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2022 Lenten Devotional

Greendale Ecumenical Group

Grace Ministries:

Zion Lutheran Church, Worcester, MA;

Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn, MA

Salem Covenant Church, Worcester, MA

Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester, Worcester, MA

God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.

- Pope Francis

What if we view this desert time of Lent as not just a time to reflect or to lament or to confess or to fast, but a time where we learn to be free.

- Megan Westra

The self-denial involved in the period of Lent isn't about just giving up chocolates or beer; it's about trying to give up a certain set of pictures of God which are burned into our own selfish wants.

- Rowan Williams

There are three elements that are almost always part of Lent: prayer, giving something up and giving something back.

- Elizabeth Hyndman

What is more important than the practices we take on is the heart attitude behind them. If there's anything we should give up this time of year, it's our sense of superiority either to those outside the church or those inside the church who do things differently than we do. The cross levels us all. And that's true whether or not you practice Lent.

- Trevin Wax

Lent is a time of going very deeply into ourselves...What is it that stands between us and God? Between us and our brothers and sisters? Between us and life, the life of the Spirit? Whatever it is, let us relentlessly tear it out, without a moment's hesitation.

- Catherine Doherty

The command to love and serve—not merely tolerate—each other requires more commitment and sacrifice than we care to give, and so we do the polite minimum from afar. The seasons of Lent and Easter bring thoughts of surrender and sacrifice.

- Nana Dolce

First Week of Lent

Sealed/Inspired for Life

Ash Wednesday, March 2nd, 2022

Matthew 6:3, 17, 19-21 – *Scholar's Edition*

Pastor Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

“When you give to charity, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. When you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Don’t acquire possessions here on earth, where moth or insect eats away and where robbers break in and steal. Instead, gather your nest egg in heaven, where neither moth nor insect eats away and where no robbers break in or steal. As you know, what you treasure is your heart’s true measure.”

Every year I prepare ahead of time for the distribution of ashes, checking my supply of pre-mixed, burned palm fronds from the previous Palm Sundays and oil from the Holy Land. It has to be the right consistency to apply upon foreheads with one’s finger and actually have it represent the cross intended to be drawn there.

We participate in the ritual to remember the cross on Christ traced upon our foreheads at baptism; sealed with the oil of Chrism.

Baptism marks the entry of faith’s seed within us by the power of the Holy Spirit, under the sign of the cross and after we’ve heard the recitation of stories concerning our becoming washed clean of the world’s influence which can cause us harm.

The scripture verses above reflect words from the Revised Common Lectionary gospel selection that most closely match the way in which Jesus spoke, when considering what is known as “The Sayings Gospel”, in German, the Quell. This is a recreation of a lost text that contained quotes from Our Lord which is understood to have circulated and for which Mark (first gospeler), Matthew, Luke and John would have had access to in developing their texts, written to instruct their congregations.

Jesus’ instructions lift up that humbleness is at the heart of faith following. And the orientation away from what the world may tell us is of value in marking success, towards that which actually helps us thrive in life and honor God from whom we draw breath in the first-place!

I’m shortly checking my supply of ash and making a note to pick up enough Q-tips to use in applying the cross during COVID so that all participating may humbly join with me in awe for the life laid down to save humanity from itself; the Love that seals us with hope and peace, inspiring us forever!

As We Begin

Thursday, March 3, 2022

Psalm 91

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

“Those who live in the shelter of the Most High...my God, in whom I trust.

This is such a sweet, sweet psalm – not sugary – but sweet in that it hits us at the very center of our being, our souls. Dwelling with God, we are OK, safe, protected, nurtured, and loved. The psalm reads like a beautiful musical ballad with a calming and meditative tune.

As we begin this year’s Lenten season, we are beginning to come to grips with the true costs of the pandemic on our lives. We have lost what experts call our “assumptive worlds—the view that the world is safe benevolent, and more or less predictable. It is that loss that lies at the heart of trauma.” Walter Brueggemann writes of this psalm that it, “speaks with great specificity, and yet with a kind of porousness, so that the language is enormously open to each one’s particular experience.”

When we sit with the repetitive “my refuge, my fortress, my God” we become keenly aware that this God is not far off but one who is that reassuring presence with awesome power that is made available to this unsure traveler in any situation he or she should encounter.

Psalm 91 is just what the great physician has ordered for us for the beginning of this Lenten journey.

Taking Refuge

Friday, March 5, 2022

Psalm 91:9-16

Rev. Aaron Payson, UUCW

*If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,”
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.*

An Ancient Taoist Tale

Once in a distant and remote part of China, there lived a simple peasant boy, P'eng Cho. His father had died when he was very young, and his mother had never remarried. . . P'eng Cho and his mother lived together outside a little village. Life was tough and the pair of them had barely enough to eat. But P'eng Cho was a good and dutiful son and his mother took great delight in him. Every day, P'eng Cho would take the ox out to plough the fields and to earn enough for them both to live.

