



2023 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

“Even the darkest moments of the liturgy are filled with joy, and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten fast, is a day of happiness, a Christian feast.” —Thomas Merton

“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

“Hold on dear friend, for this is not the end. You have traveled so far and you have worked so hard. Carry on with courage and do not give up. And not because things will be easy but because these seeds you are sowing matter, and they will grow in time, if you do not lose heart.” —Morgan Harper Nichols

“God refuses to give up, and we who are enlisted to be fellow-workers with God know that the only reason we continue is that death did not have the last word; that Good Friday was not the end of the story.” —Desmond Tutu

***“Nothing great is ever achieved without much enduring.”
—Saint Catherine of Siena***

“Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Make for it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.” —Saint Augustine of Hippo

***“My whole strength lies in prayer and sacrifice; these are my invincible arms; they can move hearts far better than words, I know it by experience.”
—Saint Therese of Lisieux***

***“Men lose all the material things they leave behind them in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give.”
—Saint Francis of Assisi***

First Week of Lent

Blow the Trumpet

Joel 2:1-2

Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

“Annie’s giving up drinking, Terri’s giving up chocolate, and I’m just giving up.”

This is a line from Nora Gallagher’s very good book, “Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith.” Lent means “long spring days” and amid winter, spring days sounds hopeful to me regardless of what the Ground Hog showed us.

I believe it is hopeful, because as the trumpet calls, it’s the beginning of a new start with God. As Gallagher points out, Lent, like Christmas, suffers from over commercialized messages. The season is oversaturated with old taglines of “giving up” so that any other meaning has long been squeezed out. But just as Moses went up a mountain and came down with his face bronzed by being in the light of God, and, as Jesus’ whole being is lit up in Holy light on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Lenten season invites us into a celebration of the mysteries of faith. What if we were to head into this season, starting today, with great expectations rather than a predetermined mindset of scarcity.

Let’s respond to the trumpet sound and head into our own cloud and sun of relationship with God.

Pilgrimage To the Cross

Psalm 51; Jonah 3:1-10; Romans 1:1-7

Thursday, February 23, 2023

Marie Sturdevant, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

Our 2023 Lenten journey begins, taking us on our spiritual pilgrimage to the cross. It is here, at the foot of the cross that the ground is level, as all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Is there a part of you that thinks your sins are small compared with others? Are there some people whose actions are so grievous that they are beyond God’s redemption? I confess that there are times I have thought that way. *“I did something that wasn’t very nice, but you should see what the other person did.”* The headlines of today are shocking as evil seems to take center stage in the world around us. History reveals a thread of evil throughout

all generations. Perhaps our prideful hearts find it easier to hold these “evil doers” in contempt rather than have compassion for them.

In today’s readings God’s nature of forgiveness and mercy is revealed. Psalm 51, David’s lament, is a cry of confession and an appeal for God’s forgiveness and mercy. This Psalm, set against the context of David’s past, where his sexual indiscretion with Bathsheba and his arrangement of the death of her husband, Uriah, to cover his adultery, reveals the terrible consequences of his sins. The words of the Psalmist display a broken and contrite spirit. David penned this Psalm as he understood the goodness and grace of God. In the Scripture passage from the book of Jonah, we see a people assumed beyond the reach of God’s mercy. God sent Jonah with a message to the people of Nineveh to repent of their sins, though Jonah had no heart for those he deemed unworthy of God’s grace. God’s dealing with Nineveh is an example to us of how repentance will lead to mercy. Repentance is central to biblical teaching in understanding the wonderful Grace of God.

In Jesus Christ, we see the grace and mercy of God. Jesus brings us the message of God’s salvation and overflowing grace for all people. In light of our Scripture readings for today, how is God speaking to you, to me, and to the world around us? Yes, we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Yet even the most hardened heart is not beyond the redemption of God through Jesus Christ. We are not the judge, jury, and executioner in dealing with other people’s sins. Instead, we are called to repent of our own sins. And through the grace of God, we are called to be the messengers of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Let us trust in our Lord as we walk in our pilgrimage to the cross, and with a contrite heart and spirit, may we reflect God’s love and mercy to a world in need of His grace.

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”
Amen.

