everything for her faith in Jesus.

As we journey into this Holy Week, let us remember this woman, the risks she took, and consider what risks we are willing to take for the sake of the good news. As Jesus called on us to remember this woman’s act wherever the good news is shared, may we remember her as we share our passion for the gospel, for the good news of God’s salvation for all people. It is a risky adventure, but one worth the cost.

Prayer:
Gracious and loving God, we remember the unnamed woman who risked anointing Jesus, who stepped out to share her faith in you and in your Son. Give us the courage to step out in faith, to remember her acts, and spread the good news of salvation in her memory.
Amen.

Rev. Matt Every
First Christian Church, Bowling Green
fccpastor@bgfcc.org
Follow the Lectio Divina phases for your devotion today
Praying with Scripture falls into the following four phases. These phases are not air-tight compartments with rigid transitions between them. Lectio offers a natural flow from one phase to the next rather than a lock-step march.

Please read Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Phase One - Lectio: reading. What does the text say?
TURN to the text and read it slowly, gently, out loud. Savor the reading, feel the words in your mouth, listening for the 'still, small voice' of a particular word or phrase that says, 'I am for you today.'

Phase Two - Meditatio: meditation. What does the text say specifically to me at this point in my life?
TAKE the word or phrase into yourself. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Let your imagination engage the text. Images are not necessarily but invitations into dialogue with God.

Phase Three - Oratio: prayer. What does God say to me and what do I say to God through the text?
SPEAK to God. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Experience this God-breathed word or phrase as a means to bless and transform the thoughts and images that God's Word has awakened in you. Give to God what you have found in your heart.

Phase Four - Contemplatio: contemplation. Being still, resting in God's presence, and letting God work through my mind and heart.
FINALLY, REST in God's embrace. Let go of words and images. Rejoice that God is with you in silence, spiritual rest, and inner receptivity.
SILENCE - LISTEN - DWELL - ABIDE

As you come up out of the depths of contemplation and prepare to resume your normal activities, first thank God for meeting you in this time. Then ask God to show you what difference can this text make in how you act? What possibilities does it open up? What challenges does it pose?
Please read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

When I step to the table to offer the words of institution—that is, to tell the story—I use these words from Paul almost every time. The most likely reason is that these are the words my pastor used, and so I carry it forward. This is the story I was told, so now I am telling it to you.

Offering these words, though, using this particular story, carries a reminder of the context. When Paul reminds the Corinthian church about the Lord's Supper, he is admonishing the church for its table manners. Paul reprimands the church for selfishness, for putting individual above the community. He goes on to say, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.”

During my first call out of seminary, I wrote a weekly religion column for the local newspaper. During Holy Week one year, my column centered on that phrase, “In an unworthy manner.” The same day the paper was delivered, a gentleman called me at the church office, taking issue with my use of the word “unworthy.”

He read Paul’s words from a translation that used the adverb “unworthily” instead of the adverbial phrase “in an unworthy manner.” He repeatedly said that Paul was not trying to say that we were unworthy but that we should not behave unworthily. It was one of those conversations where I found myself trying to convince someone that we were saying the same thing, that we were in agreement. He was not having it, though, and continued to push that I was misquoting the Apostle, no matter how many times I tried to say that we were both right.

Nevertheless, he was absolutely right. Paul’s challenge is not about who we are. It is about how we behave toward one another.

Paul would not admonish us for being unworthy, because we are. Whenever we come to the table, we come unworthy. We come to the table having selfishly put our individual needs above the concerns of the community. We all, at some time or another, come to the table forgetting that those who feast with us are our siblings in Christ and beloved children of God. We come to the table carrying the rancor of division in our culture, forgetting the One who makes us one.

We all come to the table unworthy.

We come to the table unworthy, but we come to a table of grace. If we were worthy, there would be no grace. If we earned our place at the table through our own effort or merit, it would be just another meal.

“Unworthy” is what makes it grace. By the grace of God, we come to the table with others unworthy as ourselves, receiving grace freely given so that we may live graciously. We extend the grace that we receive. We offer gratitude. We live grateful lives, thereby eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord in a worthy manner.

Dean Phelps
Visiting Regional Minister
dean@ccinky.net
April 10th

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” John 18:10-11 NRSV

It is frightening to realize that, if Peter had his way, the chosen course of Jesus would have been altered. Without consulting with Jesus, or anyone else, Peter drew his sword and sought to initiate a battle. He must have believed that the other disciples would join in. Otherwise, he would have to know that the Roman soldiers could have killed him without bringing him to trial.

The most disturbing aspect of this scene is that Peter sought to lead, even with Jesus present. The soldiers came in search of Jesus. Jesus was talking with them about letting the disciples alone, since it was Jesus who they came for. The actions of Peter are in disregard of the preferred plan of Jesus. The next words attributed to Peter are the denial that he was one of Jesus’ disciples, or that he even knew him.

I would be afraid to view the record of the number of times that I sought to substitute my plan in place of Jesus’ plan. When we consider how soon, how big, at what cost, and under whose leadership we are all guilty of taking charge when God has things in hand. How can we be called disciples if we fail to follow?

Guiding Lord, Forgive us for our attempts to lead you. Call us to true discipleship, that trusts you to guide us even when we do not understand or agree. Your record justifies such faith in you, In Compliance, Amen

Taken from the 2020 Disciples Home Missions Lenten Devotional Resource, written by Rev. Dr. Betty M. Green and Rev. Dr. Irvin W. Green.
April 11th
Holy Saturday

Please read Matthew 27:57-66

On this Holy Saturday we sit at the tomb of Jesus and join with all of creation in the great silence that this day holds. The mystery and confusion of what has been, what is, and ultimately what will be weighs heavy on our hearts and minds. With all of creation the church is compelled to renew again our commitment to live in and into the holy mystery of what happens between Thursday night and Sunday morn. This day we wait in holy silence for that which is to come.

Much of life is marked by such waiting. It seems that the world at times conspires to hide the very goodness, peace and promise that is inherent in the world through the saving work of Christ Jesus. It seems that, like in this scripture reading, powers and principalities conspire to guard and hide the life that is meant to be shared with all. We know all too well about waiting.

So we wait on this day for something or someone to awaken from the tomb that points us to death. May we wait with reverence, devotion and love for that which we know is coming, life and even life abundant. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

Dear God, bless us in our waiting and longing to see you again.

Thaddaeus B. Allen
Your Visiting Regional Minister
thaddaeus1969@gmail.com