One day, as he was ploughing a field, a fortune teller passed by. Impressed by the hard working young boy, the fortune teller stopped and looked at him. A look of concern came over his face and he beckoned the young boy to him.

"I have looked at the five features of your face and read your fortune. I must warn you that you will die on your twentieth birthday, said the fortune teller as he shook his head in sadness and then continued on his way. P'eng Cho was deeply upset, but continued with his work until nightfall.

That evening, P'eng Cho told his mother what the fortune teller had said. She was distraught with grief, but she was helpless. The wise man must have given an accurate prediction.

Not many years later, the Eight Immortals were walking past P'eng Cho's paddy fields and decided to cut across the narrow causeway which divided the watery expanses. When P'eng Cho saw the distinguished company coming his way, he pulled the ox to one side and held him still to avoid splashing them. The Eight Immortals were impressed with the thoughtfulness of the young man and commented to each other on his nobility of spirit.

That night, when he returned home, P'eng Cho told his mother about the eight strangers. His mother immediately knew that they must be the Eight Immortals. She urged her son that if they passed by again, he was to ask for their help.

Time passed. At long last P'eng Cho's twentieth birthday arrived. His mother was beside herself with grief and sent him out to work, not knowing if she would ever see him again. P'eng Cho ploughed his field, his heart filled with sadness. Suddenly, he saw the Eight Immortals coming across the fields. He ran and fell on his knees before them, begging to save him from his fate. The Eight Immortals, who knew well what lay in store, asked him to explain. P'eng Cho told them about the fortune teller's prediction. 'If you can possibly help me, please do so,' he cried.

The Eight Immortals recalled what a noble spirit this young man had. They also knew of his poor mother and of how well he cared for her. So they agreed to grant him an extra one hundred years of life. The young man leapt up with joy and surprise, and as he did so, he dropped his hoe.

P'eng Cho did indeed live another one hundred years. But he had failed to realize that when his hoe and fallen, it had killed a small but deadly snake. It was this snake which would have ended his life, had it not been for the Eight Immortals.

The Psalmist and the Taoist both point to a similar truth. The benefits of trust and reverence of that which is holy often have unimaginable and remarkable consequences.

Turn, Turn, Turn!

Saturday, March 5, 2022

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8/Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Jackie Walsh, Grace Ministries, Bethel

I was thrilled to see the scripture reference for today--Ecclesiastes 3:1-8....one of my favorites. As a teenager in the turbulent '60's, music was a very important part of my life. Although I studied music for only a brief period during this time, it was the lyrics and messages of the songs of the day that moved and inspired me. "Turn! Turn! Turn" was written by Pete Seeger in 1965 and performed by the Limelites and Judy Collins. But, most familiar was the rendition by The Byrds. The words were taken verbatim from the Book of Ecclesiastes; it was a plea for world peace and tolerance as the Viet Nam war escalated.

The Book of Ecclesiastes contains reflections of a philosopher who seeks to understand the meaning of human existence. Chapter 3 consists of 7 phrases grouped in 2 sets of 7 opposites...the number 7 symbolizing completeness. Its main message is that there is a time and a place for all things.

Psalm 91 also bring to mind the hymn "On Eagle's Wings" traditionally sung at funerals. "For He will give His angels charge over you" ...verse 11. The Psalm is a promise to us from God. RELAX...God comforts and sustains us in the midst of threats and temptations.

May you be comforted on this day, "in this season & in every matter under heaven".

Early Instructions

Sunday, March 6, 20

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

I have heard it said that to be born in the United States is to own a “PhD in entitlement” and that citizens of this great country too often struggle with “unbridled selfishness.” Such statements, even if true, are often not helpful in encouraging change. Often what is most helpful is proximity and relationship. I think about those statements as I walk through the well-stocked aisles of my grocery store with my new friends from Afghanistan. I don’t know a lot about the particulars of their situation back in Nangarhar, but I do know that the situation in Afghanistan is dire and that supplies of even the most basic dietary needs are depleted. Huge numbers of people will starve to death in the coming months with the most vulnerable (the elderly, young children, and those with medical conditions) at greatest risk.

From a Christian perspective, caring about the suffering of strangers has inherent value. It broadens our vision of whose lives matter. It increases our capacity for empathy. And, maybe most importantly it draws us back to God and the recognition that God provides enough for all – it is our job to make sure all get what is needed. Let’s not forget the journeys of our faith mothers and fathers and meet the requirements of today’s challenges.

