



## *Lenten Devotional 2021*

We hope you'll follow along daily, be deepened in your faith through this year's ministry of our graduates, and prepare your heart to celebrate at Easter the new life that Jesus Christ made possible for all.

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**PITTSBURGH  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY**

SCRIPTURE

**Jonah 3:1-4:11**

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

4:1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6 The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than

a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

DEVOTIONAL

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'" I am writing this reflection while practicing social distancing, wearing a mask in public, and churches worship virtually in response to a virus that has literally sickened to death this globe.

Concurrently, a pandemic of another sort has shaken this country to its core—a disease unveiled by a video of a dying black man gasping for air. In angry response, a collective "Jonah" (protestors and demonstrators) has taken to the streets of Nineveh (think Minneapolis and beyond) proclaiming a message: "I can't breathe," "Get your knee off our necks," "No justice, no peace."

"Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'" Day after day the voice of the people in our city streets has grown larger and louder. The sin and wickedness they rail against? Racism, discrimination, and police brutality.

God's message through Jonah stirred the hearts and minds of the people of Nineveh. "They proclaimed a fast and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." Even the King of Nineveh rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. What is our country doing? Will God's message through the collective street voice stir the hearts and minds of national, state, and local government? Will our leaders heed the prophetic word "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Will this commitment infiltrate the decisions, policies, and reform desperately needed?

Further, what are we as individual Christians doing? Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of 40 in this season of Lent, which takes its name from the imposition of ashes on the foreheads of worshipers as a sign of human sin and mortality. Are we sincere when we pray, with the psalmist, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). Do we take seriously both parts of Jesus' call to "Repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15)?

I heard a black man telling his children they are in danger, not because of anything they have done, but because of the color of their skin. He said, "The skin is the sin." Let all of us remember—we are dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19b).

## PRAYER

"Breathe on us, breath of God, fill us with life anew, that we may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do." Amen.

## THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2021

*The Rev. Rebecca Dix '15/'16*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 102

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. 2 Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. 3 For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. 5 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. 8 All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. 9 For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink, 10 because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. 11 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. 12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; your name endures to all generations. 13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favor it; the appointed time has come. 14 For your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity on its dust. 15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth your glory. 16 For the LORD will build up Zion; he will appear in his glory. 17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer. 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD: 19 that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die; 21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, 22 when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD. 23 He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. 24 "O my God," I say, "do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations." 25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 26 They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end. 28 The children of your servants shall live secure; their offspring shall be established in your presence.

## DEVOTIONAL

"For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace . . . I wither away like grass" (vv. 3, 11b). When time does its job well, what tends to be left behind are our bones.

We place a lot of trust in bones. They house and protect many vital organs. They provide structure, support, and enable mobility. If a house is solid and trustworthy to weather tempests and time, we say it has "good bones." And in a number of cultures and civilizations, bones were depended on for tools, crafts, agriculture, and medicine. Bones have played a vital role in our current existence and also in learning about where we have been as a human species.

Yet as formidable and important as they seem, even bones are not permanent. Bones ache and break. They burn. One day they hold us upright, the next they pull us down. Back to the earth. Back to the dust. Back to the beginning.

Even our bones will perish and pass away. So during this Lenten season, place your trust in something that has weathered all time. Place your trust in the One who laid the foundation of the earth.

## PRAYER

God who hears the groans from our weary hearts and who knows the worn aches of our bones, whose name endures to all generations, hear our prayers. Walk with us as our days lengthen like evening shadows, and fix our sight on you alone. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2021

*The Rev. John Culp '98*

## SCRIPTURE

### Deuteronomy 7:12-16

12 If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the LORD your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty that he swore to your ancestors; 13 he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you. 14 You shall be the most blessed of peoples, with neither sterility nor barrenness among you or your livestock. 15 The LORD will turn away from you every illness; all the dread diseases of Egypt that you experienced, he will not inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you. 16 You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity; you shall not serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you.

## DEVOTIONAL

"That's not fair!" Most of us probably said it a time or two—or 20—to our parents when we were small. Some of us tend to feel that way on a regular basis through most of our lives. We may even be inclined to make the accusation against God.

These lines from Deuteronomy 7 give us ammunition for that charge, don't they? Along with many other verses from the Old Testament, they paint for us a picture of a deity who showers blessings on his people Israel—routinely at the expense of innumerable Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, and an unfortunate army of assorted other "ites."

But that decidedly—outrageously!—unequal treatment is of course baked into the cake of what it means to be God's chosen people. It's his recurring pattern: Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; David, not Eliab or Abinadab or Shammah. And to magnify His "unfair" preference, the Lord stubbornly *continued* to bless the children of Abraham (droughts, plagues, and victorious oppressive enemies notwithstanding), even through their wearying, seemingly incessant rebellion and rejection of his rule over them. ". . . heed these ordinances . . ."? Not even close!

If Lent teaches us anything, it should surely be that time and again we are those maddeningly disobedient, ungrateful children of Abraham. We can't even lay claim to the family tie, most of us, on the basis of blood. At least not our own. And if we're ever inclined to shake a fist heavenward, railing against divine injustice (isn't that at least most of us, from time to time?), we do well to remember also that the *last* thing any of us should ever demand from God is justice. Mark Twain may have been a skeptic, even an unbeliever. But he surely got this much right: "If heaven went by merit instead of grace, your dog would get in and you would not."

May these days of somber preparation send each of us to our knees in genuine confession and sincere repentance. May they send us to the cross, where we can rejoice that God gives us infinitely better than justice. He gives us mercy. He gives us Christ.

## PRAYER

Gracious God, how amazing is the love in which you have provided a Savior for us in your beloved Son! Thank you, dear Lord! Please give us the further grace to glorify you in these days of Lent by growing ever more into his image. Send us to our neighbors near and far with the message of hope you have given us in Jesus. We ask it in his glorious name. Amen.

## SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2021

*The Rev. Jeanine Haven '00*

## SCRIPTURE

### Deuteronomy 7:17-26

17 If you say to yourself, "These nations are more numerous than I; how can I dispossess them?" 18 do not be afraid of them. Just remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, 19 the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the LORD your God brought you out. The LORD your God will do the same to all the peoples of whom you are afraid. 20 Moreover, the LORD your God will send the pestilence against them, until even the survivors and the fugitives are destroyed. 21 Have no dread of them, for the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a great and awesome God. 22 The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to make a quick end of them, otherwise the wild animals would become too numerous for you. 23 But the LORD your God will give them over to you, and throw them into great panic, until they are destroyed. 24 He will hand their kings over to you and you shall blot out their name from under heaven; no one will be able to stand against you, until you have destroyed them. 25 The images of their gods you shall burn with fire. Do not covet the silver or the gold that is on them and take it for yourself, because you could be ensnared by it; for it is abhorrent to the LORD your God. 26 Do not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it. You must utterly detest and abhor it, for it is set apart for destruction.

## DEVOTIONAL

It is so easy to get caught up in the "big picture" of Deuteronomy 7:17-26 and to read it as a message of divine retribution. But sometimes in exploring specific verses, we discover what they may be saying to us today. So here, let's consider Deuteronomy 7:22: "The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to make a quick end of them, otherwise the wild animals would become too numerous for you."

Yes, it's easy to discount this verse as being simply about God's plan for his people in entering Canaan and therefore not applicable to life in the 21st century. But consider the fact that God tells the Hebrews not to try entering all at once, rather, little by little. And note the divine reminder that God will be present as they travel on this great new adventure—present to give guidance, strength, and encouragement every step along the way.

Now, think of all the times you have witnessed God's helping someone little by little. The determined infant who keeps

stumbling and finally, triumphantly, takes a first step! The cancer patient learning he's in remission after going through rounds of treatments and multiple "clean" tests.

When we have a "life event" that initially seems overwhelming, if we take it one step at a time we have the potential to get through it successfully. We just need to remember that God is with us in each little step along the way!

## PRAYER

God of grace and love, help us to realize that it is okay to lean on you. When we feel overwhelmed by life's obstacles, remind us of your presence as we explore each new day little by little. We thank you Lord for your loving support! Amen.

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

*The Rev. Mark Gaskill '03*

## SCRIPTURE

### 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

## DEVOTIONAL

This passage is a terrible sales pitch. I will paraphrase a few of the highlights: "The cross is a ridiculous way to save the

world," "God picks stuff that doesn't make sense to anyone, Jew or Greek," "Oh, and all of us who follow Jesus, we're pretty much just a bunch of losers—that's how we know this is really God working in us."

The reality today is that churches are failing. Some of us are failing numerically; declining attendance, membership, and commitment can be plotted on gloomy graphs and dire charts. In that scenario, we think we have to find a better sales pitch, so we try (too hard) to be something other than what we are. Others may be growing numerically but failing spiritually. They have abandoned the message of the cross to some degree in favor of something that seems less foolish to the comfortable and the privileged, and there they have found a market niche.

It is difficult for the human ego to accept the terms Christ offers us. Paul was no exception; he had to do it the hard way. He fought with himself and with others to keep focused on the reality that he was not the one who was responsible for doing the saving—God had to do it.

How do you "sell" *your* church? Do you tell people how ridiculous you are? Do you admit that you can't do anything that's good on your own? Do you confess that you are a sinner, for real, and that some of your sins are pretty bad?

False humility will not avail in this world—people are too used to being lied to and sold scams. The only place to be right now, if we want to live, is with God's foolishness, which is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness, which is stronger than human strength.

## PRAYER

Help us, Holy God, for we want so badly to be wise and strong. We spend so much time and energy seeking to project positivity and success. It is exhausting. We need to be vulnerable, but we just can't seem to trust that it will work. Teach us what it means to offer our broken hearts to you. Bind up the wounds we carry from trying too hard. If we fail, let us fail as Christ failed on the cross—if we succeed, it will only be in Christ. Amen.

## MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2021

*The Rev. Sarina Odden Meyer '07*

## SCRIPTURE

### Deuteronomy 8:1-20

1 This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. 2 Remember the long way that

the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. 3 He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. 4 The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you. 6 Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. 7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, 9 a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. 10 You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you. 11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. 17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. 19 If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. 20 Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

## DEVOTIONAL

Many of us have experienced a wilderness in life—a time of trial or difficulty that forced us to drill down to the essentials of who we are, especially we who are in Christ. That is what the Israelites experienced in the wilderness. They were totally dependent on God. Their dependence was always at the forefront of their minds, because they were literally helpless without God's provision (vv. 2-4). As they neared the land of plenty, God exhorted them to continue to follow God's commandments, to continue to live in the fear of the Lord (v. 6).

Living in the fear of the Lord is a liberating concept. It is an invitation to worry only about what God thinks over and above what anyone else thinks, even ourselves. Times of wilderness are often blessings that bring us back to the essentials of who we are in Christ. It's times of plenty that we have to worry about. In times of plenty, we think we can strike out on our own and live by the bread we make with our own hands. Instead of blessing God for all that God has given to us (v. 10), we go astray, no longer living for God but living for ourselves or other people. Verse 11 reminds us as we approach a time of plenty, "Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God."

