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Monday in Holy Week, China – Jesus poster

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Holy Saturday, Lenten Cross at Oak Hill Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO

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**Reflections along the Journey
with Jesus as our Guide**

Lent 2016



Welcome to the Lenten Journey

We share a path; a journey made up of the daily moment to moment acts, decisions, questions, insights, relationships, loves, losses, fears and joys of being the people of the earth. We are God-breathed and filled with the life that comes from, and forever connects us to, the One who creates, renews, and sustains all life.

As Christians, we find our way guided by Jesus, the Beloved of God. In the life, the values, and the death of Jesus the Christ, we see what it means for God to dwell fully in our humanness. The way Jesus lived in the world; the way he lived for the lives of others which resulted in his suffering and crucifixion – is the way of life that is saving for the world.

We are reminded in the Gospel of John that *“God so loved the world, that God gave God’s only Son, so that everyone who*

believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God gave Jesus to embody God in the world; to model for us the ways of God. Jesus lived God’s way so completely that the powers of the world rejected him, condemned, and crucified him. Yet the Way-of-God-Embodied could not be destroyed; could not be overcome. God-With-Us rises to life and comes again and again!

In Jesus, we come to know what it is to live God’s saving love. And if we “believe” it, we will live it! This is not a head game! To the extent that we do not live it, we do not believe it! *Ouch! That hurts!* It is always easier to say that we are “only human,” or we’re “not perfect.” That is, of course, true. Yet it does not excuse us from the living into the way of God. It only means that it requires our constant attention and mindfulness.

In the season of Lent, we take the opportunity to awaken ourselves to what God is doing in and through our lives for the world. The journey we share is to awaken ourselves to Jesus the Christ, so that we may discover what it looks like for a person to reflect God’s light in the world.

This book of daily reflections has been written by people from four congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the St. Louis area: Affton Christian Church, Affton, MO, Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, MO, First Christian Church, Kennett, MO, and Crossroads Christian Church, Caseyville, IL. We are different in age, race, sexual orientation, ability, and life experience. We are rural, small town, suburban, and urban. What we share is our desire and commitment to live into the Way of God.

Come with us through the lengthening of days, on the journey of Lent. It is the journey of God’s love made flesh in the world, our response, and God’s redeeming.

Jacquelyn Foster, Pastor
Compton Heights Christian Church (DOC)

Easter Day

Sunday, March 27, 2016

Please read Luke 24:1-12

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (NRSV)

As I write this in the bleak mid-winter—still several weeks shy of Ash Wednesday and Lent—I am freshly grieving the death of my beloved mother-in-law. Only days ago I saw her for the last time as the funeral directors closed the casket lid, sealing her body away in its dark, final resting place.

The funeral procession went out to the beautiful, snow-covered country cemetery. She is now buried there, next to her husband, just a few miles from the home they shared for more than sixty-seven years. In the coming years, I will love to visit that cemetery. It will be a touchstone of memories, a sacred place.

But that’s not where she is now. I believe her soul is reunited with God. And I know that she is alive in the hearts and memories and the very being of those she loved. A glance from my wife, a laugh from my daughter, a visceral feeling of love in my chest as I remember her and her embrace of me as I came into her family. She’s somewhere with God, and she’s here, in all of us. I don’t need to go to the cemetery or wait until I die to see her. She’s all around me. She’s within me.

The miracle that is Easter didn’t happen just once, long, long ago. It happens all the time. Even here. Even now. Hallelujah!

God, may we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the heart to feel, and the mindfulness to notice the Easter miracles happening all around us.

Hallelujah!

Roger Bertschausen
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO



Holy Saturday
March 26, 2016

Please read Matthew 27:57-66

⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. (NRSV)

This Saturday has always been a puzzle to me as what to do with it. The solemn reflections of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are gone but we haven't yet arrived to the celebration of Easter Sunday. Usually this day is filled with normal activities like a trip to the gym, laundry, grocery shopping, or preparing meals. No matter what activities I do this day, this Saturday never feels quite normal to me.

Maybe the reason today doesn't feel *normal* is because it marks the day that Jesus was surrounded by the darkness of the tomb. No one knew for sure what would happen next. Perhaps, like the Marys, we are called to show up and sit in places of darkness, while we remember God's promise of resurrection.

We are fortunate in that we know the end of the story. Easter is coming. Time and time again, God has proved faithful.

Everlasting God, help us to show up in times of darkness with the faith of Your promise that Easter is coming!

Tammy Tobin Woodard
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016

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

Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive. (CEB)

Today's reading from the book of Joel urges God's chosen people to return to God since the Hebrew people had a bad habit of turning from God. It seems like every other chapter in the Old Testament has the Hebrew people ignoring God's word, being punished, and finally repenting. This plays out over and over and over again. It seems like the Hebrews just couldn't figure it out! So Joel speaks out to remind them, yet again, that all they have to do to prosper is return to God, for God is far more faithful than God's children could ever be. Of course, Joel was speaking thousands of years ago. Surely by now God's children have figured out that it's far easier to obey God than to suffer and repent. Right? Wrong. But fortunately for us God's mercy, compassion, patience, and love are never-ending.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the church's season of Lent. This is a time for us to evaluate what separates us from God. Like God's children from all ages past and present, there are many distractions that tend to keep us from fully experiencing God's love. It might be a busy school or work schedule, social obligations, or the desire to keep up with the Jones'. Whatever it may be, we all have something that keeps us from fully living in God's presence.

This year, instead of giving something up for Lent, which is tradition, maybe we should consider adding something meaningful to our lives, committing to prayer or meditation to strengthen our relationship with God. Any practice that helps us to turn our hearts and minds back to the One who is merciful, compassionate, patient, and faithful, for God is waiting for us, ready to listen to our hearts.

Loving God, as we enter this season of Lent help us to turn our hearts and minds to You. Welcome us back with Your loving arms that we may fully feel Your presence. Amen.

Laura Haney
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO



Thursday, February 11, 2016

Please read Isaiah 58:1-12

Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? (NRSV)

There are days when I would be happy to hide away in a retreat center under the guise of “renewing my soul.” When what I’m really doing is running away from my worries, my struggles, my quarrels and my fights. Those of us who profess God to be one who is in our midst, the restorer of life often prefer to allow God to do the work for us. We prefer to use the disguise of religion to hide our discomfort, our fear, our dread of entering into a place that we don’t know.

God’s people, to whom Isaiah spoke, knew something of this as well. They sought the glory of the faith without the work of the faithful. They hoped fasting for fasting’s sake would be enough to find favor with God. And then they wondered why they did not see. And then they wondered why their God was not noticing their righteousness.

This beautiful, driving text from the prophet Isaiah calls each one of us to step out of what we know to be the patterns of faith and step into the world we would rather ignore. The powerful indictment reminds us on this first day of Lent that we are called to drastically change our lives and disturb our religious piety. This pointed directive calls out of the pews and into the streets. This is about action, not deep contemplation.

There is always a place in faith to center, reconnect and refuel. However, this Lenten season calls us to set our own desire to seek intimacy with God aside. This Lenten season calls us into action. How are we testifying to the presence of God in the most uncomfortable places in our world? In our country? In our cities? In our churches? In our homes? Are we fasting for fasting’s sake?

Or, are we seeking to God in the hungry, the homeless, and the naked? Are we hiding from our own stresses or are we providing shelter for the refugee and a respite for tired? Are we listening to God’s indictment of the people of Israel and recognizing our own need to change? We must ask ourselves and probably one another: “Will you call this a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord?”

God of Lent, may our ears be open to hear your word. May our hands be open to serve. May our eyes be open see the need. May our hearts be prepared for your life-changing, life-presence. Amen.

Charlsi Lewis Lee
Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, MO

Good Friday, March 25, 2016

Please read John 18:1-11

Jesus replied, “I am he.” (NRSV)

One would expect the posse which came to arrest Jesus to act like they were in control of the situation. But it was Jesus who was in control. As they approached Jesus, he knew all that was to happen to him and he stepped forward and asked, “...Whom are you looking for?” They answered, speaking Jesus’ name. Then Jesus says, “I am he.” And the posse stepped back (perhaps in shock because of his straight forward answer) and fell to the ground. It would almost be funny except for the tension which every one but Jesus must have been feeling, a tension acted out by Simon Peter as he pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave.

How can Jesus be so calm in these circumstances? Jesus is in control because he knows where it will end.

I am reminded of the many times calm confronts fear in the scriptures. In John 6, Jesus calms his frightened disciples as he walks across the sea to their boat. In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel calms Mary as she ponders what Gabriel meant by saying that the Lord is with her.