Second Week of Lent

The Wonders of Love

Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Psalm 17

Rev. Aaron Payson, UUCW

“Show me the wonders of your great love. . .”

The Psalmist exemplifies a spiritual discipline that is transforming, especially during times when the world seems to much. The past two years have been a time of great pause and suffering for many. The pandemic has laid bear both the inadequacies of many of our fundamental systems of support, and it has opened our hearts to the measure of kindness and courage of so many. In the space between these polar experiences lies the call that is at the heart of lent. To be mindful of the ways each of us and all of us fall short of the call to love AND to celebrate the vision of that great love has it has been made known to us.

For me this dual meditation has been a spiritual discipline, and my response to those moments when the “glorious incompleteness” of the world overwhelms me. I find this is true most often when I am behind the wheel and apt to respond to the vision of something “stupid” with an angry response. Someone steps off the curb in front of me, “stupid.” A car makes a left-hand turn from the right-hand lane. “Stupid.” The problem with my response is that it did nothing to change the situation and just made me feel more and more stressed and angry. Then I began to force a different awareness in those moments. The person who stepped off the curb was pulled back by an alert stranger. “That’s a blessing.” The car that turned left was waived on by an alert driver who patiently braked and waved them on. “That’s a blessing.”

Lent reminds us that we can either be consumed by the world or we can bless it. I choose blessing. How about you?

Wait, Wait....Don’t Tell Me Psalm 27/Genesis 13: 1-7, 14-18/Philippians 3: 2-12
Thursday, March 10, 2022 Jackie Walsh, Grace Ministries, Bethel

On Saturday mornings I enjoy listening to the NPR quiz show “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me”. The game show host asks questions concerning the previous week’s news items....a fun way to review recent events mixed with humor and a lot of irreverence.

The 14th verse of Psalm 27--a song of trust—asks us to wait for the Lord. I wondered how many times the word “wait” appears in the Bible. According to one Google source it is 154 times...both Old and New Testaments.

The story of Abram & Lot tells the Lord’s promise of land. Because of the strife between them, both Abram & Lot had to wait for their land until their struggles ceased.

Paul’s warning in Philippians in breaking from the past tells us to “forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead”. But, wait...there’s more! Righteousness from God- based on faith is a FREE gift, dependent only upon our willingness to receive it. And, for that, we do not have to wait!

Please Answer Me

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Psalm 27

Rev. Aaron Payson, UUCW

*Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.*

My mother taught me early in life “If you seek answers then have the courage to ask questions.” What she was really describing was her own spiritual discipline that in the those moments that were most worrisome, moments in which there answers did not seem plain, she would pause and pray the question that was foremost in her mind. What was then required was the willingness to pay attention because answers, more often than not, came in the form of awareness not words.

I think this is part of what the Psalmist is getting at when we hear the words,

*Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path*

More times than not the question was not asked in order to gain greater understanding. Instead, most questions asked aim to point us in a direction that gives us clarity about what we are to be in any particular moment. Lent is a time of deep discernment. If we want clarity than we must have the courage to pray our questions and awaken to the answers as they are made known to us.

Breaking the Anxious Grip

Sunday, March 13, 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17,18

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

Lent tends to pull out all the great stories of God’s salvific work.

Abram is the perfect example of human frailty. At each turn Abram needs assurance that this was indeed the way to go, and that this God was indeed the one to trust.

“Wait, Abram says, I have no son, no one to keep my name extended into the future.” God meets him there saying, “Wait, wasn’t I the one who called you out

of the Ur of the Chaldeans (I love phrase). You will have your son; you will have your descendants.

“But how will I know?” That is always the question when we are struggling to believe and settle ourselves in God’s promises. God brings him out to see the millions of stars telling him that as many stars as you see, these shall be your inheritance. Whether or not this trip out to see the heavens calmed Abram we are not sure, but God is clearly staking his tent right next to Abram’s. Can you trust God to break anxiety’s grip on your life?

Third Week of Lent

Amazing Grace

Thursday, March 17, 2022

Psalm 63

Pam Sutton, Grace Ministries, Bethel

...”the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him”.

Sarah Jane Fee was a two year old refugee to America from poverty and oppression in Ireland. Her father was a blacksmith. Her fiery grandfather preached “hell and brimstone” and was profoundly racist against Roman Catholics. She was denied a high school education and sent to work in a brush factory where she sustained abuses with no recourse. Occasionally my grandmother would recall some of the trials and tribulations she endured but only to lift up her faith in the goodness of God, encouraging me to believe that with God, all things are possible. She credited God for sustaining her through cycles of anxiety and depression and physical limitations which held her back from social activities. She considered herself richly blessed.