God has called each one of us uniquely to participate in the redemption of the world. When we forget God and start living for other things or other people, we forsake that which God has uniquely called us to do. During Lent, let us fast from the fear of other people, the fear of other things, even the fear of our own thoughts. Let us instead turn back to God and live in the fear of God only by remembering that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (v. 3).

## PRAYER

Gracious God, you know how easy it is for us to be driven by the fear of other people, other things, and even our own thoughts. Help us to be motivated instead only in fear of you. Help us to see that fearing you is an invitation to living fully into the calling you have uniquely given to us. Help us to seek you in times of wilderness *and* in times of plenty, so that in all the times we live through we will faithfully reflect your love in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

*Jane Larson '17/'20*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of

the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

## DEVOTIONAL

We are a people familiar with political and social unrest. We continue to witness the pursuit of justice in new forms that join a long history of prophetic responses to oppression. For many, there is a deep desire to dismantle the racial and economic systems tearing apart our nation and our neighborhoods. Yet, it is quite controversial in the church to suggest how we ought to respond to these calls for justice.

It can feel uncomfortable to try to navigate a world of chaos and division. Afraid that we might create even more division, we sometimes cling to the familiar. When we turn to this story of Jesus overturning tables in the temple, we see that our God does not shy away from the uncomfortable or controversial.

During the season of Passover, Jesus entered the temple to find people selling cattle, sheep, and doves. In order for people to make the necessary sacrifices, there needed to be an exchange of goods. For the travelers coming from afar to celebrate in Jerusalem, they could purchase their sacrificial animals conveniently upon arrival. This might seem reasonable to us, but Jesus' reaction is to pour out all their money, turn over tables, and order those selling animals: "stop making my Father's house a marketplace."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not focus in on individual greed, but he seems to critique and order a dismantling of the entire system. This system of the marketplace is not necessary, and he makes no promise to rebuild it. Instead, Jesus turns the disciples' attention to his own physical body. It is not the physical temple that will be resurrected after three days—it is the person of Jesus who will continue to draw near to offer life even after death.

In this season of Lent, we practice releasing our clenched fists that cling to what is familiar. This is not an easy or passive task; it requires our constant attention to untangle ourselves from systems that seek to dehumanize and to profit off the soul of humanity.

As we engage in this work, this passage reminds us where our God may be found. God is not idly strolling through the marketplace. No, the God we follow breaks through division to bring about justice. We find our God sitting at the well with the Samaritan woman. We find our God sharing the table with those deemed outcasts by religious leaders. We find God not in the foundation of unjust systems, but in the person of Jesus—the one who overturns tables, transgresses boundaries, and continues to draw near.

## PRAYER

God of Justice, continue to draw near to us, for we know the journey is not always convenient or comfortable. When we find ourselves in seasons of despair, give us perseverance to continue on the journey, wisdom to untangle ourselves from systems of injustice, and courage to be enactors of justice. May we seek your comfort not in the systems that are familiar, but in the one who draws near. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

*The Rev. Hannah Loughman '11*

## SCRIPTURE

### Hebrews 3:12-19

12 Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. 15 As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." 16 Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? 17 But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

## DEVOTIONAL

"But exhort one another every single day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." As a parent of a four-year-old child, every day I find myself repeating the instructions I gave to her "yesterday," and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that. You get the picture. You might just know the drill. Sometimes my daughter responds with, "I know, you already told me that."

Does her response mean that I will stop telling her? No—not until she takes the initiative to "do it on her own." And there are many activities—such as taking her plate to the sink and throwing away her candy wrappers—she *has* begun to do on her own. But every once in a while she needs a reminder. I give her these reminders because I want her to grow to the fullness of maturity physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. I tell her these things because I love her.

I think that often times we misunderstand what it means to "exhort" someone. Exhortation isn't a punishment or a

condemnation—it's an act of love. The author of Hebrews 3 isn't giving permission for Christians to run around putting each other in their "place"; rather, the writer is pleading with the family of God to lift one another up and to help each other stand firmly against sin.

So don't let your heart be hardened the next time someone exhorts you. Instead, with gratitude and humility, praise the Lord for the people who care enough to help you through.

## PRAYER

Almighty God, we thank you for your constant love in our lives. We thank you for the people you have placed around us who encourage us to stand strong against sin. May we also faithfully seek to enact that love for one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!

## THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

*The Rev. Daniel Voigt '11*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 3:16-21

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

## DEVOTIONAL

There is an old story about a wealthy family whose home was going to be the first in their town to have electricity installed. To commemorate the occasion, they invited everyone they could to come out for the initial lighting. People began to cram together in the house that evening expecting to see a miracle. Finally, the moment arrived, and as the sun went down, with great fanfare the light switch was turned on and the lights began to glow. Immediately, everyone gasped in amazement at the sight, but then, just as immediately, their gasps turned to sounds of disgust as the new, bright, electric lights made every spider's web in every corner pop out in astonishing clarity and laid bare every smudge and stain on the walls and floor for all the guests to see.

You can feel the family's embarrassment as the filth of their house was on display. It is a feeling we all know too well when our errors, sins, and grandiose shortcomings become visible. What is most fascinating to me, though, is the predictableness of the next feeling: we wish the light would never have shined at all. But that is when and where the true danger lurks—in beginning to hate the light, when all the light really did was show us where we still needed to clean.

All responses to the light on our darkness start with embarrassment. But the mature response ends in gratitude. After all, God so loved us that, really, the light was sent to bring us life.

## PRAYER

To the God who loves us, thank you for sending us your light—not to condemn us but to save us. May we have the courage to look at what your light shows us and, ultimately, be thankful for it. Amen.

## FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Christie Sweeny Gravely '16*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 3:22-36

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized—24 John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. 25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease." 31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.



## DEVOTIONAL

Can't you hear the resentment and envy in the words of John's followers: "But John, everyone is now going to *him*"? To them, Jesus' building popularity posed a threat to John's ministry. So it was entirely natural for them to ask, "What about Jesus, Master? He is baptizing. He has taken a page from *your* book; he is using your method—and *everyone is going to him!*"

But what an astonishing reply they get back from faithful John. When other men would have found some subtle way to express their envy, John says, "It was all the Lord's doing. The Lord called me to this ministry. But I am merely the forerunner to this Jesus. He is the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. The age of the Messiah is dawning over the world."

This situation, where crowds are flocking to Jesus, was only the beginning. John knew that it must continue to be like that until everyone was with Jesus and no one was left with John himself. "Jesus must increase, I must decrease." Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of sinners; John is not. Jesus is the Messiah who baptizes with the Holy Spirit; John is not. Put simply, if Jesus is the Son of God now come into the world to take away our sins, then it is not enough that we simply acknowledge these things to be true. Our lives must be the demonstration of our faith, a response of heart and mind. Our commitment to Jesus must put him in the position of ascendancy in our lives. He absolutely must have the first place in our hearts. "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

## PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as we draw closer to the cross in this Lenten season, we, like the disciples, seek to understand the mystery of Jesus Christ, who draws all people to himself. Though we do not deserve your mercy, we nevertheless receive it with thankful hearts. Help us to trust that you give us what we truly need, for you are the One who made us. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

## SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2021

*The Rev. Alan Olson '14*

## SCRIPTURE

### Deuteronomy 11:18-28

18 You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. 19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you

rise. 20 Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, 21 so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. 22 If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, 23 then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and mightier than yourselves. 24 Every place on which you set foot shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the Western Sea. 25 No one will be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put the fear and dread of you on all the land on which you set foot, as he promised you. 26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.

## DEVOTIONAL

I love the Book of Deuteronomy. As I write, I can almost see a meme on Facebook that reads: "'I love the Book of Deuteronomy!' Said no one ever." There's a lot of material in Deuteronomy that fits into a very old, and mistaken, impression that the God of the Old Testament is angry and vengeful, more concerned with obedience to the law than with grace and mercy. That's the danger of a superficial reading of any text, especially Deuteronomy.

The name Deuteronomy means "second law"; it's a retelling or resetting of the law of Moses. It was written for a people who were constantly turning away from God, a people who failed to put their full trust in God and then created idols for worship.

The God who is speaking in this passage is inviting Israel, the chosen people, to return to a righteous relationship with God. God is offering Israel yet another chance to turn back to God. That's the grace. Sometimes we get hung up on the curses and we forget about the grace and the blessings.

God's blessings are not a reward for obedience. We live into God's blessings when we turn toward God and away from the idols we make and worship. The curses happen not because God is punishing us but because we turn our focus to the idols we make: money, work, activities, and general busyness, to name a few. When we focus on these things, we're not busy looking to God. We build stumbling blocks. We trip. We fall. We fail to get out of our own way.

In this season, let us look within and search for all the idols and stumbling blocks that we create, all the curses that we heap upon ourselves. Let us look for ways to smash

these idols and turn back toward God—the God who tells Abraham that his children will be a blessing to the whole world—so that we may live more fully into God’s blessings, and then share those blessings with the world.

## PRAYER

God of grace and mercy, in this season of Lent, we ask that you open our eyes and ears and hearts. We ask that you let us see all our idolatries, so that we may repent and return to you. We ask that you pour out your Holy Spirit, so that we might see all those with whom we can share your blessings. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

*Carmen Lee '19*

## SCRIPTURE

### Mark 3:31-4:9

31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” 33 And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” 4:1 Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. 2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” 9 And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

## DEVOTIONAL

“Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” During Jesus’ time, farmers used plows to prepare the soil for planting seeds rather than scattering them haphazardly on the ground. If seeds fell on a path, rocky ground, or among thorns, the problem could just as easily have been the harsh conditions in which the farmer

labored as it could have been the planter’s error. Yet in this parable there was enough good soil to yield an abundant crop, thus compensating for difficult conditions—and the seeds had to have been of good quality to grow even slightly in poor soil.

We know—because later Jesus tells his disciples so—that the seed is God’s word of truth, and the soil represents the hearts of people who hear the word. But who are the people listening? We might assume that they are unbelievers—the unchurched or non-religious, lacking previous familiarity with God’s word. But the crowds around Jesus usually represented the entire community, from religious leaders who questioned or wanted to sabotage him to working-class people who attended synagogue with varying degrees of regularity to “sinners” who were social and religious outcasts. It was that mix of people who heard Jesus’ teaching and into whose hearts he planted God’s word.

The situation is similar today. The mixed “soil” hearing God’s word could include people we would consider church leaders or consistent church attenders, as well as those we might view as distant from God for whatever reason. The “seed” of God’s word explains salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but it also encompasses God’s truth about justice and mercy as Jesus himself declares in passages such as Luke 4:16-21. There may be times when individuals who identify as Christians will not listen to God’s truth about addressing injustice and oppression, just as there might be occasions when those who do not follow Christ reject the message of salvation.