One does not have to look far in any of the scriptures to find Jesus acting and speaking calmly.

But do we find a similar calm in our meditations and at the core of our faith? In a testy situation, our response is often to speak or act out in anger, thereby losing control. Or we keep quiet, yet angry words echo in our minds; thereby we lose control. And when we lose control we lose focus on the presence of God.

God with us ever, we shall not be ruled by fear. Amen

Norm Linville
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO



Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Please read John 13:1-17, 31b-35

If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. (CEB)

In our fashion conscious world, with shoes overflowing in our closets, the idea of washing someone's feet seems so...well...odd. No longer do we walk dusty roads in sandal-clad feet, so we seldom think of washing feet as a sign of hospitality as they did in Jesus' day. Imagine offering a bowl of water to your next house guest and asking her to remove her shoes!

Before we dismiss this text as unconnected to our modern lives, Jesus reminds us that "servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them." Servants equal to masters? What a scandalous thing to suggest, for we still live in a world that likes hierarchy—knowing who's in charge or has the most power. Jesus set a new standard by offering his disciples a new commandment, a new *mandate* (from the same Latin word from which we get the word *Maundy*), that turns the world's hierarchy upside-down. In God's realm, we are all equal. To serve one another reminds us of our oneness in God's family, where even washing the dust from another's feet becomes an act of worship and respect.

During the Lenten season, try something new. Although you may not want to attempt the washing of your guest's feet, serve another with hospitality and kindness by washing the dishes, cleaning up a mess, or just being nice to someone who drives you nuts!



Thank you, God, for sending Jesus into the world to model servanthood. Inspire us to offer kindness rather than asserting power, gentleness instead of harshness. Amen.

Douglas Cripe
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Friday, February 12, 2016

Please read Philippians 3:12-21

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

It's in our nature to dwell on our past sins, failures or tragedies; while other times we hang on to our laurels of past successes. The Apostle Paul by this time in his ministry had plenty of his past to dwell upon: whether it was witnessing the stoning of Stephen or the persecution and pursuit of the early believers, he must have relived the regret of these events over and over again in his mind.

All of that changed once Paul encountered the living Christ, and realizing the past is dead through the cross of Christ, he pressed forward to achieve the intimacy of Christ's presence and eternal life with Him. Although Paul has been saved, there is still the straining toward the goal of full completion and perfection in Christ, which he realizes may not be attained in his lifetime. Paul uses the analogy of running a race, always looking ahead and never behind, straining and stretching toward the finish line as you claim the prize at the end.

Lent gives us the opportunity to reflect and contemplate our journey with Christ. It helps us to prioritize what is good for us and to leave behind those things that don't help us on our journey. You can begin here and now and leave your past where it belongs. Strain forward to accept the charge Christ has intended for you; refine yourself by following his example and by doing likewise to others. The prize awaits you at the finish line.

O Lord, help us to be more like you every day. Keep us focused on what lies ahead instead of dwelling on the past. Guide us in our journey to strain forward toward completion instead of standing on the sidelines. Use us for your Holy mission. Amen.

Pat McAllister
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Saturday, February 13, 2016

Please read Philippians 4:1-9

Do not worry about anything, but...let your requests be made known to God. (NRSV)

Walking the path that Jesus trod on his trek to the Good Friday cross is a vital part of this Lenten period. Other scriptures reveal the trauma he felt as he approached his arrest and crucifixion. Especially powerful is the description of his prayerful words and actions in the Garden before his arrest. He prayed passionately that this burden be lifted from him. During Lent, we too need to feel that trauma; we need to experience the strength and solace prayer can bring.

We each have our Lenten journeys when we fear a looming challenge with a potentially serious consequence. Standing in our path may be health issues, financial crises, family turmoil, or even natural disasters. As with Jesus, those around us may not understand, or they may simply be unable to provide what we need. Today's scripture gives us guidance and directs us to a source of strength. God is listening. God is always present. God cares.

Worry is a natural part of life. Paul's counsel to the Philippians doesn't deny that, but it addresses a means of dealing realistically with worry. Jesus was concerned about his future, but he turned the matter over to God. While his prayer was not answered as he spoke it, one thing becomes evident. Jesus found strength and resolve to continue his journey to Golgotha's cross. And his final words, "Father, forgive them," echo more strongly today. Turn to God. God knows our needs. Jesus often asked for God's strength and guidance. Why should we do otherwise?

God of all knowledge, soothe our anxieties. Calm our worries and plant within us "peace." Amen.

John Moyer
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Wednesday in Holy Week

March 23, 2016

Please read John 12:20-36

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth. Isaiah 65:17 (KJV)

How many times have we worried or let stress take over our hearts and minds?. We worry about the day to day. We worry about our families, our jobs, national and international news. Yet Jesus prepared the way. He shined the light and gave us the path to tread. He often spoke in parables which people of that time often did not understand. Who was the Son of Man and why was he going to leave? Didn't Bible prophecy speak of the new King who would restore righteousness? Jesus was the Messiah and would take care of them and all their troubles.

We, who live now, have the luxury of education. We can read, discuss, teach, and learn. We understand (hopefully) what Jesus meant when he spoke in parables. Still, with understanding we sometimes have trouble putting into practice what Jesus taught and is still teaching us today through others and the Holy Spirit.

In graduate school I took a course entitled **Theory to Practice**. This course was designed to teach us the research and best methods and bring them to fruition. We have the Holy Trinity to help us put it into practice. We reach out when we are troubled. We reach out when someone we know has problems. We should reach out to be beacons of light for those we don't know who are hurting. In that way we are disciples. There are many ways to minister to others. God has a plan for each of us. We may not understand where God is leading us, but, rest assured you are doing his will.

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not into thine own understanding. In all ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Amen. Psalm 3:5-6.

Robert Green
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Tuesday in Holy Week

March 22, 2016

Please read Isaiah 42:1-9

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. (NRSV)

Growing up in the birthplace of the KKK in Pulaski, TN, I learned about the sea of racism I was born into at an early age. I learned that people who did not share my whiteness were inferior in all aspects of life. Racial segregation was a fact of life. As I grew older and began to question things that were taught as “just the way things were”, I had to do a lot of unlearning. I became passionate about racial justice work.

I left Tennessee in the fall of 2013 to join my now wife in St. Louis. I was relieved to be moving “up north” away from the racial quagmire of the South. Upon arriving, I discovered an all too familiar terrain. Then August 9, 2014, happened and the world was changed. Over 4 and a half hours – and the ensuing days and weeks and months – we started examining some deep-seated racial inequalities. I became obsessed with the lack of justice for far too many people of color in our city and country. On too many days, cynicism consumed me.

Praise God we serve a God who renews hope on the darkest of days. When I find hopelessness overwhelming me, my faith is restored by passages such as this one in Isaiah. We are assured that God takes us by the hand and comforts us. He has chosen us to be a light for all people. I am comforted that justice work must be healing and focused on freedom rather than retaliatory and consumed with anger. We must be focused on solutions in giving a voice to the voiceless and restoring the weak and broken. May our love for justice expand our hearts so that God’s light shines through us.

This little light of mine – help me shine for you God. Amen.

Jennifer Phoenix
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

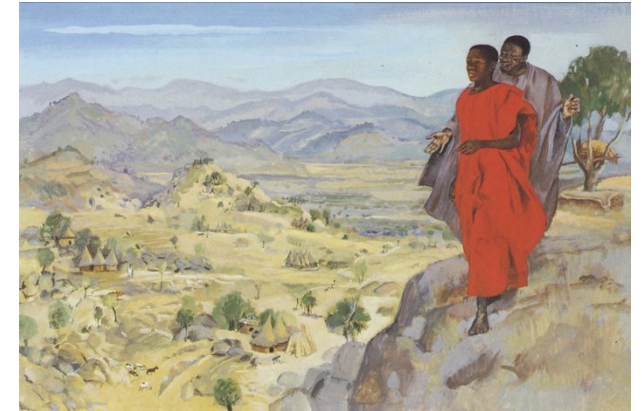
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, February 14, 2016

Please read Luke 4:1-13

It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’(NRSV)

Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus, coming right after his baptism in which he was named God’s Beloved, helps us recognize that Jesus was fully human even as he was fully divine. He was able to resist the tempter, employing the tenets of his faith and his relationship with God to hold fast.



Unlike Jesus, we don’t fare so well in resisting the temptations that cross our daily paths. Our temptations often involve possessions: a bigger house, a more expensive car, and the latest technological devices. Even the supermarkets serve as a temptation as we buy more food than we can eat, throwing much of it into garbage dumpsters. Meanwhile people around the world starve and people around the corner have become what is known as “food insecure”.

