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**Greendale Ecumenical Group  
2021 Lenten Devotional  
Vol. 1**



## Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

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### Not Like the Hypocrites

Scripture: Matthew 6: 1-6; Joel 2; Isaiah 58; Psalm 51

**A**nd so, we begin ...

Lent will surely bring us back one year, as COVID-19 and coronavirus were terms newly minted in our lexicons. These two words would dominate all news for the entire year. What started with gossip coming out of Wuhan, China, and flu-like symptoms experienced by a Washington state man after visiting this region of the world would, like a funnel cloud, whip into a global pandemic claiming 2.5 million lives and forever marking millions more who would recover. One does not portage through such terrain without being changed.

All the texts start in a menacing manner: Blow the trumpet! Shout out! Have mercy! Beware! Everything changed. Not one thing was left unscathed. For us in this country, the violent shaking sifted out truths about our identity that we have worked hard to suppress. In short, we have been hypocrites, not living up to the ideals of “We the people” and “equity for all.” Whether it be economics, access to healthcare, deep racial divides, or unequal treatment under the law, America experienced an exposure. And it hurt, seemingly unbelievable because it doesn’t fit with how we see ourselves or how we present to the world. Our self-image has taken a hit.

But it has been a good hit, a necessary one. (Can one say such a thing?) The pain, hurt, and anger that we feel means that the fight is on. Our heightened temperatures indicate that our body politic is fighting off dis-ease as truth is struggling its way to light. The truth must be told, repentance must be real, lament must be practiced, before healing and wholeness can be authenticated.

Let us all find our way into the light. Let us all start a Holy Lent.

— Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

## Thursday, February 18, 2021

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### Scripture:

Daniel 9:1-4

3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

4 I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: “Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Psalm 25:1-10

5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.

John 1: 3-10

4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it.

10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

**W**as Advent just two months ago? We were in a period of waiting, waiting for the Light. We honored the bending low of the Light coming in the Holy Child and the Celestial sign of the Light of Epiphany. Yet here we are in the season of Lent, contemplating how the long-awaited Light again might dispel the darkness of the soul, of circumstances, of uncertainty and of deadly illness and isolation.

Jesus tells us unequivocally that we will have trouble in this life, and it may seem very dark indeed. As a Good Shepherd He guards us, calls us, Lights our way. It is not an easy way, but living into all that He taught in Matthew 5, 6 and 7, we can humble ourselves like Daniel, pray and praise like David, and proclaim the Light like John.

In Christ's Love and Light.

— Pam Sutton, Grace Ministries, Bethel Campus

**Friday, February 19, 2020**

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Scripture: Daniel 9:18

We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.

**W**ith intensity, Daniel asks God to act and forgive as he prays. “O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay” (verse 19. “Let Your face shine upon,” “incline your ear,” “open your eyes,” “look at” are some of Daniel’s repeated calls to act.

Haven’t we all prayed to God with such intensity during troubled times in our lives? Sitting at the bedside of a friend or loved one, a parent searching for a missing teen involved with drugs or alcohol, a family displaced from their home due to an unexpected financial crisis. And, other prayers involving a cry out for humanity. A cure for cancer or the coronavirus and a speedy rollout of the vaccine; an insurrection at our nation’s Capitol resulting in deaths, injuries, and destruction; homes and lives battered by extreme storms and wildfires. We ask, “O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord listen and act and do not delay.”

The tone of these prayers is a sign of faith. We do not try to impress God with how good we are but rather confess how great He is.

“God’s smile is not for the healthy hiker who boasts that he made the journey alone. It is, instead, for the crippled leper who begs God for a back on which to ride.” (In the Eye of the Storm, Max Lucado)

— Jackie Walsh, Bethel/Grace Ministries

## Saturday, February 20, 2021

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### COME, Be Seated at the Table of Grace

Scripture: Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-13

**A**s you read and meditate on today's Scripture passages, imagine yourself reclining at the table with Jesus.

In Matthew 9:10-11, the Pharisees, proud of their knowledge of Scripture and the Law, failed to see their own unrighteousness, and called into question why Jesus was dining with sinners and tax collectors. As we look at Psalm 32, we see that no one is righteous, and that all have sinned. The physical, mental, and spiritual consequences of being silent in sin are clearly spelled out, and we are powerless to save ourselves. That is the work of God, through the saving grace of Jesus Christ, He who is without sin.