Patrick, 5th Century missionary to Ireland from Britain, had endured capture, enslavement, the courage to escape and then the courage to return to Ireland again in order to share his Faith in the Gospel of Christ. I have directly benefitted from this costly “amazing Grace”.

Dear God, Thank you for walking with us in times of trial. These are uncertain times for many. We open our hearts to your amazing Grace. By your Love, your Grace and your Mercy, we are sustained, we thrive and we are obliged to share this Gospel of Grace with all seekers. In Jesus’ Holy Name. Amen

Saints

Friday, March 18, 2022

Psalm 63:1-8

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

The Psalm comes with a sub-title, “Comfort and Assurance in God’s Presence.”

Psalms, of course, are hymns, tunes put to beautiful poetry with a theological point, so it is no wonder that so often when I read a psalm a tune will come to mind.

When I was just starting out in ministry, I was often intimidated at clergy gatherings when I was surrounded by those who had years on me in terms of experience and confidence. I am not a ‘millennial’ and was brought up to have the utmost of respect for elders and those who have gone before me paving the way. I could have used a little of that “millennial hutzpah” as a shot in the arm for greater buoyancy.

The tune, however, that runs through my mind with Psalm 63 is “In the Morning I Will Sing.” It is a “call and answer” piece with the refrain sung by the congregation and verses sung by a lone soloist. We sang it at a clergy gathering with the verses sang by the Superintendent. The experience humanized my Superintendent (my boss) and from that time on I saw him not so much as an authority figure but as a fellow saint of God singing praises before his Lord. To this day, I love that song and psalm.

ChoicesSaturday, March 19th, 2022**Luke 6: 43-45a – Scholar’s Edition**

Pastor Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

“For a choice tree does not produce rotten fruit, any more than a rotten tree produces choice fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from brambles. The good person produces good fruit from the fund of good in the heart, and the evil person produces evil from the evil within.”

Many years ago, I was asked to check out a car prospect for someone I knew before they sealed the deal, which I agreed to do.

The day this was to happen turned out not only to be a night inspection, but in a heavy rain. I tried to talk them out of it, but they wouldn't hear of it.

As we arrived at the location, the car was indeed outside in the driveway. It looked nice and shiny, but rain can cover a multitude of "sins".

I walked around and checked what I could, but there was no way to get it jacked up for an undercarriage inspection in that weather. My feeling was the car wasn't that good, and I told this person that. But they were determined to go ahead and make the deal anyways.

Not long after they had it registered, I was asked to check it out some more. Sure enough, the frame was rotted through, and more panels than I had seen that night in the rain. With my help they were able to recoup much of their money because it had been mis-represented and sold illegally, and then the welding shop got a belly-full...

Jesus seeks to keep us from trouble. His words are designed to make us think about our choices to help navigate us away from obstacles. Still, not everyone listens, and sometimes we think that we know best in spite of what lies directly in front of us.

Through whatever may come, the patient love of God, in Jesus by the power of the Spirit walks close-at-hand with us to help us mend, to "weld-up" that which might be broken so that we can move once again ahead on the road of life!

How Many Times. . .

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Psalm 63:1-8

Louisa Klaven, AIM, LLM, Grace Ministries

How many times have we longed to feel loved not for what we do, but for what we are? There is within us an undeniable need for love and a sense of belonging. Although there are several types of love which range from romantic love to selflove, the most valued type is unconditional love. Love which asks for nothing in return. Love which accepts us as we are. Love which knows no bounds. The type of love which God gives us—love freely given, free and undeserved. That, my friends, is grace. That is what we long for. That is what we need.

In 1872 Annie Hawks and Robert Lowry combined their talents to write the beloved hymn, "I Need Thee Every Hour." It conveys what the Psalmist is saying in Psalm 63. Both express the longing for God no matter what the day or time.

We are nothing without God and the unconditional love that God has for us, but with God, our thirst for that love is satisfied. Set in the season of Lent, we long for that total love which God has promised us. That love, that grace, that fulfillment is found in Jesus. Throughout these 40 days our self-reflection longs for that grace. We wait, we hope, we rest assured that love will be fulfilled in the glorious Resurrection.

“I need Thee, O I need Thee,
Every hour I need Thee!
O bless me now, my Savior—
I come to Thee.”

Fourth Week of Lent

None of Us is Perfect!