We are also tempted by power—power over family, co-workers, friends, the people we deal with in public, even people in church. We are tempted to diminish or destroy relationships with people. “those people”, not to be afforded the same respect as those who look, act, or think like we do.

Lent is a time to work on our temptations. We cannot completely avoid giving in to them—we are not Jesus! However, we can use this time of reflection, contemplation, and prayer to receive the power of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives in a way that enables us to deal more effectively with them. Empowered by Christ’s Spirit, we can relinquish power over people, become less enamored with “things” and share more with those in need, and build, mend, and establish compassionate and loving relationships with other people.

Loving God, when we are tempted to serve wealth, power, and exclusion, help us worship and serve you alone through the Spirit and example of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Millie Slack
Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, MO

Monday, February 15, 2016

Psalms 91: 1-2, 9-16

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

I was given the opportunity to write this message when my pastor asked for everyone to share their gifts. Although I think that I do not have many gifts, one gift that is extremely special to me is sharing the word of the Lord. I hope when reading this message it touches you and brings an abundance of blessing, and in return I pray that you will continue to spread God’s word with the world....

Before writing this message, my pastor asked if I wanted to select a verse from the Bible or if he should choose one for me. I decided to let the pastor choose a verse for me, and what a verse he selected. There is a saying that God acts in mysterious ways, and I strongly believe that the verse that the pastor had chosen is a response to one of my prayers...

In the first verse it states to “dwell in the shelter of the Most High and rest in the shadow of the Almighty.” This verse reminds me of a typical day in my life. I really do try to be a good Christian woman, and I yearn to dwell in the shelter of the Most High. Sometimes it feels like it’s difficult to find that shelter because I let life’s obstacles control my life. Sometimes we get lost and run across the wrong path when searching for that shelter; which is why the part when it says to “rest in the shadow of the Almighty” is very special. Although we might get lost in the darkness searching for that shelter, we must remind ourselves to never give up, keep trying, and have trust in God. His shadows will lead us. I think that God answers our prayers when we have tried our best and demonstrated that we belong in the comfort of the All-High and Mighty One.

Once we have demonstrated that we belong, we must also show gratitude and continue to believe in him. For instance, any problem that you may be going through requires you to work very hard. There are times when we want to give up. There are times when it’s difficult to find his shadow or even the shelter, but once we do find it, we feel so much relieved. What is the first phrase that comes from your mouth once you find it... Thank you God... I will say to the Lord

God of the Ages; God of the possible and the impossible, you are my refuge and my fortress, in whom I trust.

Andrea Scott
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Monday in Holy Week

March 21, 2016

Please read Philippians 2:5-11

“He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:8)

A famous pastor was well-known for his provocative statements, but one statement was shocking even for him. He described Jesus as “. . . with the commitment to make someone bleed. I can’t worship a Jesus I can beat up.” Aside from a disturbing understanding of masculinity, he also showed a poor reading of Scripture. We see Jesus time and time again choosing not to use power that belongs to him for coercive means. The disciples argue among them who is the greatest, and Jesus reminds them this is the way of the Gentiles. Jesus follows his way of love all the way to the cross, the ultimate act showing his way of love and life.

As the early church struggles with the best way to follow Jesus, Paul reminds them in one of the earliest hymns that their attitude should be the same as Jesus- not the way of the Gentiles, to use one’s power for coercion and violence. This is whom we claim as Lord, someone who humbles himself to death but is the one to whom “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (Phil. 2:10)

Perhaps we can’t worship the Prince of Peace unless our understanding of power and might is changed. If Jesus is Lord of our life, he has to be Lord of our fists, too.

Lord of power and love, help us always to remember your way of love and humility, following your example and not the world’s way of power and might. Amen.

Jody Clegg
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO



Palm Sunday
March 20, 2016

Please read Luke 19: 28-40

Jesus answered, “I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout.” (CEB)

I do not like parades. Well, that’s not entirely true. I like the “idea” of a parade. But the same thing always happens: 10 minutes into it and I’m already regretting going. It’s never what I imagine it could be.

With the cacophony of sirens, the revving of diesel motors, the blaring of car horns, and the percussiveness of bands; what begins as eager anticipation turns into sitting on the side lines watching people pass by wondering what I *could* be doing instead.

Dealing with the failure of meeting expectations is big business for psychotherapists. All of us suffer from the grief, frustration, and even anger of unrealized expectations and shattered dreams. With regard to today’s scripture, it would be easy to turn and examine the disciples’ expectations – or failed expectations. Year-after-year we talk about how the disciples were expecting Jesus to come in and establish the reign of God in Jerusalem, only to see their hopes nailed to a cross and die a horrific death.

But what about Jesus’ expectation? Here is a crowd that adores Jesus! They have his back! What could possibly go wrong?! However in just a few days, shouts of “Hosanna” will turn to cries of “Crucify him!” The disciples, along with the stones, would fall silent.

Lord of all Hope, help us not to focus this day on how our dreams were crushed, but on what your dreams are for us. Forgive us when we fall silent rather than speaking a word of your justice. Amen.

David Woodard
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO



Tuesday, February 16, 2016

Please read: Romans 10:8b – 13

“The word is near you; it is on your lips and in your heart” (NRSV)

Paul wants the Church at Rome to understand that God’s salvation is for both Jews and Gentiles. In the letter to the Romans, he speaks of Israelites who expressed a zeal for God, yet not an enlightened zeal. They were focused on their own ideas of righteousness; they were self-righteous, yet they did not have an understanding of God’s “righteousness” (NRSV) or “saving justice” (NJB).

The righteousness or saving justice that comes from faith is not concerned with a nit-picking about the Law. Rather, Paul tells them, the word of saving justice that comes of faith “is near you, on your lips and in your heart It is a matter of the heart that you are justified; your heart comes into alignment with God There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is the Lord of all. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is good news, right? “Yes, but . . . what if the saving justice of God revealed in Jesus makes me uncomfortable? What if it doesn’t look like my picture of righteousness? What if I back away when Jesus’ kind of saving justice comes too near -- and touches my heart? It convicts me and calls me to question who I am and what my life means in the world.

And then there is that issue of Paul’s words that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Again, this is good news, right? Yes, but . . . surely not everyone . . . surely only those who come around to believe the ‘right’ things about God, about Jesus, about the Church.

But what if God’s righteousness and generosity truly mean that God draws near to everyone? Jesus’ life of radical love, true compassion, abundant forgiveness and welcome of all is God’s righteousness embodied. What does it mean for *that* righteousness to be “near me, on my lips and in my heart?” Some days it seems so clear; some not. Ultimately, I can only trust that God’s saving justice is near – so near that it will wrap me in its love, put words of hope on my lips, and fill my heart to overflowing.

Thanks be to you, O God, for drawing so near with the abundance of your love that your saving justice becomes as honey on our lips and the very beat of our hearts. Amen.

Jacquelyn Foster
Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, MO

Wednesday February 17, 2016

Please read Psalm 102:15-22

He (the Lord) will regard the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer.
(NRSV)

Psalm 102 is one of the Psalms of Penitence or a Psalm of Lament, a type of Psalm that deal with a person's calling out to God for help and forgiveness. My Bible has the notation for this chapter: *A prayer of one afflicted when faint and pleading before the Lord*. Earlier in the Psalm the writer is pleading to God not to hide his face from him and answer him speedily. We don't know in what situation the author wrote this prayer. Perhaps he is afraid of his enemies (vs.8) or is ill or depressed. Whatever the case, he is talking to God in very specific terms about just how awful he feels and how worthless he feels. As a saying goes, he feels lower than a snake's belly.

Yet, all is not over! In verse 12, the writer shifts from talking about himself to praising God. He shifts from feeling as though doom will soon overcome him to praising the Lord. We don't know what broke through his personal desperation, but his mood changed to praising God for caring for Israel. The peoples now in exile can have hope, much as an individual can have hope. God just isn't in heaven above, aloof, but he "looked down from his holy height." (vs. 19a) He will hear the peoples in turmoil and will rescue them. Similar words are spoken by the prophet Isaiah (ch 61:1). In the writer's despair, he recognizes that God cares for everyone.

In our darkest moments, God hears us personally, and as collective believing faith communities. Our God is personal, one to whom we can relate, pour out our deepest feelings of anguish; we can also praise him and have hope in him. Whatever our situation in life, we can depend on God.

Lift us up, God, when we are down. Help us to know that you are present and that you care. Amen.