Our God is an inviting God, and forever extends a loving hand to us; COME TO ME, when you are thirsty, when you are hungry, and when you are weary. Let the little children COME TO ME. As we read further in today's Scripture passage in Matthew 9:12-13, Jesus says: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Thanks be to God, when we come to Him and repent of our sins, we are forgiven and we are washed clean. We are healed by His grace, through faith. And in the words of the Psalmist, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1-2)

Imagine yourself seated at the Table of Grace with Jesus. You have been called to the table, not because you are worthy, but because Jesus is merciful. Remember this blessing; He will uphold you with His steadfast love, and will instruct you in His way. God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good! Thanks be to God. Amen.

— Marie Sturdevant, *Grace Ministries - Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn*

**Sunday, February 21, 2021**

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## The Sign Between Me and All Flesh

Scripture: Genesis 9:8-17

**T**his text reminds us of the great expansion of God's faithfulness. It is not just humankind that holds God's interest, but all creation. This is a benchmark text that should be bookmarked as we make decisions concerning climate change, offshore drilling, protections of land and creatures.

For nine years, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse would bring to the senate floor a poster board picture of the Earth as seen from space. It came with a message: "It's time to wake up!" Every week that the senate was in session, Whitehouse would go to the podium with his poster board and speech urging the senate to take action before it is too late. Many times, he would do so in front of 95 percent unoccupied chairs.

May 16, 2013, he rose and proclaimed: "It is time — indeed, it is well past time — for Congress to wake up to the disastrous effects of global climate change."

"My trusty 'time to wake up' sign is getting a little battered and showing some wear and tear, but I am still determined to get us to act on climate before it is too late," he said on Nov. 29, 2016.

"I rise to call this chamber to wake up to the threat of climate change," he said on July 24, 2019.

According to *The New Yorker* magazine, last week, Whitehouse announced that this would be the last time he would raise his voice for the climate (this being his 279th recitation of his message).

His time has come to an end, and yet the devastation we face is great peril. Genesis 9 is the sentinel text calling us to our senses. "It's time — there is no time left!"

— *Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church*

**Monday, February 22, 2021**

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## Made Alive in Christ

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

**I**n the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars, vegetation, the birds of the air, and creatures of the sea and land. And in His crowning achievement, He created mankind in His image. The soul of man is a precious gift from God. We were created by God for God's glory. What does it mean to glorify God? To glorify God is not to add more glory, because He is already infinitely great and beautiful. To glorify God is to live our lives in a way that makes God look as great and beautiful as He really is. We fall short of the potential God has intended for us when we follow the ways of the world, giving in to the cravings of our sinful nature. When we sin, we turn our attention inward, separating ourselves from God. We become self-centered, seeking our own glory instead of glorifying God. We turn away from God, but God never turns away from us. He is not willing that anyone should perish.

We were dead in our transgressions, but God, who is rich in mercy, because He loves us, made us alive in Christ. We are not saved by our works, but we are saved by His grace, through faith. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10) This brings us back to our purpose, which is stated in Matthew 5:16, where Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." There is no greater joy than to show others how magnificent and beautiful our God is. Each of our good works is a revelation of God's great glory. Let us then live our lives in humble gratitude for this gift of God's grace, who made us alive in Christ that our good works may bring glory to our father in heaven. Amen.

— *Marie Sturdevant, Grace Ministries – Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn*

**Tuesday, February 23, 2021**

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## Pause First

Scripture: Peter 3:8-9

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessings, because to this you are called so that you may inherit a blessing.

**W**e live in an age where the exhortation to be sympathetic and love one another; to be compassionate and humble is more needed than ever. Between the experience of pandemic and the worldwide suffering, grief, and fear that it has awakened, as well as the political turmoil, violence, and division that we have experienced, we are called as a faithful people to act differently than our own fears might energize.

To do this, I might suggest, requires that we meet the challenge of our own response to fight, flee, or freeze with what the psychologist Rollo May referred to as “to pause.” May suggested that what made human beings in general different from the rest of the animal kingdom was our ability to pause between stimulus and response, and there decide which way to direct our energies. For those of faith, the direction we are bidden always to follow is that of sympathy, compassion, and humility.