Monday, March 21, 2022

Romans 2: 1-11

Roberta F. Briggs, Grace Ministries, Bethel

2 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgement upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge are doing the very same things. 2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. 3 Do you suppose, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 For he will render to every man according to his works: 7 to those who by patience is well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans we are reminded not to pass judgment on someone else because we are all sinners. We can be pretty judgmental, unkind, and hurtful

of someone else when we are doing the exact same things and saying the same things ourselves. Not a single one of us is perfect! We also know God's judgment is truth and love. But, we also must repent. God gives us many chances to repent from all our sins. We can ask for God's forgiveness and God will forgive us. However, we are expected to not keep offending God by continuing to have the same, sinful thoughts, and doing the same sinful deeds against our fellow man.

Our God is such a loving, kind, caring, forgiving God. God knows our every thought, word, and deed. God loves us anyway. But, being the loving Father God is, God teaches us right from wrong. God also gives us choices to follow God's teachings and demands we obey his commandments. That we Love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and our neighbor as ourselves. We are also to take care of this wonderful world in which we live and all living things. God gives us many choices including to reject God, but God will be waiting right beside each and everyone of us waiting for us to accept God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The one true Triune God! God created each one of us. We are all God's children.

May God wrap each one of us in the warmth and Light of God's Love, Hope, Grace, and Peace. We ask this in Jesus Name. Amen

Reports of the New Land

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Numbers 13:17-27, Luke 13:18-21

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

The book of Numbers is a fascinating book for those who enjoy history. The common Hebrew name, Bemidbar, "In the Wilderness," presents it as a narrative account of the wanderings of the Israelites before they reach the Promised Land. Other scholars have given it a sub-title, "The Death of the Old and Birth of the New," referring to the slave generation that gives way to their children who will be the true inheritors of the land.

This brief section in chapter 13 gives details of the scouting mission that God through Moses gave to the people and the great abundance and potential that the spies saw in the land. Indeed, this was the "land of milk and honey".

The Numbers scripture is matched with the comparison of the Kingdom of God to that of the mustard seed that grows and grows becoming greater and greater than its small seedling. Both texts seem to address the promises of God and the struggle that we have in truly believing and living into those promises. Take the Numbers passage just a few verses forward and we see the spies who's glowing report turns to fear as they report that the land is inhabited by giants who could easily defeat the Israelites (who they compare to grasshoppers). Our own wilderness narratives are filled with such struggles. We know of the many blessings of the faithful life but are prepared with just as many escape hatches of why we cannot truly follow. Just as the Israelites, we have much to learn in this wilderness adventure.

Our rock, Our hope, Our defender, Our redeemer!

Joshua 4: 14-24

Friday, March 25, 2022

Roberta F. Briggs, Grace Ministries, Bethel

14 On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.

15 And the Lord said to Joshua, 16 "Command the priests who bear the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan." 17 Joshua therefore commanded the priests, "Come up out of the Jordan." 18 and when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, and the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.

19 The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. 20 And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. 21 And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' 22 then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' 23 For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty; that you may fear the Lord your God for ever."

When the Israelites crossed the Jordan river carrying the Arc of the Covenant of the Lord, a leader from each of the twelve tribes carried a stone from where the waters were cut off ahead of the Ark so the stones would be a memorial to the Israelites forever. The stones were carried by the leaders of the tribes to where they camped and laid them down there. “Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests carrying the Ark had stood and they are still there today! The priests stayed in the middle of the Jordan until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua.”

Today, the Cross of Christ is probably the best symbol of God’s love for all of us. A reminder of all God has done for the people of God. God sacrificed God’s son who died for each one of us as a ransom for the forgiveness of our sins. God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is our rock, our hope, our defender, Our redeemer! God forgives each and every one of us if we believe in God’s promise of eternal life. I wear a cross often, to remind me, and others not of who I am, but WHOSE I am. Amen!

Unconditional Love **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32** – New Revised Standard Version
Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2022 Pastor Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before

you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

How many of us remember one or more times in our lives when we severely messed up in one way or another, and not only did shame hit us hard, but a level of depression set in discouraging our ability to do anything?

This story also shares a warning for the youth amongst us how “invincibility” is a sham and will get you into trouble.

The father in the story is understood to represent God, while the sons represent any one of us. The qualities of both boys can be found in many of us: “the grass is greener on the other side” syndrome, “I deserve this because of what I do” false pride, how many of us have fallen into these logic traps?

The beauty of the story is in the seeming ignorance of the dad to the kid’s attitudes, his intention to simply love them into a better understanding and appreciation for life!

Maybe we are still in the grips of some mess we’ve created one way or another and unsure of what to do next. Perhaps someone we know is having this

difficulty. If we can remember ourselves (and encourage in others) to discuss through prayer our feelings and hopes with God, and then trust in forgiveness and help coming our way, this unconditional love that IS God can help reset things so that the gift of life can be pursued in refreshed ways!