Sandy Dixon
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Saturday, March 19, 2016

Please read Ephesians 3:14-21

I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. (CEB)

As a child, Easter meant candy, colored eggs, and the Easter Bunny. My faith was limited to what I discovered in my Easter basket. I knew that the Easter Bunny was real—he left me real candy. Sadly that little bit of faith was shattered, along with my faith in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. I learned to have no faith at all—in anything. I knew something about Jesus: crucified and arose from a tomb, a story about a man who lived some place far away and did some miracles. His impact on me personally was seemingly insignificant.

Even as I crossed into adulthood, completed my education, and continued to go to church, my faith was only in the tangible. I defended my beliefs based on scientific evidence. I scrutinized and criticized the miracles Jesus performed and labeled such works as preposterous. I believed that Jesus was likely to have been a good man, a teacher with a group of followers. But I doubted that a human being could actually do what was claimed.

It was not until I encountered personal difficulties and eventually defeat, that I came to see differently. I came to God on my knees, humbled by life and my lack of faith. I came to personally know that our Creator is real. Intangible but real miracles began happening to me. I now fully believe that Jesus came to this earth and was sent to teach us how to live, how to love one another. Jesus came to earth as a mortal and died, suffered, and rose again to show his believers that there is truly life after this world.

Help me during Lent, God, to take extra time to remember the life and teachings of Jesus. Help me daily realign my heart, my mind, and my soul with what I have come to believe. Amen.

Terrye L. Hall
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO



Friday, March 18, 2016

Please read Luke 24:44-48

“The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” (NIV)

He said to them, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” (CEB)

In reviewing the two above translations, I noticed an interesting difference. In lieu of the word, “repentance,” the CEB uses “a change of heart and life.” This led to listening to a podcast interview of Louis Newman by Krista Tippet on the subject of repentance vs. forgiveness and how, as a Jew, he views this subject.

Mr. Newman authored a book entitled, “Repentance: Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah.” I had never heard the word, “Teshuvah.” So I looked up a definition for it and found, “turning back to God.” Mr. Newman said it also means turning away from errors and/or sins toward being a better person. He mentioned that to repent, a Jew normally preforms the ritual of Teshuvah, but did not go into depth on the ritual. I assume he was insinuating that anyone, Jew or not, can create their own ritual of Teshuvah. He also said that sin can be equated to illness rather than death and that repentance is healing that illness. When we attempt to run from or hide from our sins (big or small) we think we can be free of them, but only through repentance (acknowledging the sin(s)/error(s) can we become free of them.

A direct quote from the podcast is “The ultimate benefit of doing Teshuvah is that it offers us a way to overcome our past precisely because we have confronted and taken full responsibility for it. It enables us to escape the sense of guilt in some cases even despair with which many of us live. In its place, we come to live with self-acceptance and hope because we know that moral renewal is always possible.”

During Lent should we reflect on how we can use our private forms of Teshuvah or repentance to change our hearts and our lives?

Our Father God, continue to guide us toward continual repentance and lead us toward a change of heart and life. Amen.

Kay Marshall, Crossroads Christian Church, Caseyville, IL

Thursday, February 18, 2016

Please read Mark 1:14-28

When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him. (NKJV)

Mark’s description of the call of the disciples is surprisingly brief. Did they have doubts? Growing up under the shadow of Rome, they surely knew the violence with which any perceived challenge to Roman authority would be met. Mark doesn’t concern himself with their doubts. Nor does he see the need to repeat the story of the great catch that is told in the other gospels. What is important to Mark is that Jesus called and the disciples followed. James and John leave with such suddenness that their father Zebedee and the hired hands are left standing in the boat stunned into silence.

In Sunday school a few weeks ago, our leader asked the class members if they thought that they would have been Christians had they had been born in another part of the world. As most of us have grown up in the Mid-West or South Central U.S., we have been heavily influenced by Christianity, so it was always likely that if we were religious, we would be Christians. For most of us Jesus’ call was a gradual process that started the day we were born. In fact, being a Christian was never really in doubt, it simply is who we are and who we were raised to be. But what a gift it would be to hear the good news with such excitement and clarity that we would leave our family and friends in stunned silence, left standing with mouths agape. As we celebrate this Lenten period may we all take time to stop and consider the glory of Jesus’ call. *“Come, follow me, and I’ll show you how to fish for people.”*

Lord, help us cut through the clutter of daily life and remember your promise of the good news. Grant us the power to answer your call with a passion and excitement that leaves others standing in the boat in wonderment.

David Dalton
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Friday, February 19, 2016

Please read Isaiah 55: 6-11

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, by wine and milk, without money and without price.” NRSV

A man I had never seen before came in the sanctuary about an hour and a half before time for worship. He asked if we were “open.” I said yes, and invited him to join us for Church School and then for worship. Not seeming too keen on Church School, he said he would come back at 11:00 for worship. He then told me that he had visited a couple of weeks earlier when we “drank Jesus from little cups.” As he said those words he held up his hand as if holding a little communion cup. I had been away on the Sunday he first visited, yet I was sure he had been in this place. And he was back to drink more Jesus.

Isaiah 55 opens with God’s invitation: “... everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” And it is free. All you need is to be thirsty. Are you thirsty? I mean are you really thirsty for God’s righteousness, for God’s healing peace and presence?

I suppose that many who are not satisfied with what God offers, are not very thirsty. We often feel a tinge of thirst and before we even know what we are feeling, we ‘quench’ it with something that we can buy. William Jarema says that we try to fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts with things that are not God. This, of course, leaves us unsatisfied, under-nourished, yet without room for the God we really seek.

Lent is an invitation to thirst. We hear God saying: “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” Here ‘rich food’ does not refer to decadent culinary delights; it refers to the richest food and drink of all – the outpouring of God’s love.

When this man walked in the sanctuary, it was not I who extended the invitation. I heard, from his lips and his being, the invitation as I had never heard it before. “Come thirsty! Come drink the love of God and you will live! Come drink Jesus!”

Give us the courage and the patience, O God, to come to you with our hunger and our thirst, knowing that you will fill us with that which gives life! Amen.

Jacquelyn Foster
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Thursday, March 17, 2016

Please Read: Psalm 97: 1-2, 7-12

For you, Lord, are the Most High over all the earth (NIV)

On a warm, summer day, my daughter, granddaughter and I were returning home from vacation and were driving across Kansas. The sunny warm sky suddenly turned dark and treacherous with heavy rains and a severe storm rolling in. The wind, hail and rain were coming down so hard that we could not see the road in front of us and had to put over to the side of the road and wait out the storm. We sat in the vehicle with a blanket over us for what seemed like eternity. It was a terrifying experience. When the storm had passed, we noticed a break in the windshield from the hail; the break was off to the side in the shape of a smiley face. I remember my daughter stating that God was with us during this experience but he has a sense of humor by leaving the smiley face. Following the storm, the sky was clear and peaceful with the sun attempting to shine again.

These scriptures really seemed to speak to me when I read them. The psalmist talks about the earth being glad, the shores rejoice, clouds and darkness surround him, villages rejoice and lights shine because they know the Lord reigns over all. You can almost hear the earth laughing, the clouds moving and dancing, the villages singing with joy and rejoicing, and the lights shining brightly knowing the power of the Lord. The psalmist reflects on the fact that the Lord guards the lives of his faithful ones.

God is almighty; he is always there for us in good times, dark times, and difficult times. He also rejoices when we praise his name and have joy in our hearts.

So in this Lenten season, let us know that God is the Most High and reigns over all, just as the earth, clouds, villages, and lights knew this in the scriptures. Rejoice and praise his holy name.

Creator God, awaken us to the wonder of every living thing responding to you with the fullness of life. Open our hearts that we may respond with the joy of those living in your hope! Amen.

Marsha McGuire
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Please read 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. 2 Cor. 2:14 (NRSV)

George Orwell wrote a piece after Mahatma Gandhi died in which he criticized those calling Gandhi “a saint.” Orwell was skeptical about the concept of sainthood for anyone, but he did say this about Gandhi: “how clean a smell he managed to leave behind!”

That may seem like a strange compliment to give someone, but think about the metaphor. Smells capture our attention: a woman’s sweet perfume; the pungent smell of tobacco on someone’s clothes and hair; the lingering smell of garlic on someone’s breath, left over from their lunch. These smells are not in our heads, but capture our senses in a particular time and space. Moreover, they seem to be even stronger on our senses when the person leaves the room.

I think this is what Paul means in his strange metaphor to the church in Corinth: If any church probably did not meet the popular definition of “saint”, it’s the church in Corinth! Maybe “stench” would be more appropriate. Yet, Paul says even in this church, struggling its baby steps in the Christian life, is a place that gives off the aroma of Christ in its faith and work. To God and to our world, what aroma are we leaving behind?