The Parable of the Sower is often viewed as a warning to listeners to examine what type of soil represents the condition of their heart, but for those wanting to be used by God in others’ lives, it is also an alert about what to expect. The world in which we live is a harsh environment, with much rocky and thorny soil; yet we should not judge anyone’s heart. The good seed, God’s word of truth, is hearty and robust, capable of yielding an abundance of love, justice, mercy, compassion, and faith. The quality of the soil will reveal itself in due time; and as followers of Christ, we need to be aware of the challenges ahead while also being prepared to welcome a harvest.

Let anyone with ears to hear, hear.

## PRAYER

Gracious Lord with whom we co-labor, help us not to be discouraged by our world’s difficulties but to find joy in your presence. As we look forward to celebrating our risen savior, Jesus Christ, enable us also to look forward to times of good harvest in its various forms. Amen.

## MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Steven H. Shussett '93*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Romans 1:1-15

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. 9 For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, 10 asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. 11 For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— 12 or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. 13 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. 14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish 15 —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

### DEVOTIONAL

Publishing calendars being what they are, I write this devotional in the middle of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, meaning that I don't know how the story will unfold. Are these words read with relief over a return to normalcy, or with a sigh, knowing difficulties yet unimagined?

For Paul, writing to a Roman church he hoped to visit, the future was no more secure. He knew his mission's intention, but not its outcome, even as he was among the first to articulate what he understood God's desired outcome to be.

This present generation today will remember what it means to be "set apart." If for the gospel, this theology of the cross means following the One who laid down his life, which for us includes loving God and neighbor by keeping physical distance. We don't go out, we don't touch even many whom we love. In so doing—or actually, in so not doing—we lay down the life that wants to do what we have always done.

Sometimes loving one another is best achieved by not seeing one another face to face, but as through a mirror dimly.

Yet even then the Spirit calls us to be with God by being with others. We pray for one another even when we are prevented from being physically present with one another. We share some spiritual gift to strengthen and mutually encourage one another, whether it be greeting a wizened veteran walking in his backyard, singing from a balcony, or group celebrating-by-Zoom.

To you, 2021 Christian, the question before you is whether the lessons of 2020 have been taken to heart or swept into the dustbin of history. Is compassion our watchword? Is creativity still allowed—in worship and in mutual encouragement? Or have we already forgotten how precious and appreciated simple acts of love and generosity can be?

### PRAYER

Holy One, we are indebted to you, and to those who have heard you, for inspiring us and calling us to the better angels of our nature. Having reaped some harvest, strengthen us with the Spiritual gifts necessary to sow seeds that eagerly proclaim your gospel. In the name of the Sower himself do we pray. Amen.

## TUESDAY, MARCH 2, 2021

*The Rev. Brian Lays '15*

### SCRIPTURE

#### John 4:43-54

43 When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee 44 (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country). 45 When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival. 46 Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. 48 Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." 49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." 50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. 51 As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him." 53 The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he himself believed,

along with his whole household. 54 Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

## DEVOTIONAL

In many of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' healings, Jesus heals face to face, taking the hand of a sick girl, or telling a paralytic to pick up his mat and walk. But our passage today is different. Jesus assures the royal official, whom he meets in Cana, that his sick son, who is in Capernaum, "will live." Although the official wants Jesus to come with him to Capernaum and heal his son in person, Jesus doesn't offer to take the detour. Instead, he offers a word of promise, and the official is left to "walk by faith and not by sight" and journey home alone. *The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.* Upon returning to Capernaum, the official discovers that, sure enough, his son was healed the previous day right when Jesus proclaimed it would be so.

The life of faith is often lived in the interim between promise and fulfillment. When we see God's promises fulfilled, we celebrate and give thanks, as we should. Yet we don't always reflect on how long we waited to see the promise fulfilled. And when we are in the midst of waiting on a promise, we don't always reflect on the times we've seen God fulfill other promises. There's no escaping it: faith is a waiting game. The good news is that many who have gone before us have "started on their way" trusting that God's word would be fulfilled. May we join that great cloud of witnesses this day—and continue on our way with the hope that God is faithful still.

## PRAYER

Faithful God, we give you thanks that your word does not return to you empty. Give us patience and faith to wait upon you, trusting that your promises are sure, even when the best is yet to come. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 2021

*The Rev. Minh Towner '13*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 3:6-18

6 The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there? 7 And I thought, "After she has done all this she will return to me"; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it. 8 She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but

she too went and played the whore. 9 Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. 10 Yet for all this her false sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in pretense, says the LORD. 11 Then the LORD said to me: Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah. 12 Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry for ever. 13 Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the LORD your God, and scattered your favors among strangers under every green tree, and have not obeyed my voice, says the LORD. 14 Return, O faithless children, says the LORD, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. 15 I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. 16 And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. 17 At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will. 18 In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your ancestors for a heritage.

## DEVOTIONAL

We live in a world that encourages us to be independent, self-reliant. With an attitude of entitlement, we work hard to pursue the world's view of happiness to meet our fleshly desires. No matter how hard we try, failure is inevitable, and disappointment follows. We question God when things don't turn out favorably for us. We even question God's existence, or we live wearing a mask pretending who we are not.

God knows our imperfection. God knows us more than we know ourselves. We are "faithless Israel . . . false Judah." We are sinners, but God still loves us unconditionally. God is calling us "return" to him no matter what. The desire of God's heart is to care for us, even though we are sinners, as long as we truly repent. If we do so, his promise will be delivered as he has said: "I will give you shepherds after my own heart." In Isaiah 40 God says to his people, "*I will save you. I have called you by name—you are mine*"—a promise that today also holds true for us.

## PRAYER

God of love, God of mercy, you know our weaknesses and our sinful nature more than we know ourselves. We run after our heart's desire instead of being obedient and following your will. We live our lives for this world and not for you. We ask you for your forgiveness. Thank you for your unfailing

love. We pray that our souls will always be on fire as we run after your heart. In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2021

*Chap. Nicholas Stavlund '17*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Romans 2:12-24

12 All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. 17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God 18 and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, 19 and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, 21 you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

### DEVOTIONAL

Paul wrote in Romans 2 that there were some Gentiles who instinctively did what the Law required (v. 14). Apparently, these outsiders had the Law of the insiders, the chosen people, bubbling up in their gut, overflowing in their behavior. The requirements of the Mosaic law were, in Paul's words, written on their hearts. Presumably they were never taught this stuff in a classroom. Yet, despite their disposition as outsiders and their dispossession of the law, their conscience bore witness to the light of God.

In the spring of 2017, while the battle for western Mosul continued to grow increasingly violent, I saw an ISIS fighter surrender to an Iraqi military officer. Months earlier, members of this Iraqi officer's family were murdered as they tried to flee invading ISIS fighters. Surprisingly, the Iraqi officer grabbed the dejected ISIS fighter by his shoulders, looked

him the eyes, and prayed that God's peace would reign in the man's heart. He didn't punch him. He didn't shoot him. He prayed for him.

I think I saw the light of God that day, not in an Anglican or Presbyterian, but in an Iraqi Army officer whose heart was broken from the violence of war. Perhaps this is what Paul was pointing to: Doers of the law of God are everywhere, even in the most surprising of places.

### PRAYER

O God, with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light. Quench our thirst with living water, and flood our darkened minds with heavenly light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever, we pray. Amen.

## FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2021

*Lynn Cox '14*

### SCRIPTURE

#### John 5:30-47

30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. 31 If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. 33 You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. 39 You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. 40 Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. 41 I do not accept glory from human beings. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. 43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. 44 How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

## DEVOTIONAL

What patience God has with our unbelief! Jesus has healed a sick man physically and spiritually and been repaid with persecution from a group of Jews. Blind to the grace and mercy we readily see in Jesus' acts toward the man, they have called Jesus to account for performing work forbidden on the sabbath. We enter the middle of Jesus' response to their accusations confident that we side with him and anticipating his delivery of a theological coup de grace.

Thank God, that is not what Jesus does. Instead, he affirms that he has no power of his own. Like them, he must seek the will of God to be empowered. In a subsequent debate (John 8:14-16), Jesus will claim that he can testify rightly to his own actions, but here he submits to the human standard that requires the testimony of others. He reminds his accusers of the witnesses that testify to them about his identity: God his Father, John the Baptist, the works the Father has assigned to him, the Scriptures, and the law of Moses. Submission to God in love and faith are all that is necessary for them to recognize the truth of their testimony.

Jesus' word to his opponents is also a word to us. We may hear it echoed in the directive to believers in James 1:5-7. God gives wisdom—the ability to recognize and respond to God's truth—generously and without hesitation to those who ask for it in faith. When, like Jesus' accusers, our study, prayer, and worship are shaped more by our devices and desires than by the love of God, we must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

This word to everyone who claims a relationship with the Father is both hard and full of grace. God does not hesitate to call out whatever constitutes our doublemindedness, but in Christ he simultaneously invites us into loving relationship, thus proactively making his will and way available to us by faith through the Scriptures, the testimony of the saints, the fellowship of believers, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Lent grants us time and space to see where we stand in response to God's invitation.

## PRAYER

Thank you, Father, that in love you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus and invite us to know you more and more by faith. Match our desire to know you and do your will to your desire for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 2021

*The Rev. Anthony Hita '13*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 5:20-31

20 Declare this in the house of Jacob, proclaim it in Judah:  
21 Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear. 22 Do you not fear me? says the LORD; Do you not tremble before me? I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail, though they roar, they cannot pass over it.  
23 But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. 24 They do not say in their hearts, "Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest." 25 Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have deprived you of good. 26 For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings. 27 Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, 28 they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. 29 Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD, and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? 30 An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: 31 the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?

## DEVOTIONAL

In 1961 Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, wondered how seemingly normal everyday people in Germany could have followed monstrous orders given to them by their Nazi superiors. Milgram noted that at the Nuremberg trials the most common defense was, "Just following orders." So Milgram developed an experiment wherein participants were instructed by an authority figure to give electric shocks of increasing intensity to a person, placed out of sight in another room, whenever he or she answered a question incorrectly. Unbeknownst to the participants, the shocks weren't real; moreover, someone else was also in that other room—an actor, wailing as though the shocks were putting him in mortal danger. Despite the audible agony, 65 percent of the participants followed the order of the authority figure by, in the end, administering the highest, supposedly fatal shock.

Milgram concluded from this test that otherwise normal people will follow the orders of perceived authority figures

even when those orders may result in the death of an innocent person. Later tests by other experimenters found that when a participant was instructed to tell *someone else* to administer the shock, compliance rose to 92.5 percent. But when participants were placed in the presence of others who *refused* to obey, compliance fell to just 10 percent. In other words, the less impact a person feels personally, the more likely they are willingly to follow orders that harm someone else—but this willingness can be disrupted by just one or two others who refuse to comply.