No situation is hopeless. All things are possible!

Fifth Week of Lent

Faith In God's Provision

Wednesday, March 30, 2022

2 Kings 4:1-7/Luke 9:10-17

Marie Sturdevant, Grace Ministries, Bethel

God cares for His whole creation, and His love reaches out to us, far beyond our understanding, in meeting our needs according to His will. We see in our Scripture readings for today God's abundant provision for those in need. In the reading from 2 Kings, we find a widow of one of the sons of the prophets crying out to Elisha for help as the creditors were coming to take her two sons as slaves. Having no more than a small jar of oil in her house, the widow was told by Elisha to seek out and borrow empty jars from her neighbors. In following the word of God through Elisha as he commanded, she was committing herself to faith in God's provision. When she returned to her home, she was told to close the door and, in faith, pour out her one jar of oil into the borrowed jars. Miraculously the oil kept flowing, filling all the borrowed jars. It ceased to flow when she filled the last jar. The jars were filled according to her measure of faith, and she was told to go sell the oil and pay her debts and live on what was left.

The feeding five thousand, which is recorded in all four gospels, is another story of God's miraculous and abundant provision. Jesus cared for the needs of the people gathered to hear Him speak about the kingdom of God. As the day was drawing to a close, Jesus' disciples wanted to send the crowds away, but Jesus replied, "you give them something to eat." The disciples, having only five loaves of bread and two fish were ordered to seat the people in groups of about fifty. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, hardly enough to feed the multitude, gave thanks to the Father, broke and distributed them so that all were fed, and all were satisfied. We can try to analyze this and never have a clear answer as to how seemingly little could feed and satisfy so many. But in faith, we know that God will provide and that in Him all things are possible. He continues to feed us today in all corners of the

world when we join together in Holy Communion. From this table of grace, we are sent out as bearers of God's love, grace, and mercy, to feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, visit the sick and lonely, and love those marginalized by society; God's provision in and through us. May we trust in the abundance of God's provision; there is enough to feed everyone, and we all eat and are satisfied. Let us then give thanks to God as His ever-flowing grace fills us again and again. Amen.

Deliverance and Birthing

Friday, April 1, 2022

Luke 15:1-10

Pam Sutton, Grace Ministries, Bethel

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the Presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

I believe and declare that the Cross is central to my relationship with Mother-Father God. Jesus calls us to follow Him, the Incarnate Holy One, to leave our boats, our nets, our stored grain, achievements, pride, shortcomings, our fears and illusions of life at the foot of His Cross and take up our own.

Nothing illustrates the inevitable act of total submission to God's natural and spiritual laws quite like childbirth. Fifty years ago today, our daughter Kristen's birth transformed my life from maiden to Mother. When the time came, there was no way to prevent the crushing pain or the loss of control. I had to submit and go with it. This was no April Fool's matter. Childbirth, even now, claims lives. So it is with all deliverance and new beginnings, isn't it? There are great risks individually and communally when we take up the cross that God sets before us. It is only when I have done so that I have experienced the joy of the Resurrection, the New Birth as Jesus promised just as I did when I held my new born to my breast for the first time.

Dear God, Thank you for calling me, even in my rebellious fearfulness and times of doubt. Thank you for hearing my confessions. I seek to see You in everyone and everything, to align my will with Yours. Thank you for demonstrating the Way of Jesus that delivers me from myself “surrounding me with songs of deliverance” Psalm 32. Happy Birthday to you, Kristen and to all of us as we, in the Name of Jesus, come to the Cross. Amen

Our Gift of Perfume
Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8 – *New Revised Standard Version*
Pastor Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Jesus' life was given for our sakes: the "Love come down at Christmas" Incarnate in human form teaching us about God's hope for each of us, how we relate with/grow through connection with God and how to best get along with each and EVERY other.

Mary represents those of us who get what Jesus did for humanity. She heard our Lord's words concerning his impending death because religious authorities saw in his ministry a threat to their way of life.

The perfume used in anointing Jesus represents "Thanks!" and humble appreciation for this Love manifested in his person taking the time and making the effort to help our race find our way by following *the Way!*

So, what is the "perfume" of our anointing God; what are the ways we respond to this Love and show our thanks in honoring and imitating this *Way?*

Sixth Week of Lent

"Things?"
Tuesday, April 5, 2022

Exodus 40:1-15
Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

Has this been a worse year for fires, or am I just imagining things? It seems I have seen more news stories about residential fires putting people out of their homes and apartments, requiring heroic rescues, and causing deep heartache and trauma than any other year. I know one family who has endured two fires this year. Either way the eyewitness news report will feature a fire chief explaining what happened with ice cycles hanging from his helmet followed by the victim's family saying something like, "We got out. Things are replaceable but people cannot be replaced. We were lucky."