God of our senses, you have called us to be the body of Christ and spread knowledge of him through our work. Help us to spread the fragrance of him in all of our work. Amen.

-Jody Clegg
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Saturday, February 20, 2016

Please read Psalm 46

God is in the midst of the city...the Lord of Hosts is with us (NRSV)

The psalmist writes of God’s presence in the midst of times of trouble: the earth is changing, almost violently, as the mountains shake and tremble, as waters rise and roar. Yet, the psalmist assures us that even as the tumult threatens all those who reside in the city, God is “a very present help in trouble.”

As a hospital chaplain, I met a young man who had suffered a devastating car accident. Though he survived the crash, his life was irrevocably changed. Not only would he never be able to go back to his work, it was likely that he would not be able to live on his own and lead an independent life. The grounding of his life was shaking and trembling, the waters of stress and hopelessness were rising and roaring around him. He asked why God had abandoned him. If God had promised to be present through times of trouble, to be a refuge for him, why didn’t he feel God’s presence?

God was present. God was present in the nurses and aides who were caring for him each day, bringing in special breakfasts from his favorite fast food restaurant. God was present in the therapists who were helping him learn how to use his body anew. God was present in the social workers, combing through community resources for ways he could maintain the most of his independence. God was present through the doctors who were working to manage his pain. God was present in pastors who visited from his church who supported him through questions of meaning and identity. God was present in his family and friends who loved him through every moment of grief and anger.

Just as God was present to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, so is God present with us in the love of those around us. God has always worked through willing servants, from prophets and psalmists, to kings and disciples. God’s love and healing does not come solely through divine and cosmic intervention; God’s refuge and strength also come through small acts of kindness and compassion and through those who embody God’s hope and compassion in the midst of our times of turmoil and strife. A breakfast sandwich can be the presence of God when shared by someone with love in their heart.

God who is our refuge, help us to see your compassion and strength in those who support us through times of trouble and change; encourage us also to be refuge and strength to others in their times of need. Amen.

Rev. Cari Frus
Affton Christian Church,
Affton, MO

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
Sunday, February 21, 2016
Luke 13:31-35

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

I was a stubborn child. Oh, who am I kidding, I'm a stubborn adult. I imagine that I'm not alone in this predicament. Sometimes it is hardest to hear that which we need to hear the most. Sometimes we would rather stand with our hands over our ears singing "Lalalalalalalalala!!!" But...we have to grow and address the very things in life we try to avoid.

Jesus spoke to the people of Jerusalem who spent a great deal of time with their hands over their ears. He laments over their penchant for killing prophets and stoning "those who are sent" (v. 34). They haven't been listening. Yet, he yearns to embrace them nonetheless.

During Lent, we focus on what we have done that separates us from each other and, therefore, God. It is not to make a list of our stubborn actions. Lent calls us into something deeper. Lent calls us into the midst of the very stuff we have tried to avoid. Lent calls us to unplug our ears, shut our mouths, and accept grace humbly.

Stubborn and humble don't typically get to be used in the same sentence. But, there it is. Jesus calls to humbly listen and be present for his coming. He does not beg. He does plead. He laments our stubbornness and our eagerness to do it our way. He does so with the compassion of a mother hen gathering her brood. He does so with the love of a mother calling her kids in from the back yard. He does so knowing that he is journeying toward his death. He does so knowing that he walks toward his resurrection.

Perhaps this Lent, we can practice less stubbornness when it comes to doing what is right. Maybe we can bring a little extra food to the local pantry. Maybe we can buy pair of socks for the homeless guy on the corner. Maybe we can step up and step out when we witness racism and we can call it what it is: ignorance and hate.

Our stubbornness is usually an effort to keep things the way they are. I don't recall Jesus patting a lot of folks on the head and telling them, "Yup, you got that right." Most of the time Jesus is calling us out of ourselves and into the world in order to evoke change. Are we ready to listen?

Help us, O God, to set aside our stubbornness and serve your world. Remind us to embrace humility and serve as we await your coming. Amen

Charlsi Lewis Lee
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Tuesday, March 15, 2016
Please read Mark 9:30-41

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. (NIV)

Jesus was always teaching, but this was a special time for his disciples, a teachable moment. He explained what would soon be happening to him, which they didn't understand. When there were more serious things to discuss, they argued about who was the greatest. He told them if they are going to be great, they must give up their own greatness and serve others. And then he suggested that welcoming the little children invites God's presence.

Children are a blessing from God. They have a natural spontaneity, a lack of restraint, courage, surprising and sometimes painful honesty, and innocence, traits sometimes lost in adults. Their high level of energy can be daunting or annoying to some, but I believe that children reflect the pulse of the church. Their chatter means something is happening. The presence of children means growth and vitality.

We are called to teach and welcome the children. This includes adults who need teaching too. We are to have patience and teach with joy the love of God. I don't believe it is an accident when people visit our congregation. Our welcoming should continue as people return and join us in our journey of Christian growth. How sad if our attitude causes someone to miss finding God in our midst.

Lord, help us to have that welcoming attitude of Jesus, to forget our own interests while nurturing growth in others, for you have assured us you will be with us. Amen.

Linda Thompson
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Wednesday, March 14, 2016

Please Read Isaiah 43:16-21

He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared. (Revelation 21:4, GNB)

Occasionally, in organizations with which I am involved, someone will suggest a new project or a modification of the way we have done some activity in the past. The first reaction of the membership is usually, "We can't do that! We've never done it that way before!" All too often, we tend to cling to the old ways of doing things without even considering that there might be a better way. Also, we sometimes cling to past memories and past hurts in our personal lives that would be best forgotten and left behind.

Isaiah told the Israelites that they shouldn't cling to the past. He also told them to get ready for something new that was ahead of them—returning to their homeland. God was preparing to do an exciting new work in their lives and was going to always be with them. God offers new things in our lives when we allow Christ to become our Lord and Savior. God removes our sins of the past and opens new roads for us to follow in His service.

During this Lenten season, may we rid ourselves of past burdens and look forward as we open our hearts to new things that Christ has in store for us, knowing that God will be with us wherever this new journey takes us.

Lord, thank you for showing new paths that you want us to follow in your service. Thank you for the assurance that no matter where we find ourselves, you are there with us. Amen.

Carol Fisher
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Monday, February 22, 2016

Please read Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (NASB)



From the beginning of time, the Lord has wanted to be our light of the world. There is so much darkness that tries to blot out the beautiful light. Troubles come upon us when we least expect and we begin to solve whatever the problem ourselves, in our earthly incompetence. God is waiting to lead each one of us through it all.

He promised that He would not leave us or forsake us. Trust and obey is all He asks of us for Him to gather us under his shelter for eternity. When we think we can do it all ourselves, that is the

beginning of our failure. Until we bow our knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, we are missing the shining light and a closer walk with him.

God guide and direct us toward your loving light and grace. Amen.

Mona McAllister
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Tuesday, February 23, 2016

Please read John 15:1, 6-16

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (NRSV)

Jesus knew the time was drawing near when he would leave his disciples, his closest friends, and return to be with his Father. The scriptures in John show many dialogues between Jesus and the disciples. He was preparing them for the days and months ahead when they would draw on the love they felt from Jesus. The scripture is symbolic in describing this setting.

Jesus is talking to the disciples and refers to himself as the true vine and his father as the gardener. He tries to instill in the disciples the importance of following his teaching, continuing to love him, and keeping the commandments. The disciples were branches that would bear fruit if they followed Jesus' teaching. How confusing this must have been for the disciples. They had heard Jesus speak, observed him heal people, and perform miracles.

Jesus told his disciples, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." We as Christians are sometimes skeptical, often weak, and do not often follow Jesus' teachings. Though many may have been raised in the church, at times we depart from Christ's teachings. The days of Lent provide us a time to grow in our awareness of Christ's role in our lives. As we continue the season of Lent, let us remain in close communication with God—One who is always waiting for our prayer and will help us if we just ask. We as Christians become stronger in our faith when we love God and keep the commandments. We take comfort in knowing God will be with us forever.

Lord, creator of the vine and branches, open our hearts and minds to follow the footprints left by Jesus. Amen.

Anne Moyer
First Christian Church,
Kennett, MO

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, March 13 , 2016

Please read John 12:1-8

Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. (CEV)

Many years ago, I took a graduate course that involved reading from the Greek version of the Gospel of John. The professor focused on John 11—the story of the raising of Lazarus. We studied chapters 10 and 12 as well, to see the Lazarus story in context. It was the most in-depth Bible study I had experienced. I don't claim to be an expert about the story, but it has always since then spoken to me.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus, siblings all, loved one another deeply. They also loved Jesus deeply. Their home in Bethany was his "home away from home," and he and his disciples were always welcome. Then tragedy came. Lazarus fell ill. His sisters sent messengers to Jesus, but Jesus took his time getting there. Meanwhile, Lazarus died. Because the sisters loved Jesus, they could be honest with him. They expressed their disappointment, anger, and anguish. "*If you had been here...*" Yet even then, they believed in Jesus. Martha affirmed her faith. "I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son." Jesus proved worthy of that faith, raising Lazarus from the tomb.