Good Trouble

Friday, February 24, 2023

Psalm 51; Jonah 3; 1-10; Rom 1: 1-7

Pam Sutton, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

The late John Lewis, Congressman, utilized this phrase himself and was characterized by it as well for his tireless work with regard to equality and justice. Jonah, who though in time was obedient to God's Will, complained mightily against the outcome. What the blazes did I go to all this trouble for if you're not going to follow through, God, and blow these people and their city off the planet? The "good trouble" grace and mercy aspect of God's work can be disconcerting from a flawed and fallen perspective. Lent is a time when I choose to reflect not on my perspective, but on God's in Christ's Love and Light. God only knows, I need it as much as Jonah did.

Psalm 51: 16 + 17¹

¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

¹⁷ *My sacrifice, O God, is
a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.*

Jonah 4 : 1 – 4, 11: *But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Romans 1: 6: *And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. Prayer: Oh Good Trouble inducer, fill my heart with courage and love by the Grace of Christ's Holy Spirit to answer your call with that same Grace. Amen*

The Chosen Fast

Saturday, February 25, 2023

Isaiah 58:1-9

Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester

*“Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the ^lheavy burdens,
To let the oppressed go free,
And that you break every yoke?”*

What are you giving up for Lent this year? This is a question that I have heard every year since I was a child. It was usually asked of me by one of my Catholic friends, in conversations which talked of not eating chocolate, giving up television, other sweets, and such. The conversation was one that celebrated a time of depravation. On the surface, it mimicked a child-like sense of suffering for the faith. “If I have to. . .God its going to be hard.”

But Isaiah turns this act of ritual suffering into a commandment to give up the ways in which we participate in the suffering of others. “To loose the bonds of wickedness” – our bonds, the ones with which we bind ourselves and others. “To undo the heavy burdens” – our burdens, the ones we place on ourselves and others. “To let the oppressed go free” – to free that which oppresses ourselves and others. “To break every yoke.” – that which we place around our own neck and body as well as that we place on other beings.

Here the Prophet turns the suffering of the fast into acts of liberation, when what we let go of is our need for power and control, our need to protect our own sense of superiority. And act according to the vision of the Divine which calls for justice, freedom, compassion, and care to be our ultimate concern.

And here’s the thing. This is not simply something we do for a short period of our lives, for the sake of a period of spiritual reflection. What is demanded of us is a perpetual meditation and, moreover, a perpetual releasing of the ways of the world which bind us to the worst of our human impulses. This is not a fast to give up that which gives us pleasure, but a spiritual commitment to give up that which continues to cause suffering and injustice. This is the fast we ought to choose.

Matthew 4:1-11 NRSVUE

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We love excuses.

As kids, if we had siblings and parents or other adults found blame with us wouldn't we frequently point the finger the other way to deflect punishment, or at least diminish it?

It's no different for many adults. And unfortunately the religion in Jesus' name developed a "devil complex" early on that has guilted/scared people into either submission within the church structure ("God's going to get you if you don't repent...") or driven people away from organized religion.

Sad but true. And all based upon misinterpretation of biblical writings.

Today's scripture could best be understood as instructional fiction; by that I mean the whole devil-temptation angle of Jesus sets out to emphasize the elemental-spirit temptations of this world, as Saint Paul refers to worldly pressure/distractions/logic, vying for our participation and can take-us-down hard. Jesus' response is our model to follow; don't give in, stay the course of (faith) right-living/direction!

The world's effect can be constant/persistent bombardment of us and all creatures by systems and circumstance. We must be constant/persistent in pushing back on its negative influence in order to remain healthy, whole and hopeful!

Second Week of Lent

God's Will for Life

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Genesis 4:1-16

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

This is a well-known story, but as in all well-known identities we must fight the "danger of the single story (Chimamanda Njosi Adichie)". We are all set in relationships of brother/sister. Such relationships are often fraught with the dilemma of competition and anger. This early relationship foreshadows the later stories of Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers. Abel is not the only one who is hunted down, Cain himself is pursued. "Sin is an aggressive force ready to ambush Cain." And sin, as is so often the case is larger than Cain. The story points to the awesome choices that are daily set before us. Anger particularly, takes a good share of our brain-space in every day. The good news seems to be tucked into the corners of verse seven, "If you do well." Perhaps doing well is in our fortitude to go to our brothers and seeking reconciliation before actions of sin and death take over. Even as Cain is banished from the land, God's will and God's call never ends and even in the far land of Nod, the mystery of God's care ever extends.