This rather odd text from Exodus is about things – just things. But things do have a role to play in our lives especially as these things represent and are signs of the sacred.

One of the Confirmation lessons I teach are about things. The lesson talks about setting up the great tabernacle, the placement of the bowl, the lampstand, the water basin, the place of the Holy of Holies, etc. These are not just things but are sacred objects that point us to the Holy One. Next time you are in church, look around at the things in your sanctuary. Give God thanks for these "things" and how they usher us into the holy space of God.

"A City Under Siege"

Thursday, April 7, 2022

Psalm 31:9-16

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

*"Blessed be the LORD,
For he has wondrously shown his
Steadfast love to me
When I was beset as a city under siege." Ps. 31:21*

I write this reflection the day after the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. We had been warned for months that this was to happen. For months there had been a stream of steady build up in weaponry, equipment, and troops. Some believed, some denied, some could not imagine it, others had lived with it for so long that it was nothing new. But yesterday it happened.

The psalm tells the story of being in trouble, so deep is the trouble that one's whole body is like a broken vessel, all aspects of the body; eye, bones, soul are left wasting away. But then a turn and please read on to the end of the psalm.

We start in trouble, but we end in relief and rescue. The psalm lacks specificity in exactly what the trouble was; it does not need to be spelled out because the speaker knows where the pain is located and what is its cause. But there is resurrection, response, and wholeness provided by the Lord.

The wonderful thing about the psalm is that we bring our own specificity to it. The Lord sees to it that all is heard, seen, and felt. And the Lord brings us well-being and new life. Praise be to God!

“The Starter’s Gun”

Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

Luke 19:28-40

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

The day was all orchestrated by God. Not one detail was left to chance but each interaction every tiny detail serves a unique and spiritual goal. The day sets off the highest celebration in the Christian year. It sets in motion the redeeming work of Jesus and brings sharp focus to every event of his short ministry.

Resist a fast reading of the Lukan text. You know it, but allow the story to speak a new narrative into this Holy Week. In fact, read it not once, but several times and slowly. God will speak. This we know – for sure.

Holy Week

The Fragrance of Pure Devotion

Monday, April 11, 2022

John 12:1-11

Marie Sturdevant , Grace Ministries, Bethel

At the heart of today's Gospel reading is an extravagant, yet profound and humble act of worshipping Jesus, just days ahead of the Passover. While all four gospels give an account of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive oil or perfume, John's gospel identifies the woman as being Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. In a generous act of hospitality and intimate fellowship, Lazarus and his two sisters gathered with Jesus in their home after experiencing Him raising

Lazarus from the dead. As Martha served supper and Lazarus reclined at the table with Jesus, Mary, in a beautiful act of faith and devotion, broke open a jar of expensive perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped His feet with her unfurled hair. Her actions went against the conventions of decorum of the day. A few days earlier, Martha and Mary sent for Jesus because their brother Lazarus was sick. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus, showing His true identity, ordered Lazarus out of the tomb, raising him from the dead. On that day Jesus, Martha and Mary were confronted with the stench of decaying flesh, and now the house was filled with the fragrance of luxurious perfume. This was not just any perfume. This perfume was bought that she might keep it for the day of Jesus' burial.

By contrast, a couple of verses further into the passage, we find Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, sternly objecting to the waste of expensive perfume. On the surface his objection and concern for the poor as well as fiscal prudence seem justified. But his heart was motivated by greed and Jesus knew what was behind this disgruntled and hypocritical disciple.

Jesus invites us into true discipleship, letting go of greed and self-centeredness. An unbelief in God's economy may numb us to the possibilities of pure and authentic worshipping of our Lord. The extravagant love and devotion displayed by Mary was poured out from a heart that saw the true identity of her dearest friend, her Lord, Jesus. May our worship be motivated by the same love and deep devotion to our Lord, Jesus, the one who came into the world that we may have eternal life.

Tough Love

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 – *God's Word Translation*

Maundy Thursday, April 14th, 2022

Pastor Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

Before the Passover festival, Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go back to the Father. Jesus loved his own who were in the world, and he loved them to the end.

² *While supper was taking place, the devil had already put the idea of betraying Jesus into the mind of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.*

³ *The Father had put everything in Jesus' control. Jesus knew that. He also knew that he had come from God and was going back to God.* ⁴ *So he got up from the table,*

removed his outer clothes, took a towel, and tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel that he had tied around his waist.

⁶ When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter asked him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus answered Peter, "You don't know now what I'm doing. You will understand later."