For Christians—especially those in positions of authority—Milgram’s experiment demonstrates the necessity of modeling noncompliance with systems we know are harmful. We must stand against discrimination, economic deprivation, abuse of power, corruption, and immorality as the shore resists the sea or people *will* be led astray. Right behavior issues from peers and authorities who actively resist wrong in word and deed. It only takes one or two objectors to turn aside others who might otherwise comply with wrong. Injustice in the world today is not inflicted upon us—it is allowed *by* us when we choose not to stand against it. As Christians we are all called to take that stand.

## PRAYER

Lord God, from whom all blessings flow, you have taught us by the words of the prophets and the example of Christ how we are to behave. We acknowledge that we live in a world with corrupt authorities who seek to ensnare us and lead us astray. You who control the seas, we ask that you would grant us the courage to resist oppression, injustice, and evil with our voices, hands, and feet in whatever forms they present themselves, so that we may not be false prophets but instead a people, called by your name, rightly proclaiming the Word of Truth and thus enabling others to resist with us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

*The Rev. Rebecca Reeder '19*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 6:9-15

9 Thus says the LORD of hosts: Glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel; like a grape-gatherer, pass your hand again over its branches. 10 To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen. The word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it. 11 But I am full of the wrath of the LORD; I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out on the children in the street, and on the gatherings of young men as well; both husband and wife shall be taken, the old folk and the very aged. 12 Their houses shall be turned over

to others, their fields and wives together; for I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, says the LORD. 13 For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. 14 They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. 15 They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD.

## DEVOTIONAL

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” I am struck by these words as I write in the midst of widespread social unrest, and I wonder where the battle specifically for racial equity will be by the time this devotional is read. I hear God shouting these words from Jeremiah 6 about our own society, in which deep wounds and ongoing intergenerational trauma have too often been treated carelessly. Too long the refrain, “Peace, peace,” has been proclaimed when there really was no peace for the wounded.

I also hear God convicting us all that we often treat the wounds of Jesus carelessly—we throw them about as though the cross were a weapon instead of representing Jesus present with the least of these. Yet, as we move closer to the cross this Lenten season, we discover anew that every wound of our own that was treated carelessly, as well as every wound of others whom we ourselves have treated carelessly, is borne in the wounds of Christ. So let us lay both our wounds and our carelessness once more at the foot of the cross, be assured of God’s justice and mercy, and then follow in the way of Jesus by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

## PRAYER

Loving and gracious God, as we journey through this Lenten season, give us ears to hear your word and eyes to see where injustice continues to be rampant. Give us a holy unrest to continue caring for the wounds of your people until Christ’s peace reigns supreme. In name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

*The Rev. Bernard Nti '17*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 7:1-15

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word,

and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. 3 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. 4 Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." 5 For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, 6 if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, 7 then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. 8 Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 9 Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? 11 Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD. 12 Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. 13 And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, 14 therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. 15 And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

## DEVOTIONAL

The word of God through Jeremiah called the people of Judah to reevaluate their worship and spiritual practices. They worshiped God wholeheartedly in the temple, yet their deeds outside the temple were appalling. They lied and cheated. They oppressed the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. They shed innocent blood. Relegating their worship of God to within the four corners of the temple, they ignored the law of Moses' command to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:15).

Jeremiah reminded the Judahites that God was interested in their day-to-day lives. To God, receiving their worship was just as important as their loving the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—just as important as the negotiations they made in their day-to-day lives in private and in public. God watches!

In this period of Lent, God is reminding us that he's concerned about the "mundane" aspects of our lives just as much as he's concerned the "sacred" aspects. For worshiping God is not one particular act—worshiping God is a *lifestyle* that should permeate all the areas of our lives. In Romans 12:1 Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and

sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." The hymn *All to Jesus I Surrender* articulates one's personal commitment to enacting this verse.

To what areas of your life have you relegated God? Have you surrendered your all to God? God is calling us to reexamine and surrender fully to him everything about our lives.

## PRAYER

Lord, teach me to surrender my soul, my body, and my spirit to you. Let me not hold back any area of my life from you lordship and control. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

## TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2021

*The Rev. Alyce Weaver Dunn '88*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 7:37-52

37 On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 38 and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. 40 When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." 41 Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? 42 Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" 43 So there was a division in the crowd because of him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. 45 Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" 46 The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" 47 Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? 48 Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed." 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 51 "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" 52 They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

## DEVOTIONAL

Growing up, I frequently attended summer camp at Jumonville, one of our United Methodist camps in the Western Pennsylvania Conference. An annual highlight



was stopping by Moses' Rock on a hot, summer afternoon. I would hold my hand for a moment over the water that was gently bubbling up from the rock. Then, as I would release my hand, the water would gush up! I would lean over and drink from the fountain of water. Nothing was more satisfying to my parched mouth than a drink of cold, mountain spring water!

Nothing is more satisfying to a parched soul than a deep drink of the living water offered in our scripture lesson! Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Jesus spoke these words to believers on the final day of the Feast of the Tabernacles, a joyous festival that remembered God's provision for the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. The image of a priest drawing water out of the pool of Siloam and pouring it into a bowl in the temple would have been fresh on the peoples' minds. The prayer of the priest for God to send rain would have been ringing in their ears. The remembrance of God's gift of water in the wilderness when Moses struck the rock would have been burning in their hearts.

As the Festival neared the end, the people wanted the joy to continue. They did not want to wait until next year to experience again the joy of God's presence flooding their lives. They did not want their Spirit-saturated hearts to become parched again as they went home to an arid existence.

So Jesus' offer of living water was captivating. Although there were detractors who did not want dependency on ritual and hierarchy to end, the invitation to be in relationship with the God who daily provided the satisfaction of living water was powerful. The opportunity never again to experience a parched spirit was a gift to those who were oppressed, beaten down, broken, and in need of resuscitation. They craved such living water!

As we journey through the wilderness of Lent, many of us realize our spirits are parched, our joy has run dry. Bitterness and brokenness have beaten us down. We need our conviction of faith revived! We need our thirst for justice quenched! We need the aridness of our hearts saturated anew with Jesus the Christ!

As you pray, fast, read Scripture, and worship during Lent, may you discover anew the living water of our Lord Jesus and never be thirsty again!

## PRAYER

My heart is dry, O Lord, and my spirit is arid. Joy and hope have been wrung out of my life by disappointments, misunderstandings, tension, and pain. I need your living

water to refresh my heart, to saturate my spirit. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Mark Ioset '87/'86*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 8:4-7, 18-9:6

4 You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD: When people fall, do they not get up again? If they go astray, do they not turn back? 5 Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They have held fast to deceit, they have refused to return. 6 I have given heed and listened, but they do not speak honestly; no one repents of wickedness, saying, "What have I done!" All of them turn to their own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. 7 Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtle-dove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the LORD. 18 My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. 19 Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?") 20 "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." 21 For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. 22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? 9:1 O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! 2 O that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. 3 They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the LORD. 4 Beware of your neighbors, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer. 5 They all deceive their neighbors, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongues to speak lies; they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. 6 Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the LORD.

## DEVOTIONAL

As I write this devotional there is a jackhammer pounding away outside our apartment, as well as construction trucks with backup beepers going full tilt. I'm thinking this is rather appropriate and perhaps a moment of God-incidence. Jeremiah and his message were, at times, not unlike a jackhammer. He hammered home concussively that the people, his people, God's people, needed to get back to God

and what God had to say to them and then to act on God's word.

The verses before leave us shaken and unsettled, which I suspect is their intent. They are hard-hitting. No "warm fuzzies" here. They deliver a scathing critique of a society in shambles, almost as devastatingly bleak as Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones. Jeremiah's soul is raw with the words he delivers, right down to *his* bones. To be a prophet is to find oneself in the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart," with a nod to William Butler Yeats. It is a calling that exacts all. Jeremiah spends himself. He is spent by his allegiance to that call.

Our call leads us into the same endeavor. As I write, society is reeling from two deadly scourges: COVID-19 and racism. God, however, sends us into this society that we might not only speak words of critique but also, as Jeremiah does elsewhere, words of hope grounded in God's yearning that we, in listening to him, in knowing him, might know his peace, his shalom . . . and God's shalom means wholeness. We could sure use some of that. Just now, the jackhammer has gone silent, but the backup beepers are still sounding.

## PRAYER

Holy and gracious God, knock some sense into us. Give us the courage to take your word seriously. Split us open to receive it and, with it, your purposes for us in this time. May we accept your call as irrevocable and spend ourselves in allegiance to you, your Son, and those to whom you send us. Amen.

## THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. T. Ann Daniel '92*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 5:12-21

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14 Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised

dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. 18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## DEVOTIONAL

The renowned Greek philosopher Aristotle has left a legacy for logical thinking. It has influenced many since the fourth century BCE. There is a logic that the first century CE writer Paul adopted in Romans 5:12-21—a logic he expects us to follow in order that we may not miss the depth of the argument. The argument is the power that one individual can have over the entire world. It can be demonstrated positively and negatively. As I write, the world is grappling over the death trail of the pandemic novel coronavirus disease, which no doubt originated with one individual or one group of individuals.

Our text states that the first human creature sinned and all humans inherited this original sin; the full context is in Genesis 3. The New Testament speaks of the first person who was both truly human and truly God, Jesus Christ, who broke the power of sin so that all humans may receive salvation and inherit eternal life. The impact of the original sin is double death, both physically and spiritually. The impact of sin canceled is maintaining forever our spiritual life, which begins when we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and continues eternally, even beyond physical death. To accomplish this, Jesus gave his life on Calvary's cross as the purchase price for eternal life available to the entire world. Then he conquered physical death by rising on the first Easter day.

The dominion of physical death caused by disobedience, trespasses, and condemnation is intercepted and interrupted by God's grace as a free gift, perfect peace, and endless life. Let us accept this new status now: life with hope to live after physical death. The Lenten season invites us to hit the pause button, be reflective, be penitent, and remember that Jesus died for us. All that is required from us is to seek forgiveness, claim the gift, and die to whatever originally caused us not to live in full recognition of the love of God for the world generally and the salvation of our souls personally. Receive new life—your sins are washed away!

## PRAYER

Dear God, the architect of all plans, the giver of new life, the transformer of souls, we look to you for redemption,

salvation, and life forever in your presence. Help us to dwell with you, whether it is currently in the human body, where your grace is being infused, or in the future beyond the grave, where there will be no temporal interruptions or distractions. Set us free from sin, shame, and skepticism; then bring us to the place where we may fully trust you, confidently obey you, and joyfully accept your gift of salvation. This we pray in the name of the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

## FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 2021

*The Rev. Joseph W. Hedden Jr. '97*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Jeremiah 11:1-8, 14-17

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 3 You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant, 4 which I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron-smelter, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, 5 that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, "So be it, LORD." 6 And the LORD said to me: Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them. 7 For I solemnly warned your ancestors when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. 8 Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of an evil will. So I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not. . . . 14 As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. 15 What right has my beloved in my house, when she has done vile deeds? Can vows and sacrificial flesh avert your doom? Can you then exult? 16 The LORD once called you, "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit"; but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. 17 The LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.