ALL Are Precious in God's Sight!

Psalm 121

Friday, March 3, 2023

Roberta F. Briggs, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

Psalm 121 A song of Ascents:

1. *I lift up my eyes to the mountains-- Where does my help come from?*
2. *My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*
3. *He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber;*
4. *indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*
5. *The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand;*
6. *the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.*
7. *The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life;*
8. *The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

Although the words are slightly different from the words I learned as a very young child, this Psalm is one of my very favorites because it reminds me of my Mother who used to recite it faithfully to the five of us children from Bible reading and memory. She loved God and his son, Jesus Christ. She taught us God would always take care of us “no matter what” , and would always be with us.

Through all the storms of life, and there have been many, I have been able to remember this Psalm, see her smiling face, and remember her advice. Mom died five years after my father, when I was eight.

At 85, I can tell you, the words of this Psalm are absolutely, true. Our God loves each and everyone of us. We are all God's children.....Black or Yellow, Red or White, ALL are precious in God's sight. God loves us ALL unconditionally.

With all the changes and illness that have been happening, especially the last couple of years, we need to remind each other God IS with us “No Matter What,” just as God has been with us each and every day of our lives. I ask you to remember and share this Beautiful, Meaningful Psalm. Amen

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 121:1-2

When I was ten years old, my brother, who was my only sibling, died in a drowning accident. Being a young child, I didn't understand that God was at work inside me, guiding me through my first encounter with death in the fragile steps of these early days of my spiritual journey. Several years later, my father died under some very difficult circumstances. Though I was blessed with a wonderful husband and two beautiful children, there was still an inescapable feeling of darkness inside following my dad's death. I didn't understand at the time that it was here that God was continuing His work in me, bringing about healing and transformation. Twenty years after my father's death, my mother died following a two-year struggle through a life-threatening illness. Watching my mother's decline as I tended to her daily care over her last two years, I knew I was losing a little part of her each day. And with her, I felt like I was losing a piece of myself. My faith was on shaky ground during this time, as I didn't understand how God was working through my exhaustion, guiding and protecting me as I worked outside the home, tended to the needs of my family, and provided daily care for my mom through her illness.

The summer after my mom passed, I was invited to join a group on a backpacking trip in the White Mountains; my first of several backpacking and hiking adventures. There was something about that trek up the mountain that allowed me to conceptualize the spiritual transformation that had been going on through the losses in my life. Every rock and snare I traversed on that trail reminded me of the obstacles I overcame. It was on this trip that I realized it wasn't through my own effort that I got through any challenge, but that my help had always come from God. Just as He never let my foot slip on that rocky trail, He had always protected me through my journey over and through the obstacles of life. When I reached the summit of that mountain and looked out over the landscape of God's beautiful creation, I saw the valley from whence I came. Like a flashback over my

whole life, I realized it was God's protection that brought me through every step of the way.

My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. God guides and protects each of us as we face obstacles, challenges and dark times in our lives. And though we don't always understand, God is at work bringing about renewal and transformation even in the darkest places of our lives. May we realize the goodness of God, who understands our every need as He protects us and guides our steps as we journey through this life. Amen.

Capturing the Moment

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9

Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester

"Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'"

I am not good at posting pictures on social media, or, perhaps I should say, I'm not particularly prolific at this practice. In fact, I disdain the tendency we have today to interrupt some of the most precious moments in life by having to document it in order to share it with others in a nano-second.

One unique characteristic of the generations that have grown up with social media is that, unlike previous generations experienced life, processed those experiences and then over-time shared what they felt, thought or learned, these generations, having and experience and sharing it is coterminous. Which, to my mind, robs us of the ability to linger in important moments and to consider how those moments impact us without the fervent pressure to share them immediately.

I think this is part of the lesson which Jesus is teaching to Peter in Matthew's account of the experience of ascension and communion with Elijah and Moses. To build "dwellings" on the spot would have been the ancient way of marking the place, as if the issue were to return to the place instead of contemplating what happened there. Furthermore, it is clear to Jesus that Peter doesn't comprehend the reason why he was chosen to accompany his teacher. Which was not to mark

the place but to consider the enormity and importance of the mission to which he was being called.