In that context, we come to a family banquet, a time for the reunited family to express their love and thankfulness. Mary, overwhelmed with emotion, anointed Jesus' feet, let down her hair, and wiped his feet. Judas protested such unbecoming and wasteful behavior. Jesus, though, knew that his own death would be coming soon. Even then the leaders were plotting. So Jesus affirmed Mary's extreme act of devotion, an act that would foreshadow other women later who would come to his tomb to honor his body.

It was an act of extravagant love and sacrifice. So was Christ's own death on the cross.

Help teach us Mary's way of extravagant love. Amen.

Michael Dixon
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Saturday, March 12, 2016

Please read Mark 8:1-10

Jesus asked, How much bread do you have? (Mark 8:5)

In this story of the feeding of the four thousand, a large crowd of people, many of them seeking to be healed is following Jesus. The NRSV says that he called his disciples and said to them: *“I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way...”*

How did the disciples respond? To paraphrase, they said something like this: Lord, we are out in the desert. Where in the world would we find enough bread to satisfy their hunger? They basically threw up their hands at what seemed like a lost cause.

It’s a familiar situation for many Christians today. How often do we think, or even say: Lord, we know refugees are fleeing a dreadful situation, but how could we take them in? Lord, we see homeless people sleeping on our streets, but where could we shelter them? Lord, our food pantry has more clients than ever, but the shelves are almost bare. Lord, the church budget is barely enough to keep the doors open, how can we give more to mission?

Today, as then, Jesus answers our questions with a question of his own. *“How much bread do you have?”*

He took seven loaves, and blessed and broke them, and not only was there enough to feed the hungry crowd, there was more than enough.

Do we have a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a spare dollar, a blanket? Can we gather some cooking utensils and bedding for a resettled refugee family? Is there room in the church basement for a washer, dryer and shower for people living in their cars to use? When we focus on mission are we surprised when the church budget is enough?

Today, as then, Jesus asks us to feed the world’s hunger for compassion. It all starts with what we have on hand; it starts with that one loaf of bread that in Christ’s hands becomes more than enough.

God: open our eyes to see your call to compassion, and open our fists so that we can release the loaf of bread that we have been gripping tightly all along. Amen.

Judi Linville
Compton Heights Christian Church, St. Louis, MO

Wednesday, February 24, 2016

Please read Mark 4:21-25

And He was saying to them, “take care what you listen to.” (NASB)

There is a story by D. J. Pollay about a taxi driver who just narrowly missed being in an accident because of the carelessness of another driver. Instead of getting angry, the taxi driver smiled and waved. When questioned by his passenger, the taxi driver explained “The Law of the Garbage Truck.”

“He explained that many people are like garbage trucks. They run around full of garbage, full of frustration, full of anger and full of disappointment. As their garbage piles up, they need a place to dump it, and sometimes they’ll dump it on you. Don’t take it personally. Just smile, wave, wish them well and move on. Don’t take their garbage and spread it on other people at work, at home, or on the streets. The bottom line is that successful people do not let garbage trucks take over their day.”

Mark’s scripture echoes this idea by telling us that we are beacons of God’s light. We are not supposed to take God’s word and hide it away. God has shared a message with us so that we can take it out into the world and spread it for everyone to hear.

We are bombarded with messages from our family, co-workers, the news media, and social media. But like the garbage truck, many of these messages are garbage. God tells us that we should take care of what we listen to. We have a responsibility as Christians to share good messages and to let the garbage fall away.

Dear Lord, help us to spread your light and love through positive thoughts and deeds. Amen.

Janet Carter
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Thursday, Feb 25, 2016

Please read Mark 4:26-34

It is like a mustard seed...it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. (NRSV)

I have never seen a mustard seed. Even though I lived in rural Ohio for quite some time (and as a child, have had wild mustard pointed out to me), I have never seen a mustard seed. But I imagine, like the passage says, that a mustard seed is small. Tiny. Miniscule. Little enough it can fit on a fingertip. This is a seed that rivals the very opposite of the greatness, majesty, and grandeur of God. But this almost-throwaway seed is what Jesus uses as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. The mustard seed parable isn't meant to be beautiful or full of grandeur. A mustard tree, in fact, is called the 'greatest of all shrubs' in this parable. A shrub: one of those scraggly sorts of greenery objects that people keep in front of their house for ornamentation and trim it occasionally. But that's not what mustard does; it is not a plant for ornamentation. It grows up, towards the sky, and it grows large, stretching out branches so that when it is large enough, people can sit beneath it and cool down from the day.

I am struck in this passage by the last line: *so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade*. For some reason, I thought of birds making their nests underneath the tree (instead of in it) and imagined how large this tree would have to be for it. Can you imagine what the kingdom of God is like if even the smallest seed, the throwaway, has a place to be grand, beautiful, and necessary? God took the time to create the mustard seed, something of smallest significance, and allow it to birth a great tree for comfort, rest, and shade. If our faith is like a mustard seed, we too can birth something great for our Lenten journey and for our Lenten world.

Maker of the tiny, rejuvenate us by showing us the small victories and paths are the ones we should be taking. Allow us to find you in both the greatest moments and the smallest ripple. Amen.

Rebecca Mularski
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Friday, March 11, 2016

Please read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. (NRSV)

In today's day and age many of us find ourselves wanting to have it all. We want the job that has the best benefits and highest pay without having to work too many hours. We want the big house in the right zip code, the perfect significant other that gives us all of their time and affection, the newest car with all of the options one could ever desire, a wardrobe on par with the latest trends, and the best of whatever else life has to offer. After all, what is wrong that? Many have worked hard to achieve the "finer" things in life. Is it bad to want to have all of these things? Not necessarily, but it is important to take a step back often see if you are getting "drunk" on life while others go "hungry."

What the author of Corinthians is trying to portray is an image in which people come to a shared space where some overtly take, thereby leaving others without. So, too, can this be our interaction with people. Sometimes it is easy to become distracted with getting ahead and meeting our own needs that we forget the needs of others may not be getting met. These needs may not be as black and white as in the text where some are getting their fill of food and others are going hungry. Sometimes the needs of others may be emotional, and sharing a simple and genuine "how are you doing," or "how was your weekend," or even a smile, or holding of a door can fill their hunger.

It is important to remember that the Lord's Supper, God's grace, and Jesus' saving, is something that should be shared by all and not held up by the few, because there is always more than enough to go around.

Dear Lord, please help us to remember as we go about our days to wait for one another and make sure that everyone has the opportunity to partake. In Jesus name, Amen.

Sarah Woods
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Thursday, March 10, 2016

Please read Matthew 24:9-14

Tell us, when will these things happen? What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? (CEV)

For two thousand years, people have said “Jesus is coming soon.” People approach the Bible as if it were a secret code book, and try to decipher it, and to try and interpret the “signs of the times.” From time to time, we hear of preachers who think they have found the secret. They gather a following, sell all they have, and wait. And wait. And wait. Then they go back to try and reassemble their lives, or they go through their calculations again and revise their schedule.

Have they all been wrong? Yes, so far. They have been second-guessing Jesus. In a line a few verses after today’s passage, “No one knows when the day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels, and not the Son. Only the Father knows.” Predicting is presumptuous.

But does that mean that we should ignore passages like the one you just read? Certainly not. There have been several “ends of the world,” when civilization has fallen apart, and believers have been tested and martyred. There is persecution of Christians today. Our world is being torn apart by rampant ideologies, racism, and injustice. The God of justice will one day prevail. When will that be? We don’t know.

All we can do is live faithfully and lovingly in the world in which we live. If we work for justice, if we devote ourselves to loving God and neighbor, we will be ready. In this Lenten season, let us dedicate ourselves to be citizens in God’s reign, which is now, and which is to come.

Help us to be faithful to you, God, in troubled times and good times. Amen.

Michael Dixon
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Friday, February 26, 2016

Please read Mark 4:35-41

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (NRSV)

The idea of giving something up for Lent is a spiritual practice that did not resonate with me until recently. I had heard it described as a practice of self-control; as something to help me identify with Christ’s suffering; as an act of acknowledging the state of my sin. I understood the idea but there was still a disconnect for me between giving up chocolate or giving up swearing and spiritual growth. Then I heard the practice described this way - the purpose is to give up something that separates me from God.