This does not mean that we are bidden to be abused or to suffer at the hands of others. It means that when we are bidden to use our own energies, we direct them in ways that make for sympathy, compassion, and humility. To love is to witness to truth in a way that expresses the substance of that love. It means that we do not demean, humiliate, or do violence to one another. We strive to understand before being understood (to quote St. Francis), and in that process to speak our truth – in love.

— *Rev. Aaron R. Payson, UU Church of Worcester*

**Wednesday, February 24, 2021**

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## You Do Not Have to Prove Anything

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

The vision of Jesus tested in the wilderness is the subject of Matthew 4:1-11. The wilderness experience is revisited many times in Hebrew and Christian scripture. From exodus to John the Baptist and now Jesus, we repeat the theme of wandering in the wilderness as metaphor for a period of discernment, testing; literally, a time of retreating from the world as it is most commonly experienced. It can be a time of fear and anxiety when a way forward is not clear. And, as we experience in Matthew 4, it can be a time of testing what we hold most dear within ourselves.

In many ways the period of isolation that many have experienced this year has been just such an experience of fear and anxiety, testing, and awakening to strengths, to truths, and ways of being that we may not have realized in ourselves.

Jesus meets this moment by living deeply within the truths that he embodies. While cast as an opportunity to prove himself, he responds to every challenge with the deep truth that he has nothing to prove. He is there to bear witness to the deeper truths that are not threatened by his wandering. He drinks deeply from the well of faith and eats the bread of life, and responds to the demand that he must prove himself with the clear voice of faith that there is nothing he needs to do or be other than what he has become in relationship to the God whose love is his life's witness.

The passage ends with an admonition worth remembering today, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve God only."

— *Rev. Aaron R. Payson, UU Church of Worcester*

**Thursday, February 25, 2021**

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**Scripture:** Romans 3:21-31 from The Message

21 Now, the way to receive God's approval has been made plain in a way other than the laws in the Scriptures. Moses' teaching and the prophets tell us this.

22 Everyone who believes has God's approval through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no difference between people.

23 Because all people have sinned, they have fallen short of God's glory.

24 They receive God's approval freely by an act of his kindness through the price Christ Jesus paid to set us free from sin.

25 God showed that Christ is the throne of mercy where God's approval is given through faith in Christ's blood. In patience God waited to deal with sins committed in the past.

26 [God] waited [to] display approval at the present time. This shows that God o[is all about] justice, a God who approves of people who believe in Jesus.

27 So, do we have anything to brag about? Bragging has been eliminated. On what basis was it eliminated? On the basis of our own efforts? No, indeed! Rather, it is eliminated on the basis of faith.

28 We conclude that a person has God's approval by faith, not by [their] own efforts.

29 Is God only the God of the [Hebrew people]? Isn't [God] also the God of people who are [Hebrew]? Certainly,

30 since it is the same God who approves circumcised people by faith and uncircumcised people through this same faith.

31 Are we abolishing the laws in the Scriptures by this faith? That's unthinkable! Rather, we are supporting these laws.

**S**cripture, containing the Word of God, but not "the Word" of God, reveals enlightenment, comfort and encouragement for the well-being of ALL people. No one is left out for the intent of its benefit.

However, it has sadly become manifest in many circles where believers in God and Jesus gather, that unless you are a "card-carrying" member of some group calling themselves Jesus followers, then what scripture says is not meant for you. And because of this, many people have "thrown the baby out with the bathwater," that is, have discarded interest or respect of biblical scripture for just this exclusionist rationale.

Yet it isn't true; scripture isn't just for those who say they follow Jesus!

When Saint Paul writes that whenever someone finds God’s teaching beneficial, and “leans into” following God’s ways, that are the WAY of Jesus, then they are doing what is meet and right and have approval through God and Jesus’ intent, which is our Creator loving us into the Essence, what is God: Grace and Mercy!

Here in this time of introspection during Lent, as we think a bit more pointedly on our life-walk, how we are doing at it, and what the meaning of Jesus’ ministry is all about, there is all the God-stuff meant to help us “on our way” to consider: scripture. However, many times God and the teachings get shuttered away from the light of day because of the “church.” Jesus followers in places who have been exclusionist have tainted the waters of Godly-centeredness because of their narrowmindedness and ways.