Perhaps we ought to reconsider how we capture the most important moments in our own lives.

Third Week of Lent

Faith Matters

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Romans 4:6-13

Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester

“Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.”

Maria Harris, Religious Education Professor at Boston University, now of blessed memory, once spoke to a national gathering of Unitarian Universalist ministers and proclaimed, “The null curricula of Unitarian Universalism is that you have to at least act educated to belong.” It was a moment which stunned many of us into an uneasy silence. In one sentence she had convicted an entire movement, which claimed to be creedless, of embodying an ethic which was the exact opposite of what we professed to believe and how we ought to behave. Worthiness was mitigated by how much formal education you could claim.

This conviction of liberal tradition in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular has been the impetus for much reflection over the years. And I think the lesson of that moment is central to the lesson that Paul is attempting to teach the faithful in Rome. Who belongs here is not a matter of ancestry, cultural associate, familial ties, or national citizenship. What matters is a common faith. Which is something that goes well beyond belief. It is a way of orienting oneself to community and the world. It is allegiance to something more grand than Empire as it was commonly claimed by the Rome.

For me, the lesson here, especially as a Lenten practice, is the constant meditation on the ways in which I, and the communities to which I belong, overtly or unconsciously establish tests for who can claim membership. Perhaps it isn't

educational attainment. Maybe it's one's economic status? Or the color of one's skin. Perhaps it's the language which we are most confident and comfortable using? Maybe it's whose stories we tell most often? Or what statement of belief to which we ascribe. Maybe it's the words we use. Or could it be age, gender, gender expression or sexual orientation? What are the ways that we guard the door of our own communities? What would be the difference if we started first getting to know each other better and gaining a deeper understanding of each other's faith?

The Supremacy of Christ

Colossians 1:15-23

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Roberta F. Briggs, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

Colossians 1:15-23

15The son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him, 17He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

According to the Lutheran Study Bible, “ because all Christians of every age have already been united with Christ through Baptism we let Christ's love, peace, and forgiveness guide our relationships with other Christians, with members of our family, and with people who are not Christians.” “Colossians invites us to lead

lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him as you bear fruit in every good work.”

“Therefore, we do not have to earn God’s love or earn Christ’s love through good works that prove we are worthy of his forgiveness. Because God first loves us and forgives us, we respond by loving God and gladly acting according to God’s commands.”

Therefore, God, loves each one of so much, God’s love and forgiveness are Gifts from God. “God created everything in heaven and on earth through Christ who existed before creation is the firstborn from the dead: At his birth he became fully human to carry out God’s plan for salvation. Christ’s resurrection (firstborn from the dead) opens up the way to eternal life for us.” AMEN.

Discipline of Dailyness

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Exodus 16:27-35

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

We can only live one day at a time, but our instincts are often skewed to hoard resources in abundance so that there should never be lack. The early instruction concerning the gathering of provisions was for only one day at a time. We pray for “daily bread.” The teaching is that we might adopt a discipline of dailyness. No building of bigger and bigger barns. No anxiety over what we will eat tomorrow. The hope is that we might rely on God for our daily needs. The huge equity gaps that mare our society today are evidence of our hoarding of God’s provision. From early Israel to our present day, such hoarding points to our disregard of God’s will for the best life possible for all people. Is it possible to think back on the faithfulness of God, that manna came without fail right up to border of the promise land, and to see that such provision marks our lives too. How might we tame our hoarding that our lives might reflect a discipline of dailyness and greater love for God’s rich resources and the feeding of the whole world?

Fourth Week of Lent

In and Through it All

Monday, March 13, 2023

John 1:1-13

Pr. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

John 1:1-13 NRSVUE

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

IN AND THROUGH ALL

It's really best to have a grasp of scope when considering any topic or job. You wouldn't paint a room in your house without figuring out if the walls were clean and smooth enough to accept the paint; peeling or flaking off after hard work laying it down isn't cool! You also wouldn't want to debate something if you had no idea of the topic.

The gospel writer, John, appropriately sets-the-stage to appreciate the scope of the God-story; Creator of all things who cares so much for our race on this small planet in the vastness of the cosmos that an in-person visit was necessary to help us know the Love which will never-quit on anyone!