I think of Jesus as described in today’s scripture reading – I imagine him exhausted after spending hours on a boat, just off shore in the hot sun, finally finding some rest only to be awakened by his disciples’ fear and anger – “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus had just spent the day teaching to the crowds and his disciples about the nature of the Kingdom of God yet as the storm blows in their fears rise and the disciples demand to know if Jesus cares.

It is not that the storm the disciples faced was imagined, but rather that the disciples’ fear caused them to react in a way that left no room for faith. Like the disciples, we may face real hazards in our community and in our world and yet when we react out of fear, we separate ourselves from God - choosing doubt that allows no room for faith, choosing security that allows no room for compassion, choosing comfort that allows no room for reconciliation.

Ever present God, open us that we may be strengthened by your love so that we may give up the fears the separate us from you. Amen

Kathy Mead
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Saturday, February 27, 2016

Please read Psalm 23

...for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me... (NRSV)

‘I cannot fix you’ are the last words you want to hear from a consulting surgeon. I listened with a heart sinking further and further as he continued with the rest of what amounted to a death sentence. “But, I insist you get a second opinion.” He wrote a name and number on a paper with a flourish and was gone. Just like that. The next thing I remember was sitting in the car with the words of my best friend who died a few months before ringing in my ear: “I know where I’m going and I am not afraid.” And I thought yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil (forgive me, I learned the King James Version).

I felt better already. I would call that second opinion person and see what he had to say before I got worried and tied myself into knots. I prayed for guidance and verse 4 kept coming back to me. When I came to the church, I was a lost sheep. Now I’m a sick sheep, thankfully no longer lost, but I needed the comfort and sustenance of a loving Shepard.

God’s love for me is like a warm quilt. I felt that love, as though he were in the same room. To make a long story short, Doctor Second Opinion said, “of course I can help you.” After radiation treatments and more prayer, there is no sign of the cancer. Thank you Father, thank you.

Awesome God, I thank you for your son, Jesus, and how his sacrifice made it possible for even me to walk in the light of His healing grace. Even though I don’t deserve it, I will always praise you with honor and glory.

Jan Evans
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

Please read Hebrews 10:32-39

You endured a hard struggle with sufferings...sometimes being partners with those so treated. (NRSV)

None of us like to struggle, for we prefer a pain-free and easy life. The reality, however, is that each of us will face more than one difficult day—possibly even this week! Think back to your childhood—how did you experience life? One of safety? Or chaos? Some children grow up in a safe environment, sheltered from the many problems of life. Others face hunger or abuse on a daily basis, never experiencing security and love. No matter what our experience in childhood, sooner or later we experience the struggles of life: health issues, betrayal of loved ones, financial crises, natural disasters...

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminded his readers that they had endured great suffering, suggesting that they had been partners with those who had been treated harshly. When we read this letter today, the words may sound like an odd thing to suggest, for why would we want to intentionally suffer with someone? Possibly in doing so, we are reminded that we are not alone; for since we all struggle there will always be a partner to walk through the turmoil with us.

As a foster parent, I have heard the struggles and hardships of children in the system, those bounced around from home to home. My wife and I decided to become partners to children seeking a place to call home, listening to their stories and offering them unconditional love. In doing so, we hope they experience a spark of hope, a reminder of God’s presence in their lives. May you find a way during this Lenten season to “become partners with those so treated” and offer them a glimmer of hope.

God, help us enter into the struggles of life with those around us, supporting them as they strive to cling to your promise of love and grace. Amen.

Douglas Cripe
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Tuesday, March 8, 2016

Please read Psalm 32

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

How new and fresh the air smells after a rain and thunder storm. Everything is washed and cleansed. We are washed clean and made new when we confess our sins and accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. God forgives us and makes us whole! Heaven and earth rejoice that the prodigal has come home.

We must also forgive those who sin against us and ask God to forgive their sins as well as ours. Imagine a child who plays outside all day and is covered with dust and filth. The child's parent bathes and washes the child and is glad that they are clean. The child rejoices in becoming clean. What better lesson did Jesus teach in forgiving others than at the Last Supper where he washed the feet of his disciples. He taught us to be servants of each other.

Jesus tells us that to be made "clean" is to confess our sins and accept him as our Christ. We've also been charged to make disciples by making our light shine to others that we glorify heaven.

God please help us to make our lights shine that we are a beacon unto you. Amen.

Jill Green
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, February 28, 2016

Please read Luke 13:1-9

But unless you change your hearts and lives (CEB)

My husband and I love children. Our biological children are grown and independent, and we have hosted two international exchange students. In the community in which we live there is a great need for good foster parents, so we attended all the necessary classes and became certified foster parents. Our goal had been to provide a safe and loving place for children until being reunited with their parents, but then God placed three girls in our home who didn't have a safe home to which to return.



Our three girls have had a difficult life, and sometimes they wonder why they have had to endure so much, a similar question some asked Jesus. Jesus asked the crowd whether those who suffered were worse sinners, which of course, he denied. To paraphrase his questions in regard to foster children: Are they less deserving than your own children? Are they less deserving than other children around them? Do you think they are guiltier than children of safe and loving homes with their biological parents? Of course not! Jesus invites us to love and nurture all those around us to feel a sense of belonging. We must open our arms and our hearts to welcome them, make them feel safe and loved, and provide an opportunity to share in a community of God's love.

We found our calling to be more than just foster parents, for we now hope our three girls will become a permanent part of our family through adoption. During this Lenten season, may you give God the ability to prepare your heart for the changes that God sees as appropriate.

God, please prepare my mind and heart for the work you desire in my life. Give me the strength and willingness to accept the changes you place before me. Amen

Staci Cripe
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Monday, February 29, 2016

Mark 5: 21-43

“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” RSV

In the passage from Mark we have read of the reception Jesus has received from members of this community. There are a number of themes from which we might choose to draw a message.

For instance, was the woman who touched the robe of Jesus waiting for Him to pass her way? There might have been advanced word that a man of magic or the Messiah was to pass through the town and she, having been suffering from the hemorrhage for so long, thought “perhaps He does these things, perhaps not, but what can I lose by trying to get close where He can help me.”

Perhaps we should look at the priest who was more dramatic in his approach. He fell down before Jesus to ask for his help with his child whom he was convinced was on her death bed. Was the priest an orthodox Jew? Orthodox Jews thought and said that Jesus and His message were hypocrisy, an apostasy, or, even worse.

In both cases these people were desperate. No matter their backgrounds or motives, for them it was time to act. And so Jesus knew by the diminishing of His power that His robe had been touched and pronounced the woman cured through her faith. The priest thought he had, through the ensuing delay, lost his daughter to death. Then Jesus called that daughter to rise up, upon which she arose and lived.

These were striking stories. They were captured and included in the materials written and later included in the Bible by someone who was paying attention to what was important. Wouldn't you think that if either person had said “Thank You” for these miracles that would have become part of the story? But those words are not there.

We too are blessed daily by gifts from God and from other humans. Is it important to say Thank You to Him and to others? We think so and encourage you to make it a practice to say “Thank You” whenever you receive anything from God or anyone else.

God, Creator of all, for all the opportunities we have to be a part of in your world, in nature, in people and deeds, we thank you. Amen.

Don and Joan Morrison
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Monday, March 7, 2016

Please read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. New International Version (NIV)

I heard these scripture verses cited quite often growing up in my Indiana home church bible study I still recall many of the verses, particularly: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

I don't recall the first verse as much, but I am drawn to it now. Because of God's sacrifice for us, we no longer need to see anyone from a worldly point of view, or according to the flesh, in the King James language. It's hard to remember to see everyone we encounter that way, but if we are in Christ, we can. Paul's letter tells us that once we let go of the old ways of being, we can embrace a new life and the new ministry of reconciliation for Christ!

As we enter a new springtime season, we will see signs in the earth, as well as in the world around us of rebirth, rejuvenation, renewal, resurrection and regrowth. May we learn to let go of the weight of our fears, guilt, shame, and of all of the sins that hold us back, and be reborn and grow as we boldly receive God's gift of grace and reconciliation.

It is reassuring to know God's unending love for us, and to feel the shared power that make ambassadors reconciled by You, through Christ, without sin! Thank you for resurrecting us from old ways to giving us a glorious, new life.