Just as there are “bad apples” in every group, so, too, within the ranks of the church that follows God and Jesus as the Christ. So, here is the reminder: “God isn’t just for card-carrying Christians anymore,” and has never been the case anyways! Let us all get on board with the hope of God that we know, Grace and Mercy, and are willing to live it out, so that creation better reflects wholeness and wellness, justice and truth!

— *Rev. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries - ELCA*

## **Friday, February 26, 2021**

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### The Call of God Is Universal

Scripture: Romans 4:1-11; Genesis 16:1-6

**I**n his letter to the Church in Rome, the Apostle Paul is addressing a quarrel between those who are circumcised and the uncircumcised, meaning Hebrew people and Gentiles within the Church. He is addressing the issue of who is legitimately Christian. His logic is that circumcision was a sign of a faithfulness, a “righteousness” that preceded the act of circumcision. Giving the Roman Church a moment to consider that it is the quality of their faith, not the state of their body, which is the hallmark of belonging.

I would take this a step further. That our reading today also includes the passage from Genesis which details the circumstance through which Abram's firstborn arrives through Sarai's slave, Hagar, that we also learn that God's blessing is extended to all, Hagar and Ishmail included, meaning those who identify as Islamic.

For us, then, the lesson is that we are to look at each other not through the lens of what faith tradition we practice, or what our cultural origins are, but through the lens of faith that all people are worthy of our love, of God's love, and that we are witness to this through every act of compassion we commit.

— *Rev. Aaron R. Payson, UU Church of Worcester*

**Saturday, February 27, 2021**

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## Not Who But How

Scripture: Mark 8:27-30

**W**ho are you? This is the question at the heart of the passage in Mark 8. And there are many answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, a Prophet, ... the Messiah. So it might seem strange that Jesus responds, "Don't tell anyone." Surely this would be a moment to shout from the rooftops!

But ... what if Jesus understood that it was more important for people to experience God through his actions than to declare who or what he was? The danger in proclaiming who he was is that the conversation then turns to him and not what he represented and what he was doing. Instead of inspiring people to recognize their own relationship to God, to concentrate on who Jesus was, was to center on their relationship to him. Sound heretical? The question at the heart of this passage is: Was Jesus interested in being identified as God, or was he more interested in people awakening to their relationship with the Divine? More interested in resolving to be faithful to such a relationship and vision than to proclaim his particular status?

I take the essence of my quandary from another passage referenced today, Genesis 16, and

Hagar's response to the news that she will bear Abram a son. She responds, "You are the God who sees me." Perhaps this was what Jesus wanted most of all for those to whom he ministered and bore witness.

— *Rev. Aaron R. Payson, UU Church of Worcester*

## **Sunday, February 28, 2021**

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### Set Your Mind on the Divine

Scripture: Mark 8:31-38; Mark 9:2-9

In today's passages, Jesus is trying hard to say something important to his disciples ... he knows what will be required of him in the coming days and weeks as he prepares to enter the final stage of his earthly life. And his disciples want none of it. Jesus is rebuked by Peter. Jesus' response? "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things."

Jesus is reminding them that what he is about is not their need to have him, but the Divine's need to awaken in everyone the potential each has to be a disciple. That the purpose of life is not longevity but love. And that to manifest love, means often to experience suffering. A hard lesson for those who have traveled and been close to the master.

And to prove his point, the disciples witness a transformative moment when Jesus communes with Elijah and Moses. Scared out of their minds, they can only think to mark the spot as sacred ground. But Jesus, once again, instructs them to tell no one until he is gone and rise.

Why wait until then? Once again we are bidden to consider where it is that we place our energies. In claiming the divine in order to quell our own fear and uncertainty? Or, but witnessing to the potential of the Divine in all that we are and do in order to awaken that potential in the world? Are we to make God a slave to our own needs, or are we to be a servant to all that God commands? Are we to love God and neighbor or proclaim our knowledge of the nature of God as supreme?

— *Rev. Aaron R. Payson, UU Church of Worcester*