### DEVOTIONAL

Is there a more hopeless verse than Jeremiah 11:14? How can a prophet be commanded not to pray for the people? Would it ever reach the point for you pastors and your ministry to

stop praying for your congregation? I think we would all say, "I certainly hope not." Indeed, prayer for me is sometimes a last refuge when I can't think of what else I could do for or with someone!

But here in Jeremiah we are not dealing with normal times or a normal command. First, this passage is not about what Jeremiah wants so much as what God wants. Jeremiah may desire to pray—we don't know. But God commands the prophet not to "waste his breath," so to speak. Second, what might cause God to issue such a command? Perhaps God will only work with those who want to be part of the covenant agreement. If there is no mutuality, there can be no prayer, in other words. Have the sinful so tested God's patience and willfully ignored God's warning (v. 7) that prayers fall unheard to the ground?

I don't pretend to know. But there is one thing I do notice here, and it is God's command to listen in verse 4. In my best moments of prayer, I listen well to God and try to follow the divine command. In my worst, my prayer time is devoid of listening; I'm too busy speaking to let God speak!

### PRAYER

God, when I think I have it all figured out, correct me. When I think I know better than you do how to run the world, enlighten me. When I can hear every other sound under the sun but your voice, help me to listen. Amen.

## SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2021

*The Rev. Rebecca McGreevy Hickok '93*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Psalms 149

1 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. 2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. 3 Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. 4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. 5 Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, 7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, 8 to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, 9 to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord!

### DEVOTIONAL

It is Sat., March 13. But . . . it's not really Sat., March 13. As I write these words, it's late June, and my deadline for

submitting this devotional is in a few days. It's a sweltering summer day in the mid-Hudson Valley, an area hit particularly hard by "the virus." Here in New York, we are on a slow march to whatever normal will be for us.

I can't imagine what next week will bring, much less what our world will look like in nine months, when it really will be March 13. But I can tell you one thing: there's a good chance that we will not be singing the praises of God in the congregation of the faithful. Singing is the one thing they've told us not to do. All those diagrams and graphs and 8 x 10 colored glossy photographs with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back have shown us that. NO SINGING! No new songs. No old songs. No songs with dance. No songs with timbrel. No songs with harp. NO . . . SINGING.

Yet it's the one thing we should be doing now—whether it's June or March. New songs, old songs, protest songs, praise songs, lament songs . . . songs that fill our hearts with love; songs that fill our eyes with vision; songs that fill our ears with awareness. Maybe we can't gather together as we used to in pre-Covid-19 days, but that doesn't mean we can't still sing. In fact, do this: close the computer or Ipad or phone or whatever device you are using to read this devotional, stand up, and hoot out your favorite hymn. If we can dance like no one is watching, then we can certainly sing like no one is listening. Except God. Who is listening—and beaming at all God's beloved children standing by themselves in their homes and workplaces and backyards and at traffic lights and by a loved one's hospital bed and in classrooms or church offices, singing. Singing for our lives. Praise God!

## PRAYER

Loving God, Conductor of the Choir Invisible, we lift our voices to you not just to praise you but also to ask your guidance as we seek to be in harmony with each other. Amen.

## SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Errol L. Connor '99*

## SCRIPTURE

### Galatians 4:21-5:1

21 Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. 23 One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. 24 Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. 25 Now Hagar

is Mount Sinai in Arabia[a] and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, "Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married."

28 Now you,[b] my friends,[c] are children of the promise, like Isaac. 29 But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30 But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman." 31 So then, friends,[d] we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

## DEVOTIONAL

How foolish! Who has bewitched you? Do you not know you have abandoned the truth for a lie? But, like a good neighbor, friend, or pastor, the Apostle Paul reprimands and reminds us all that "we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman" (Gal. 4:31).

Abraham had two sons, one by the slave and one by the free woman. The metaphor of the slave women (Hagar) represents all misguided human efforts to help in the fulfillment of the promise of God. The free woman (Sarah) represents the faith that takes God at God's word and waits for the promise. Through Abraham and in Jesus, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

It is foolish to think that one can be saved by works of the law when Christ Jesus died to save sinners. Yes, it is true that faith without works is dead; however, works apart from faith are a dead end. We become slaves to the law because we are prisoners of sin without Christ. We cannot be made perfect by our own human efforts. No matter how well we keep the law, observe tradition, or slavishly follow religious customs. No one is made right with God by obeying the law but by believing in Jesus. *All self dependence is but vain. Christ doth our cornerstone remain.* ". . . Justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1).

So it is true, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. As such, we are recipients of grace. Grace means gift: that which we do not deserve, that for which no price nor labor is required. By grace we are saved through faith . . . not of works . . . it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). That's the Promise of the Father: freedom in Christ and empowerment through the Spirit. Child of God, child of the promise, may you ever stand in the grace where Christ makes free.

## PRAYER

“Abba!” Father!” Beyond the law, I see your grace in the glory of the Cross. It’s finished! Yes, the work is done through Christ, your only Son. And so, I have started on that road of freedom, faith and love. Lord, help me rest, yet daily run the race, and rise with Christ above. Amen!

## MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2021

*The Rev. Deborah Evanovich '94*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 16:1-21

1 The word of the LORD came to me: 2 You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. 3 For thus says the LORD concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bear them and the fathers who beget them in this land: 4 They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become like dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall become food for the birds of the air and for the wild animals of the earth. 5 For thus says the LORD: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them; for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the LORD, my steadfast love and mercy. 6 Both great and small shall die in this land; they shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them; there shall be no gashing, no shaving of the head for them. 7 No one shall break bread for the mourner, to offer comfort for the dead; nor shall anyone give them the cup of consolation to drink for their fathers or their mothers. 8 You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. 9 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to banish from this place, in your days and before your eyes, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. 10 And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, “Why has the LORD pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the LORD our God?” 11 then you shall say to them: It is because your ancestors have forsaken me, says the LORD, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshiped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law; 12 and because you have behaved worse than your ancestors, for here you are, every one of you, following your stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me. 13 Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor. 14 Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, “As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of

Egypt,” 15 but “As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.” For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors. 16 I am now sending for many fishermen, says the LORD, and they shall catch them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. 17 For my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight. 18 And I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations. 19 O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say: Our ancestors have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit. 20 Can mortals make for themselves gods? Such are no gods! 21 “Therefore I am surely going to teach them, this time I am going to teach them my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the LORD.”

## DEVOTIONAL

My house of cards was beginning to fall all around me. Fifteen years of leading ministry in the church was going to disappear to a temporary supply because I could no longer make it through a Celebration of Worship without running to the bathroom. Six months had gone by—months spent suffering pneumonia . . . whooping cough . . . a strep infection . . . the indignity of always hiding behind a bathroom door—before someone was able to put a name on the problem: Crohn’s Disease.

All these infirmities left me stranded on a couch . . . under a quilt . . . staring at the ceiling. No television. No reading. No music. Just biding my time and drug trials until I was so emaciated that, unable to walk, I entered the hospital in a wheelchair. The cards kept falling.

Crohn’s Disease is supposedly an inherited disease, but my genome could not be identified in any of my ancestors that I knew. It was hidden in the very distant lineage only to be shaken awake in my body—probably due to the stress of pastoring a church in crisis.

In the next 14 years there would be surgeries, transfusions, IV drugs, breast cancer and radiation, and more surgery. At least twice, there was no assurance I would make it through the night. But I did—with the power and might of God!

God’s power and might, seen in the faces of those who prayed when I could not . . . felt in the hands that ministered to me through each new hospitalization and home recovery . . . heard in the voices of those who pulled me out of the mire of self-pity . . .

inhaled in the fragrance of each new health professional who saved me . . .  
worshipped in my expressions of thanksgiving for all that God had restored in my life . . . for just being alive!

God's power and might,  
restored in those who call on God's name and abide in God's hands.  
God's power and might,  
a whisper and a bellow.  
God's power and might,  
made available for all God's people who trust and believe.  
God's power and might,  
lived out in the life and death and resurrection of God's Son  
. . .  
so no one who calls on the name of God will be lost.

## PRAYER

God of all that is behind us . . . of all that surrounds us now . . . and of all that is yet to be, we shake off the fear of life without you and discover during this season of Lent that you gift us with the power and might of Christ in the center of all life. Amen.

## TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2021

*The Rev. Trevor Jamison '01*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 7:13-25

13 Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.  
14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.  
21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?  
25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

## DEVOTIONAL

Do you live your life based on the viewpoint that people are generally good or generally bad? And if you're a preacher, do you preach from the perspective that people are generally good or generally bad? I have had to rein in my tendency to regard people as good, but preach about them as bad.

One sure sign that not all is well with the world, including the people in it, is the great number of situations for which there is no perfect answer or outcome. Even our best turns out bad in some ways.

Industrialization brings great wealth for many (though not all), but it wrecks the planet everyone depends upon for life itself. I seek the best for my child, though I'm aware that in a situation of limited resources my doing so means someone else's child will have to go without.

Good things, such as wealth, creation, parental love, and even God's gift of "the law," says Paul, can and often do become occasions for wrong, not right. Sin, it seems, is not just about you or me acting badly—it's a condition affecting individuals, human systems, and the world itself.

Yet Paul doesn't write to rub our noses in the mess we make of life, individually or collectively, so that we despair. He writes to give us hope. He points us toward God, the Creator of this world, as the One who saves the world: "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

So, as followers of Jesus, we try to do the right thing—for ourselves, for our nearest and dearest, and for those we hardly know. When that doesn't work out well (as often it doesn't), even if we're tempted to despair we remain hopeful, for salvation from this less-than-good situation depends not on us—it comes from the God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

## PRAYER

God of all creation, thank you for all that's good with your world—and for making yourself known in your Son, Jesus Christ. Encourage me to walk in your ways, and rescue me, I pray, on those occasions I fail to do so; for You are my hope and my salvation. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Karen Anderson '97*

### SCRIPTURES

#### Jeremiah 18:1-11

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. 11 Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

#### Romans 8:1-11

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

## DEVOTIONAL

The reality of our existence is that we live in a world marred by sin. Sin, which is driven by seeking our own will rather than God’s. The great “I” in center of the word—s-l-n—reflects our constant need to be in control, to be our own god. Words such as self-will, self-interest, self-centered, and self-reliance come to mind.

Sin infects and harms individual lives, families, social constructs, political systems, and nations. All are the imperfect clay in the hands of our Lord and Creator, who works to shape and mold us to his good and perfect will in spite of our imperfections—our sin. The good news of the gospel is that “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:1-2).

In Christ we have hope, not just for ourselves but also for our world. Sin and death no longer rule. It is God’s will that all should come to know the love of God and the saving grace of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:4).