Madeline Haraway
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday March 6, 2016

Please read Luke 15: 1-3, 16-32

"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (NSV)

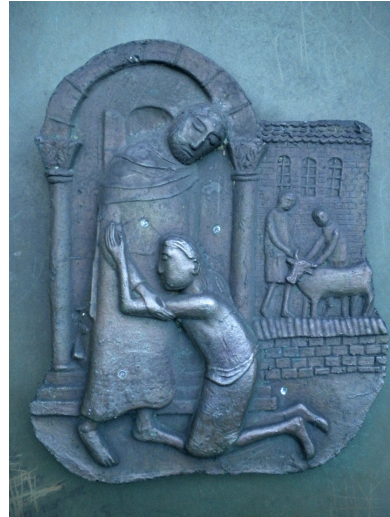
In this scripture Jesus is speaking to the tax collectors and sinners gathered together. But the Pharisees and the Teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" As Jesus proceeds to tell several parables he describes situations that may not result in what then would be normal behavior.

In the first parable of the Shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep, he describes how the shepherd after finding his lost sheep invites all his friends and neighbors "Rejoice with me: I have found my lost sheep". In the second parable he describes a woman who loses one of her 10 silver coins of her entire fortune and feverishly looks for it everywhere, when she finds it she also calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate. In the third parable of the father with two sons he celebrates the return of the "lost" son, which seems odd over the son who has been working by his side the whole time.

In each of these examples Jesus stresses how one of many is celebrated and I believe the underlying message is for each to look to him and believe in him and be celebrated. In my growing relationship with the Lord I have found that he truly provides all we need to be happy. But I also feel he is telling us to not just celebrate the little things nor just the big things in life. A repentant sinner is certainly something for all to celebrate.

Lord, help us to understand that we should hold family, friends and neighbors close, walk daily in your path, and take every opportunity to celebrate. Amen

Rick Tockstein
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO



Tuesday, March 1, 2016

Please read Psalm 139:1-13

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away...Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. (NRSV)

We take great measures to protect our privacy. No, not just in our world of digital communications – user names and passwords - but in our relationships with those we know well and those with whom we are just casually acquainted. We shy away from revealing too much of ourselves, too much of our true feelings for fear of being judged. We want to strike a balance, get along, and play well with others. We also have things we prefer to hide: fears, mistakes, bad choices, unforgiving attitudes, and grudges held long past the times disagreements occurred. These are not good qualities on our life's resume so we suppress them, trying to keep them hidden.

Psalm 139 tells us that nothing about us is hidden from God. He knows each and every thing about us. What a blessing this is! The writer says "such knowledge is too wonderful for me" meaning, "can you believe it?" God knows us completely, including our imperfections, yet he has claimed us, we are his, and we are loved. And (it gets better) we are never, ever separated from him. Isn't that our greatest hope, that we will always be surrounded by the love of God? The Psalmist writes "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Nowhere.

In this season of Lent, we are filled with awe and gratitude that God sent us Jesus Christ to show us how to love one another and to be our Savior so that we may one day live eternally in the Kingdom of God. His love for us is boundless.

Dear God, how comforting and liberating to know that we are never separated from you. Thank you for loving us completely. Amen.

Sarah Morrison
Affton Christian Church
Affton, MO

Wednesday, March 2, 2016

Please read Psalm 16:5-11

You teach me the way of life. In your presence is total celebration. (CEB)

We sat silently in our chairs, hands dirty from bait, gently gripping our fishing poles. The reflection of a line of trees across the lake, made a perfect mirror image in the calm waters. The light from the sun was dancing through the broken spaces between the leaves, as the cool breeze tickled the fine hair on my arms. The indecisive geese wandered between foraging for picnic scraps and gliding back into the lake, making a ripple around their entrance. I closed my eyes and smiled. In this moment, my wife and I were fully present with God.

Fast forward 24 hours, I am bouncing back and forth between nine open tabs on my computer screen, trying to plan programming at work, answering calls, texting my wife about supper, nursing my hurt feelings (did my boss *really* have to be so short with me today?), arranging mental health appointments for two of our children, fretting over my grandfather's failing health, and feeling quite overwhelmed and sorry for myself. Whew. That moment with God sure didn't last long. No wonder there are so many adult coloring books and mindfulness apps these days!

It is much easier to fully embrace the presence of God while sitting on the sidelines of calm waters, isn't it? Thankfully, God isn't as fickle as we are. In this Psalm, David is experiencing great turmoil, but he has fully recognized his oneness with God. This Lenten season, mindfully observe God within you during every moment, even the difficult ones. With this understanding, your whole body can rest in safety, no matter how tumultuous the waters become. Now that is something to celebrate!

Dear Lord, Awaken my senses to your never-ceasing presence within my life. Today, I celebrate the safety I feel in you. Amen.

Julie Phoenix
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Saturday, March 5, 2016

Please read Psalm 24

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? (NRSV)

Summer church camp as a teenager in Tennessee was for me a time of great questioning. It was a time and place where my mind was free to ponder the Big Questions of existence which would have kept me up late at night and sent me into a panic during my regular life. At church camp there was time to contemplate these questions and have these conversations in the light of day, which was far less panic-inducing than solitary insomnia. Church camp was also the event in my life in which I first entered into deep relationships with those who were truly confident in their own faith. Oh, I had known plenty of people who were self-righteous, but I had never witnessed this kind of confidence before – the peaceful self-assurance that comes from a faith in the goodness of God, and the ultimate goodness inherent in each of God's people.

Confidence does not come naturally to me, which may be why Psalm 24 was a challenge to connect to initially. It is such a confident proclamation from the first verse – “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” – to the final one: “Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.” Though there are questions throughout the psalm, each question has a definitive answer, and there is no wavering. Personally, I see questions everywhere, and few of them have answers, certainly none so straightforward as these.

It is helpful for me to remember, then, that there are some things of which I am sure. There are some questions, even some Big Questions that I feel I can answer with certainty, just like the psalmist. It is also helpful for me to remember that even those deeply confident, faithful people who so inspire me have questions themselves. What a relief that these two things – the need to question and the ability to be confident in our faith – can live side-by-side within us.

Reassuring and mysterious God, be with us in our questioning and in our confidence as we seek your face. Amen.

Sarah Richardson
Compton Heights Christian Church
St. Louis, MO

Friday, March 4, 2016

Please read Luke 9:2-6

Have reverence for the Lord, all his people; those who obey him have all they need.
(Psalm 34:9, GNB)

When it comes to travel, I am a planner and organizer. Whenever my wife and I make a trip, we carefully pack our bags with clothing, usually taking more than we need. I make sure I have maps and my GPS device and have studied the route. Stops and lodging along the way are planned. We often take a cooler and bag with snacks. Since we are both writers, a camera and laptop computer generally accompany us as well. That's a lot of baggage to load and organize. After making sure we have a credit card and cell phones, we are ready to begin our journey.

What a contrast with the way Jesus told his disciples to travel! Take no bread, no money, no extra clothes, only a staff and sandals. Simple attire for carrying a simple message: repent. How much spiritual "baggage" do we carry and thrust in the way of others in our attempt to be witnesses for Jesus? Is there baggage in our lives that prevents us from being the faithful witnesses and servants Christ wants? We should not allow the excess baggage such as prejudices, possessions, or opinions to obscure Christ's message: repent and commit your life to him, for God will provide all else that is needed.

During Lent as we prepare to celebrate the risen Christ, we have the opportunity to reexamine our lives and rid ourselves of excess baggage that slows us down on our journey to share the Good News.

Father, thank you for being our provider and sustainer throughout all of life. Help us to rid our lives of the baggage that prevents us from being in full relationship with you and from being your witness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

John C. Fisher
First Christian Church
Kennett, MO

Thursday, March 3, 2016

Please read Mark 6: 1-13

Jesus said, "And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." (NIV)

Jesus and his disciples had returned to Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, and on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue. Those listening were at first amazed, but then they began to question his words, casting aspersions on his authority, even his legitimacy. Their attention turned to animosity and "they took offense at him." Now it's Jesus turn to be amazed by the listener's "lack of faith". There was no "local boy makes good" here. In the latter passages of Mark's narrative, Jesus sends his disciples out to teach, but admonishes them that if no one listens to them that they "shake the dust off [their] feet" and leave.

A conflicting thought emerges here: when Jesus' listeners declined to receive his message he didn't leave but yet he commands his disciples when they are not being listened to, to do just that. Do I stand amazed, Jesus like, when I'm witnessing but not being listened to, or do I say nothing, turn and leave?

In this Lenten season, and all the seasons, we are challenged to be living witnesses to all we encounter, not just those close, family types and that our witnessing is always to be done in love. One of my favorite lines from the musical "Les Miz" reminds us that "to love another person is to look into the face of God."

God, we pray that in all our dealings with your children, we do in in love.

Ken Holmes
Crossroads Christian Church
Caseyville, IL