⁸ Peter told Jesus, "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus replied to Peter, "If I don't wash you, you don't belong to me."

⁹ Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, don't wash only my feet. Wash my hands and my head too!"

¹⁰ Jesus told Peter, "People who have washed are completely clean. They need to have only their feet washed. All of you, except for one, are clean." ¹¹ (Jesus knew who was going to betray him. That's why he said, "All of you, except for one, are clean.")

¹² After Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer clothes, he took his place at the table again. Then he asked his disciples, "Do you understand what I've done for you? ¹³ You call me teacher and Lord, and you're right because that's what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. ¹⁵ I've given you an example that you should follow. ¹⁶ I can guarantee this truth: Slaves are not superior to their owners, and messengers are not superior to the people who send them. ¹⁷ If you understand all of this, you are blessed whenever you follow my example.

³¹ When Judas was gone, Jesus said, "The Son of Man is now glorified, and because of him God is glorified. ³² If God is glorified because of the Son of Man, God will glorify the Son of Man because of himself, and he will glorify the Son of Man at once."

³³ Jesus said, "Dear children, I will still be with you for a little while. I'm telling you what I told the Jews. You will look for me, but you can't go where I'm going.

³⁴ "I'm giving you a new commandment: Love each other in the same way that I have loved you. ³⁵ Everyone will know that you are my disciples because of your love for each other."

I couldn't bring myself to hate the bully who had tormented me in middle school.

When a couple of engineering colleagues tired to discredit my work and take over my position, except for standing up for my job and overcoming their advances, I didn't take further action against them.

Even after a parishioner took me to task for simply supporting the rights of people, they had no respect for, I didn't flip out on them, but prayed for them.

This is tough love; withstanding the temptation to engage in retribution, and unfortunately something various religious traditions within the tribe of people calling themselves "Christian" support through a mis-reading of the Old Testament.

But Jesus comes to set the record straight, to dismantle the myth of retributive justice and replace it with distributive justice; simply loving and respecting EVERYONE no matter what, as our Lord demonstrated unconditional love for ALL of us.

"A Lonely Day"

John 18 -19:42

Good Friday, April 15, 2022

Rev. Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

It used to be that on Ash Wednesday, you would bump into people at the grocery, or at school, or people pumping gas that would have the marking of ash on their forehead. It used to be that Lenten dinners were well attended, and that Palm Sunday through Easter were recognized in the school and business calendars giving room for people to attend services and observe the cadence of the Lenten season. But that has largely changed as the culture has become more secular. This is not a sad note, a pining for what was, or a harsh commentary of today's culture. It is more the recognition that no matter who we are, how far we have moved, where we are now in our lives, or how we have changed, very few of us can completely remove ourselves from the loneliness of this day and the recognition that a good man died a terrible death for a world that he sought to love. Even the busiest of us are reminded that something happened on this day that changed the world.

If you too are caught in the busyness of your life, or in the routine that makes this day, April 15, 2022, just another day, I would urge you to stop for the briefest of moments to take in the "thud" of the body of the man who was just cut down from a wooden scaffolding because he loved a world that could not understand what he was all about. No matter who we are... this is a lonely day.

Returning to Normal

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25

Rev. Aaron Payson, UUCW

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

When are things going to return to normal? This question has been at the heart of many a meditation and prayer the past two years. The pandemic has made us long for a simpler and less burdensome time. The heart of the question is a longing for a sense of normalcy. We all want to do things that we once did without the burden of masks and social distancing. We all want to be together again, physically. We long for human touch, the embrace of friends and family. We yearn to go shopping without thinking we are risking our lives. We want to sing in church and send our children to school without fear. These are heart-felt desires.

And yet there is so much that has happened and so much that has been illumined that can not be ignored or forgotten. We have learned again that we are not isolated beings, even though we have felt isolated. We have learned that our actions have consequences far beyond our own intentions. We have come to understand that many of our most important systems can be overwhelmed and that there are far more essential people and front-line workers than we had previously imagined. We have learned again that life is precious and that we are vulnerable to disease. We are aware more than ever of the disparities sustained in many communities that have been forced to the margins of our common life, and that we all suffer from a history of racism and white supremacy. All this and so much more have we learned, again.

Given such immense relearning, how is it then that we can “return to normal”? What would normal be, if only to forget all that has happened, which we cannot. I think this is what the author of Isaiah is getting at when they talk of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. I think this is also what Easter means. Once you’ve heard the clarion cry to love, what does normal mean? Once you’ve witnessed the brutality of the world, why would we want to return to normal? Jesus knew this. And now do we. May this Easter be an opportunity to envision again a new creation.