Where do we start? We start with ourselves by daily surrendering our will into the Potter’s hands to do with us and build with us as he wills. From there we pray for the surrender to him of all those around us in the knowledge that his will, his way, his love are perfect—as demonstrated in the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In him we are a new creation, and through the him we are given the power of the Holy Spirit to help bring change and hope to the world. Praise God! Praise the Potter.

### PRAYER

Lord, we confess our willfulness and pride. Even in prayer we often give you instructions instead of waiting to hear your instructions for us. Forgive us, Lord. Give us humble, compliant spirits that patiently listen and wait to know and do your will—spirits which know and trust that what you do can and will be better than anything we could ever conceive or imagine. We pray in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

## THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 2021

*Jonathan J. Ellegood '06*

### SCRIPTURE

#### John 6:41-51

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42 They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I

have come down from heaven?" 43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

## DEVOTIONAL

For the first two years we lived in our home we had a light above our kitchen sink that didn't work. Every day, we would wash dishes and I would think to myself how it would be nice to have this light working. But it never seemed so dark that I couldn't see well enough to get the dishes washed.

One day, something compelled me to finally put in a new light. Having a new light in this space made all the difference. Now I can easily see where I miss spots on dirty dishes and what places need scrubbed a little harder. I realized, now that there is a new light, I can't wash dishes without the light on. When the light is off it's too dark for me to wash dishes. Until the light was on I didn't know how dark things really were.

In his Gospel, John reminds us that Jesus is the light that shines in the dark places for eternity. The people "ate manna in the wilderness and they died," and they drank from a well that only leads to being thirsty again (John 4:13). The people had some light, but it wasn't the true light. Jesus is the one who is the "living bread" and the "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). In Christ, there is no end, only true joy.

As we prepare for the coming of Easter, we must ask ourselves: Are there dark places in our lives that need light? How much time and energy are we spending on things that are only temporary?

## PRAYER

God, we are easy to distract. We like shiny objects and easily accessible toys. But what is right in front of us is not always helpful and healthy. Guide us toward you. Lead us to ask hard questions and allow us open ears to hear the responses - even when they are difficult. Amen.

## FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

*The Rev. Kristen Renee Barner '97*

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 23:1-8

1 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. 2 Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. 3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. 5 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." 7 Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, "As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt," 8 but "As the LORD lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." Then they shall live in their own land.

## DEVOTIONAL

I read this passage from my couch, during quarantine and election season. We live in a time of unknowing—not just *not* knowing, for what we used to know about this world has been mightily challenged. And that's not a bad thing. A frightening thing? Sure. But not a bad thing.

These verses from Jeremiah 23 speak of shepherds and leaders, people in charge. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" Has there ever been a time in any nation when the leader has been flawless? Do we not, in every election season, try to find exactly the right leader to satisfy us?

Lent is often a season of fasting—a season that includes a tradition of prayer and giving something up. We know this tradition. Many if not most of us have been familiar with it our whole lives. But . . .

What if we decide that during this particular Lent we will flip the idea of giving something up and instead challenge what we know about our Lenten practices? Suppose that, instead of giving something up, we take something on.



What if we take on the leadership role of dealing wisely and justly, with kindness and concern, for all God's people? We cannot all become elected officials (shepherds), but we can all participate in the communities in which we live.

Yes, this is a time of pandemic. Yes, we must social distance. Yes, we must be mindful of the safety of others and ourselves. But what if, for this particular Lent, we heeded this lesson from Jeremiah by looking after one another? What if, for this particular Lent, we looked deeper into the example of God's radically holy Son? What if we spent this particular Lent remembering, in all that we do, that "The Lord is our righteousness"?

## PRAYER

God of love, you gather us into this life with one another and called us to care for one another. We ask that you would grant us courage to love one another. We ask that we would recognize your sacred presence in all people. In this time of Lent, O God, help us to flip our unknowing so that we might know you better. We pray in your name, and the name of your radically holy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## SATURDAY, MARCH 20, 2021

*The Rev. Brian Wallace '06*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 9:1-18

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. 6 It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, 7 and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you." 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. 9 For this is what the promise said, "About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son." 10 Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac. 11 Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, 12 not by works but by his call) she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau."

14 What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. 17 For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses.

## DEVOTIONAL

"There are clubs you can't belong to, neighborhoods you can't live in, schools you can't get into, but the roads are always open." This marketing slogan, from Nike, has been a source of inspiration for runners such as me for many years.

As I reflect on our passage from Romans 9, I am reminded of this slogan. After all, Paul argues that to be a child of God has nothing to do with who you are, where you come from, what you look like, how much money you have, who your parents are, etc. "This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise who are counted as descendants" (v. 8). To be a child of God is to trust in the promise.

In short, the promise—proclaimed as the coming reign of God by Jesus, the Messiah—is one that is wide open. Wide open to everyone, no exceptions. In this Lenten season we prepare to celebrate the week that sealed this centuries-old, wide-open promise to everyone, no matter what their past or future promise. We prepare to celebrate the week when God won final victory over the power of sin and death on that glorious morning.

## PRAYER

Gracious God, help us, your people, to be those who proclaim your wide-open promise. May we see past the barriers and blind spots that keep us from being your faithful ambassadors to those you love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Kristin Beckstrom Widrich '04*

## SCRIPTURE

### Mark 8:31-9:1

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter

took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." 9:1 And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

## DEVOTIONAL

"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

Leave it to Peter. Who but Peter would dare to rebuke Jesus? Brash, impulsive, thick-headed Peter. Peter, so quick to jump out of the boat when he sees Jesus walking toward him on the water, and so quick to sink when he notices the wind. Peter, so quick to draw his sword when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, and so quick to deny that he even knows him when Jesus stands trial. Peter, so quick to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, and so quick to rebuke him when Jesus explains what that means. Oh, Peter. Rebuking Jesus? Did you really think that you knew better than he?

Of course, I see myself in Peter all the time. More often than I'd like to admit, I catch myself pulling Jesus aside, telling him how it should be. After all, Jesus' way – the way of the Cross – it's not easy. Not for Jesus. Not for Peter. And not for me. I would much prefer to focus on pleasing the crowd than to risk rejection. I would much prefer to alleviate the suffering of others than to endure suffering myself. Like Peter, I set my mind on human things, even when (especially when?) Jesus calls me to focus on the divine.

But this is the fifth Sunday in Lent. In one week, Holy Weeks begins, and we will journey with Jesus, once again, through his suffering, Crucifixion, and death. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, and so shall we.

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus, your way is not easy. I struggle to deny myself, to take up the cross, to follow you. I need your help and intervention. Thank you for going before me, to show me the way. Thank you for sending your Spirit, to equip and empower. Fix my eyes on you, today and always. Amen.

## MONDAY, MARCH 22, 2021

*The Rev. Richard Kinney '07*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 9:19-33

19 You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20 But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? 22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; 23 and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— 24 including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? 25 As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" 26 And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they shall be called children of the living God." 27 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; 28 for the Lord will execute his sentence on the earth quickly and decisively." 29 And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left survivors to us, we would have fared like Sodom and been made like Gomorrah." 30 What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; 31 but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. 32 Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 as it is written, "See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

## DEVOTIONAL

In the epistle reading for today the Apostle Paul ushers us into a spiritual mystery. Why has God ordained a world of vast disparity and unfairness? The Apostle uses the image of God-the-Potter/We-the-Clay and suggests that God makes pottery of different quality. Some people have mental or physical disabilities or early onset of disease. Some children are born into broken families or crippling poverty, while others are born into wealth and privilege, seemingly destined for success. Some people groups are outside the saving work of Christ while others have generational faith. Respectively, Paul calls these people "objects of wrath made for destruction" and "objects of mercy, prepared for glory." That seems so unfair.

TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 2021

The Rev. Elizabeth Wallace '07

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 10:1-13

1 Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. 5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

## DEVOTIONAL

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (v. 8). In the movie *You've Got Mail* there's a line in which the main character, the owner of a bookshop, says, "When you read a book as a child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your whole life does."

As a child, in the evenings I would watch my parents and sister read and become entranced by the words on the page. Ever since I myself learned to read, I've been transfixed by the power of words. I remember going into my older sister's room (when she was away at a friend's house) to read not her diary, but her Bible. I knew there was something special about those words in particular, and I couldn't get enough of them.

In Jeremiah 31:33, God talks about the new covenant that will be written on the hearts of God's people. This new covenant won't be engraved on tablets of stone, but engraved on our hearts. When Scripture becomes part of our daily life, it shows up at unexpected times. We might find ourselves reciting a familiar psalm as we wait for results at the doctor's office. We might hear the words of 1 Corinthians 13 when we are feeling impatient and unkind. And these words

The 2014 movie *The Drop Box* documents the story of a church in South Korea with an amazing ministry to disabled, abandoned children. The ministry began when the pastor of the church and his wife gave birth to a child with severe deformities and brain damage. At birth, the child had growing off his cheek a lump the size of a second head. He would never be able to walk, talk, feed, or bathe himself. That he required 14 years of surgeries and therapies before he could be released from the hospital forced the family to sell their home to pay for his medical bills. As you watch the movie, you can't help but think, "Put the poor thing out of his misery." If ever there was a poorly made piece of pottery, "an object of wrath made for destruction," this child would surely seem to be it. Yet God had a purpose for that child's life. Like the words Moses says to Pharaoh, quoted by Paul here in verse 17, "For this very *purpose* I raised you up, in order that I might demonstrate in you, my power, and in order that my name might be proclaimed far and wide in all the earth."

Through that deformed child, the pastor and his wife learned the value of every human life. They have treated their child with great dignity, and it led them and their church to a ministry of rescuing and raising other disabled children. Abandoning babies (especially disabled ones) in dumpsters or back alleys is a huge problem in South Korea, so the church created a Drop Box—an incubated receptacle where desperate mothers can anonymously place their baby, who is then transported through the exterior wall and into the shelter of the church. Thus the disabled orphans are given a chance in life and raised in love. At the time *The Drop Box* was filmed, 500 babies had been saved in this way, and many of them have grown to be well-adjusted members of society. All this goodness came about because of one child whom God allowed to be born with such severe disadvantages.

The Bible never explains why there is disease, inequity, and unfairness in this world. It is a broken, fallen world. But God is calling those of us who have received God's mercy to show God's mercy to others. The weakness we see in others should soften our hearts with compassion and draw us to their aid, and the weakness we see in ourselves should humble our pride and draw us to receiving help from others. God wants the weak, fragile pottery of this world to teach compassion to society, and God wants the seeming objects of wrath to be honored through the ministry of objects of mercy. And in this way God not only brings a broken world back together but also, in the process, weaves a beautiful tapestry out of the glorious and inglorious parts of our humanity.

## PRAYER

Abba Father, Thou art the Potter, We are the clay. May we be content with our created limitations; strengthen us with Thy mercy where we are insufficient. And lead us also to others, especially the weaker vessels of Thy Creation, that the mercy we show them may bring glory to Thee. Mold us and fashion us all into the image of Jesus Thy Son. Amen.

from Romans 10 remind us that God is close at hand—and the word of God can be in our hearts and on our lips at all times.

## PRAYER

Gracious God, we give you thanks for your word in Scripture. May it guide and direct us during these 40 days of Lent. Help us to keep your word in our hearts and on our lips. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Stephen Franklin '09*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 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. 5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. 6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. 18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, 19 then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

## DEVOTIONAL

“Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” When I was in high school, we had a visiting missionary from the Philippines stay with our church for a few months. It was one of those mild winters, with very little snow. The day before our guest was scheduled to leave, we were hit with a blizzard, a total

white out. In Northeast Ohio, this isn’t anything new. But for our visitor from the Philippines it was an astonishing thing to experience. After seeing snow for the very first time, she said with tears in her eyes, “I finally understand what it means when the Bible tells me that I’ve been washed whiter than snow.”

Lent is a journey that teaches us about the incredible grace of a God, who hears our prayers of confession and washes us clean. We are constantly reminded of the sin that entangles humanity—not just the world around us but the heart within us. As we look forward to the day of resurrection, may we rejoice in the assurance of our salvation. May we journey with joy because God shows us mercy according to God’s steadfast love. May we be filled with tears of joy, like my friend from the Philippines, because we have been made clean, washed whiter than snow.

## PRAYER

With the psalmist, let us pray, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, . . .” Forgive what my lips tremble to name, that I may forever dwell in the house of the Lord. Amen.

## THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2021

*The Rev. Susan Rothenberg '08*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 11:1-12

1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 3 “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” 4 But what is the divine reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace. 7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 8 as it is written, “God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.” 9 And David says, “Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; 10 let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and keep their backs forever bent.” 11 So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means!

But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 12 Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

## DEVOTIONAL

When my children were small, one of their favorite books was, *Mama, Do You Love Me?* It is a sweet and simple story of a little girl testing to see whether there are limits to her mother's love for her. The little girl poses questions to her mother, beginning with descriptions of small, mischievous acts like, "Mama would you love me if I threw water on our oil lamp?"—to which the mother replies, "I would still love you." The questions progress to include more and more outrageous behavior, ending with: "Mama would you love me if I turned into the biggest, meanest polar bear with big shiny teeth and I chased you into your tent and you cried?"—to which the mother replies, "I would be very surprised. And very scared. But I would know it is really you inside that polar bear. And I would still love you."

Here in Romans 11:1-12, Paul presents an image of a God who is gracious, kind, and never gives up on God's people, even when they reject God's blessings and become hard-hearted, mean, and sluggish. God doesn't forget who we are inside when we stumble, disbelieve, and snarl at life. Like a loving parent, God will not reject the worst angels of our nature. In fact, according to Paul, God is longing for us to cast off everything that prevents us from living into our true identities as God's beloved children.

In this season of Lent, we are invited to consider our lives deeply, to be honest about the things we have done and left undone that cause us to stumble away from the merciful heart of God. Like the little girl in the story, we can safely think about, pray about, and confess all those dark places inside ourselves because, at the end of the story, we will never be rejected by the One whose love is inclusive, wide, and deep. We do not stumble so we can fall. Every day, through the grace of God, our stumbling leads us right back into the loving arms of Jesus.

## PRAYER

Holy parent of all people, we do not need to ask whether you love us, because it is your love that gives us life and breath. Forgive us when we stumble, teach us when we are sluggish, open our eyes and ears to experience the power of your Holy Spirit. Let us be so confident of your love for us that our lives become a testimony of your love for all creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## FRIDAY, MARCH 26, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. John Charnock '09*

## SCRIPTURE

### Romans 11:13-24

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry 14 in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! 16 If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

## DEVOTIONAL

In this passage about the olive tree, Paul does three things: asks a question, provides an answer, and tells the truth. First, the question. Who do you think you are? We might fancy ourselves the heart of things, but the fact is we're barely a *part* of things. I've never seen a wild olive shoot, yet I realize I *am* one. Undisciplined, wandering, haphazard. I know who I am. Who do you think you are? That's a question Paul asks us all.

He also provides an answer, spelled G-R-A-C-E. By grace, a wild olive shoot is treated as a natural branch. By grace, a lost soul is welcomed home. By grace, the question finds an answer. "Who do you think you are?" sounds the question. "Saved by grace," comes the resounding reply.

So there are the question and the answer. Now it's time for the truth. None of this is easy. All that pruning and grafting is painful—so of course it hurts. Especially in the middle of Lent, it hurts. After all, we follow one who took Holy Week walks in the olive groves. We bear the cross of one who died on the tree.

Who do you think you are? Saved by grace. None of this is easy. Thanks be to God.

## PRAYER

O Lord, I don't always journey along a neatly groomed pilgrim path. Sometimes I wander in the wilderness. Sometimes I even outrun the hope that is in me. So help me find hope in you. In your name I pray. Amen.

## SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 2021

*The Rev. Rebecca McGee '09*

## SCRIPTURE

### Psalm 31

1 In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. 6 You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. 7 I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of my adversities, 8 and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad place. 9 Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. 10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. 11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. 12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. 13 For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. 14 But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." 15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. 16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. 17 Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you; let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol. 18 Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt. 19 O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone! 20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues. 21 Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege. 22 I had said in my alarm, "I am driven

far from your sight." But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help. 23 Love the LORD, all you his saints. The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily. 24 Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD.

## DEVOTIONAL

"Into your hand I commit your spirit" were the words that I prayed after my 99-year-old maternal grandmother took her last breath. My mother, brother, and I were with her when she died on March 15, 2011. I would say these words again during her funeral service, the first service I ever officiated.

I have quoted these words from Psalm 31:5—the same words which were the last that Jesus spoke from the cross in Luke 23:46—at every funeral and memorial service since my grandmother's funeral. I prayed them brokenheartedly shortly after my father died—once I had stopped keening and wailing with an intensity I didn't think possible.

The Psalms, and in this particular case a personal lament such as Psalm 31, give voice to practically all the emotions we human beings experience, yet sometimes can't articulate. Our afflictions, distress, sorrows, and grief are poured out to our faithful God, who hears them all and gives us shelter and refuge. Blessed be the LORD, who hears our cries of despair and covers us in God's incredible, never-ending steadfast love!

## PRAYER

Merciful and compassionate God of all creation, we thank you for your care of our whole beings—body, mind and spirit—in both life and death. Help us to continue to grow in our trust of your abundant goodness and unwavering love so that, whatever we encounter, we know in both our heads and our hearts on whom we can depend. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Roderick Grahame '15*

## SCRIPTURE

### Matthew 21:12-17

12 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." 14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did,

and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry 16 and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” 17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

## DEVOTIONAL

We all love a parade, don’t we? Enticed by the color, the music, floats, and balloons, joining in is so alluring. And that day in Jerusalem, as Jesus approached the city riding on a donkey, lots of people joined in the procession. It was a joyous, unruly, untidy ragbag parade of humanity—the lost, the lonely, the sick, the marginalized, the children, and the foolish all found a welcome. Here was their King, a donkey-riding King, a King of peace and love coming down the Mount of Olives and approaching the eastern gate.

Yet what we may not realize is that, at roughly the same time, approaching the western gate from the road to the coast was another parade. This one had marching, weapons, well-disciplined soldiers, and it was led by a figure in uniform riding a stallion. This was a parade of power, not joy, led by one Pontius Pilate, coming into the city to keep order during the Passover celebrations.

Two parades—two approaches to life that were to clash in the days ahead. And the confrontation starts in the Temple as Jesus, in mounting rage, drives out the moneychangers. Even now it shocks us. We are not accustomed to seeing Jesus in anger. His fury arises from various reasons: the misuse of the Court of the Gentiles as a trading floor rather than a place of prayer and communion with God. This area was meant as the sanctuary for non-Jews. His anger also because the rich and powerful are ripping off the poor by charging exorbitant commission rates for exchanging common currency into Temple coin. It was a lucrative arrangement between the Temple authorities and the greedy, grasping money folk. No ethical investment here. And Jesus is outraged.

Two models of how we might live: one of money power and control, another of love joy and acceptance of all. Which parade will you choose to follow as you journey through Holy Week?

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus, our delightful donkey-riding King, in whose parade come the waifs and strays—may it be your way that we follow, your procession of love we join, that we might be led ever forward to your Kingdom of justice and inclusion for all your followers. Amen.

## MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2021

The Rev. Susan Washburn '12

## SCRIPTURE

### Jeremiah 11:18-20; 12:1-17

18 It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. 19 But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!” 20 But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. 12:1 You will be in the right, O LORD, when I lay charges against you; but let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? 2 You plant them, and they take root; they grow and bring forth fruit; you are near in their mouths yet far from their hearts. 3 But you, O LORD, know me; You see me and test me—my heart is with you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. 4 How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, “He is blind to our ways.” 5 If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan? 6 For even your kinsfolk and your own family, even they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you; do not believe them, though they speak friendly words to you. 7 I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies. 8 My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has lifted up her voice against me—therefore I hate her. 9 Is the hyena greedy for my heritage at my command? Are the birds of prey all around her? Go, assemble all the wild animals; bring them to devour her. 10 Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. 11 They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no one lays it to heart. 12 Upon all the bare heights in the desert spoilers have come; for the sword of the LORD devours from one end of the land to the other; no one shall be safe. 13 They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns, they have tired themselves out but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the LORD. 14 Thus says the LORD concerning all my evil neighbors who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit: I am about to pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. 15 And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring

them again to their heritage and to their land, every one of them. 16 And then, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, "As the LORD lives," as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people. 17 But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says the LORD.

## DEVOTIONAL

"God, *do something!*" Many of us have experienced the frustration of watching the bad guys win or the wicked thrive. Like Jeremiah we have gone to friends or co-workers in exasperation and asked, "How can she get away with it?" When things feel out of control, we call upon God to right the wrongs we experience in the world. Like Jeremiah we call upon God saying, "Let me see your retribution upon them!"

During this Holy Week, Jeremiah reminds us that our world does not always look like a fair place. As *The Message* puts it in Jeremiah 12:1ff., bad people have it good and con artists make it big. Certainly, as the story of Jesus unfolds this week, it would seem that the worldly and powerful forces against him will win.

We don't know the disciples' prayers as they watched their leader be arrested, beaten, and crucified, but I'd imagine their cries sounded like Jeremiah's: God, *do something!* Make this right! We, too, want to know we have a God we can call on in our despair, a God to fight the unfairness of a cancer diagnosis, restore a lost job, overhaul the systems that deny justice, or miraculously heal a loved one.

Though we may be drenching our pillow with tears, we are promised joy in the morning. Jeremiah's message doesn't end with despair and defeat but the promise of God's compassion and restoration. The events of Holy Week don't end when the stone is rolled in front of the tomb—but with the stone's being rolled away in the light of a new dawn.

## PRAYER

Lord, we come to you remembering that despair and dysfunction do not have the final word. Give us hearts to trust that you are working for the reconciliation of the world even when we cannot see it. May your power and compassion reign. Amen.

## TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 2021

*The Rev. Ben Phipps '15*

## SCRIPTURE

### Philippians 3:15-21

15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. 17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

## DEVOTIONAL

We live in a culture in which most of us like to do things our own way. From ordering at our favorite restaurant to selecting an outfit for the day, many of us live by the motto "Have it your way!" We long to be our own person, to be known as unique, to be a free individual. That yearning to be unique may make it frustrating to hear what the Apostle writes to the Christians in Philippi: "join in imitating me."

Hold on. Why should we have to do things the way you do, Paul? Why can't I do things my own way and live my life the way I want to live it?

Well perhaps Paul knows a truth about human nature that our culture seems to have forgotten (or perhaps ignores), namely, that as human beings we are creatures made from dust and created in God's image. Lent is a time of year when we remember that we are creatures while also seeking to be more like our Creator. Or to put it another way, Lent is a time when we seek to imitate Jesus. We participate in his sufferings so that we may participate in his glory.

So why imitate Paul? Simply because Paul imitates Jesus. We all need someone to look toward while imitating Jesus. For the Philippians it was Paul. Who is it for you? Whom are you imitating? Does your life represent someone who is imitating Jesus? If not, how can you adjust your life so that you reflect the glory of Christ?

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus, show me the areas in my life where I can better imitate you. I confess that I too often follow the selfish



desires of my heart from longing to be my own person rather than following you. Strengthen me and equip me to love and serve you in every aspect of my life. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31, 2021

*The Rev. Alice Phillips '94*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Jeremiah 17:5-10, 14-18

5 Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. 6 They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. 7 Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. 8 They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. 9 The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? 10 I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings. . . . 14 Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise. 15 See how they say to me, “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!” 16 But I have not run away from being a shepherd in your service, nor have I desired the fatal day. You know what came from my lips; it was before your face. 17 Do not become a terror to me; you are my refuge on the day of disaster; 18 Let my persecutors be shamed, but do not let me be shamed; let them be dismayed, but do not let me be dismayed; bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction!

### DEVOTIONAL

I love plants and flowers; however, I have a problem! In the busyness of life, I can walk right past them and forget something . . . they need to be watered.

What is true for my flowers and plants is true for my spiritual life as well. This passage from Jeremiah gives us a wonderful image of a tree planted by a stream whose root system reaches deep to be nourished by the water (vv. 7-8). These verses tell us that, when we trust in the Lord, this is the image for us. When we trust in the Lord, we are nourished and strengthened, and we can bear fruit. When the tough times come in life, we can stand strong.

We do not need to be like my dried up flowers and plants when I forget to water them. Jesus tells us, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38).

Are you spiritually parched right now? Why not come to the One who can nourish your wilted spirit. Soak in God’s Word, spend time in prayer and meditation, and take time to praise the Lord!

### PRAYER

Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the way in which you nourish our spiritual lives. You invite us to come and drink. Oh Lord, we have to admit that there are times in our busyness that we don’t spend ample time with you; and we know the result: a wilted spirit. We are grateful, Lord, that as we come to Jesus and drink, you lift us up and strengthen us! Help us to drink abundantly so that, when the difficult times in life come, we can stand strong and continue to bear fruit.

## THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

*The Rev. Leland Platt '02*

### SCRIPTURE

#### John 17:1-26

1 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5 So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. 6 “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the

world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

## DEVOTIONAL

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who *will* believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (vv. 20-21). Jesus' prayer in John 17 expresses Jesus' care, love, and compassion not only for his current disciples but also for all who will believe in him.

Other than Jesus, few creatures can express compassion as well as dogs can. And dogs have played an important role in my ministry. Because dogs express compassion so well, I have used several of them as therapy dogs in homes, nursing homes, and hospitals to visit members of my congregation. Case in point: Russ and Shirley had been married for more than 40 years and were incredibly close. Shirley was hospitalized with an unknown medical condition. Russ was terribly worried. The next morning he showed up at my front door in tears. "I don't know what I will do without her," he sobbed. I invited him in. He sat sobbing away in a desk chair as I fixed him some coffee. Purves, my Golden Retriever, immediately came to Russ, placed his paws on the chair, stood on his hind legs, then placed a paw on each of Russ's shoulders and, with deep compassion, looked Russ in the eye. Russ stopped crying as he looked into Purves's eyes, laughed, and said, "I needed that." No pastoral words of mine were needed.

While watching a five-year-old boy play with a large yellow Labrador Retriever, Luther Seminary professor Andrew Root observed: "This boy was experiencing the [message] we long for most as humans . . . *You are loved. You are mine. You are beautifully and wonderfully made*" (*The Grace of Dogs*

[2017], p. 76). I know that's what Russ experienced as Purves looked into his eyes.

## PRAYER

God of all grace, love, and compassion, we thank you for your enduring presence among us as you remind us so often, and in unexpected ways, that we are loved and cared for. You make it easy to say with the psalmist, "Light, space, zest—that's God! So, with God on my side I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing" (Ps. 27:1, *The Message*). Amen.

## FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Parker '10*

## SCRIPTURE

### John 19:38-42

38 After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

## DEVOTIONAL

My husband was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma when he was 29 years old. We had two beautiful daughters who were 5 and 3 and we'd just found out we were expecting our third child when the surgeon delivered the news. I'm sure the shock was evident on both our faces. Who expects to receive a diagnosis of cancer in their twenties? I'm embarrassed to admit that the first thought that came into my mind was a selfish one, "How would I take care of three kids if he died?" I threw myself into caring for my daughters, afraid to get too close to my husband, afraid of what the chemo might do to our unborn child, afraid of being a single parent, afraid of losing him. Fear makes us do crazy things, doesn't it?

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were afraid too. They were afraid of losing their positions of power, they were afraid of what people would say, they were afraid of what happens to people who follow Jesus. Fear makes us do crazy things, doesn't it?

But they show up—in spite of their fear. They show up and they care for Jesus' body and prepare him for burial with an abundance of spices—75 pounds worth—enough to bury 75 bodies! And we are the witnesses of the extravagant love that always seems to accompany Jesus. Abundance that fear cannot overcome. Abundance that even death cannot diminish! Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea's actions remind us that as beloved children of God, we are loved abundantly, in spite of our fear— even because of our fear.

My husband survived eight months of chemo, took a break from his treatment to be by my side when our third daughter was born, and finished with two more months of radiation treatments. He is still cancer free.

When I look back at that challenging, demanding, exhausting period of our lives, I realize we not only survived, we thrived—because of the abundance of God's love that we experienced through the love of our family, our friends, our children—even in the midst of our fears.

### PRAYER

Abundant God, thank you for all the ways we experience your extravagant love. Help us to remember, in spite of our fears, or because of them, you love us with an everlasting love. And *all* God's beloved children said, AMEN!

## SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 2021

*The Rev. Greg Steible '14*

### SCRIPTURE

#### Job 19:21-27a

21 Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! 22 Why do you, like God, pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh? 23 "O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! 24 O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever! 25 For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; 26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, 27 whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

### DEVOTIONAL

Silence. Ear-shattering silence. Guttural and fierce silence. Silence blasting forth from the deep.

Yesterday we witnessed Christ on the cross cry out one last time. And today, what do we have? The void encroaching wordlessly on our hearts. Tomorrow will come, but we aren't there yet. Today we sit in the deafening silence.

When Job is confronted with this silence, he stands firm. In the heartbreaking reality in which he finds himself, when all is lost and Job is being blamed by his friends, and when Job even begins to believe God is being unjust and malicious, he proclaims a greater truth. He boldly proclaims, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth." He knows the truth of God's grace and believes, deep in his innermost being, that there is hope.

As we sit in the silence of this Holy Saturday, we know the truth. We know what the morning brings. We know the oppressive silence will come to an end. But in the middle of it, it's easy to forget. And so we raise our voice in unison with Job and declare that we know our Redeemer lives and that at the last our Christ will stand upon the earth.

### PRAYER

O God, we are eager for tomorrow, and yet you call us here. Be with us in the darkness, as we know our Redeemer lives. Give us hope even on those darkest days, until that morning rises. Through Christ, our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

## SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2021

*The Rev. Dr. Richard Willhite '86*

### SCRIPTURE

#### John 20:19-23

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

### DEVOTIONAL

This passage from John's Gospel follows his telling of the crucifixion. Loss, agony, death, a desolation of hope—that's the immediate backstory. At this point, the disciples are what today we'd call trauma survivors. Still in shock from the casual violence of his public execution, they now fear for their own lives.

Their suffering must have been beyond description. Perhaps, that's why the Gospel writer didn't try to describe it. He names only their fear. And perhaps John's very silence on the disciples' inner states may be our doorway to the story.

Perhaps you've lived through a loss that left you devastated. The hard truth is that many people do. Wordless questions arise. "How can I go on? How could all this have happened?" In the wake of the unspeakably awful, a strange guilt often arises to compound the misery. "Could I have done more? Was I somehow to blame?" Can you identify?

John bears witness to a reality of this human life. Be it trauma or a chronic, dull ache, suffering is part of our common ground. Reader take note: it's precisely into an assembly of agonized trauma survivors that the risen Christ appears.

He appears first with a greeting that's also a benediction, repeated twice for good measure: "Peace be with you." Beyond any judgment or blame, the words convey the same grace as the Father's greeting to the returned Prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). The timing is remarkable. It comes forthrightly and clearly to suffering hearts. Remarkable too, that the Risen Christ confers a directive, an assignment to people at the very nadir of hopelessness: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he says. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus told the disciples something very clear about this sending: As he was sent by the God he called Father, he now sends them "Not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved" (John 17:2-3). Marching orders for trauma survivors. Perhaps none other than they are so well suited to recognize the suffering of the world.

The disciples are charged with the care of the same lovely and sordid, sweet and deadly world through which Jesus moved. There is no evasion. Conferred with a God-like authority to forgive or retain sins, they are sent not for condemnation but compassion. They will move forward on paths they cannot yet imagine, not on the strength of their own merits but with the gifts of Holy Spirit. In the steadfast love of God, the undeniable traumas of life are not the end of this story but a mysterious *beginning*.

## PRAYER

To you, God of all moments, we lift up our hearts. May we hear your voice of blessing and empowerment in moments when our vision penetrates no farther than our suffering. May we find ways forward when our imaginations and hopes grow dim. May we find compassion when we are tempted by the false refuge of cynicism. Remind us again and again that, in You, life and love are eternal and that all the world's unfolding moments are held in Your hands.

*The Scripture quotations contained in the lectionary readings are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*

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