Let that sit with you for a moment, the magnitude of God's still-expanding 'verse since the creation-spark, the attention all the details and oversight for other

sentient beings demand and the intent is connection with each and every one of us wherever we are. Astounding!

God, thank You for your amazing care of us!

Cracked Cisterns and Living Water

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

There is little place to hide. Jeremiah, the poet, has laid out the situation as a well-schooled prosecutor lays out her strategy in a court of law. One of the most prominent verbs is “went after.” The people of Judah “went after” other gods. Their (our) actions show infidelity and there is little that can be said. When we go after other gods, we become like those gods. When Judah fled to other gods, who are nothing, Judah became “no thing.” Cisterns are built and dug, but they are faulty and can hold no water for we have gone after inferior things.

There are other prominent verbs as well. “They did not say.” That is, the people became lax in their worship. They forgot to rehearse the story of Yahweh. Where amnesia occurs so the life of the people is skewed. Everyone is at fault. The prophet names all: priests, judges, rulers, the entire leadership team has failed Yahweh and Yahweh is ready to go to court so that he might be heard.

Wherever

Friday March 17, 2023

Psalm 23

Pr. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

PSALM 23 KJV

23 *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

² *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

³ *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

⁵ *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

WHEREVER

On a business trip many years ago, my flight was delayed and I arrived in Chicago somewhere about 11:30 PM. I still had to pick up the rental car and find the hotel. In a short-bit I was on the road and believed I was following the road signs correctly. Indeed, I was moving along nicely, just away from where I should have been headed. And when I decided to exit and figure out where I had gone wrong, I found myself in the middle of a distressed neighborhood at close to 1 AM.

Sometimes we are over-tired, confused and wind-up where we aren't comfortable to be. But still we are not alone, ever. This wonderful writing from ancient times captures perfectly the epiphany the author brings to our wider world for the reality of faith's strength; that trust in the One will help us through all things.

Obviously I made it to the hotel that night, very late. And the next day at the convention center I was at least a bit worn-out, but whole and thankful.

Fifth Week of Lent

For Justice & Fairness Throughout the World

Isaiah 59: 9-19

Monday, March 20, 2023

Jackie Walsh, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

*"Therefore justice is far from us.....
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart
lying words, justice is turned back, for
truth has fallen in the public square...."*

Reading the Isaiah text will tempt us to compare Isaiah's words in verse 13 to the horrific activities of January 6, 2021 in our public square, our nation's capital.

Ancient Israel, too, experienced sins and failures including dealing unjustly and dishonestly with one another through their lies and actions. The word "justice",

appears in both today's Isaiah passage and verse 7 of Psalm 146 meaning fairness, moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, religion or equity. It is very easy to find Bible passages which seemingly affirm and corroborate our own political and moral views. But, God does not always work the way we might expect. It is God's nature to work by turning the ways of the world upside down.

We read again in Psalm 146 to not put our "trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help". In Acts 9... the conversion of Saul...we read of God's dramatic calling of Saul (Paul) and the spirit's power to change hearts and lives.

The actions and events of January 6, 2021 should never, ever happen again. And we should work and strive with others for justice and fairness throughout the world. Thanks be to God that we are free to "Praise the Lord, our God, all our life long".

"Their Packing Lacked"

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:8 – 3:3

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Ezekiel, like his counterpart Jeremiah, addressed the Babylonian threat to Judah. The difference was that Jeremiah was in Jerusalem experiencing the actual destruction of the city and temple, while Ezekiel was already in Babylon - five years into the long exile. Ezekiel was from a priestly family, thus was exiled early in the movement along with other leaders and prominent people. Those who were exiled wrongly assumed that whatever was happening it would be a short trip, while Ezekiel's message was "settle in" this will take time. God's promise to judge the people of Judah for their idolatry and oppression of the poor was finally coming to reality. The people's ability to listen to Ezekiel was no better in Babylon than it was in Jerusalem. Reorientation back to God can be a lengthy and humbling experience. The change will call for nothing short of a complete re-install of a heart, both new hardware (heart) and software (spirit). For a long time, Ezekiel would minister (25 years). For many years, Ezekiel would look out over dry bones wondering if any health could be awakened. They should have packed better, restoration and change of heart is a lengthy process.

Lament

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Psalm 130

Pr. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

Psalm 130 NRSVUE

¹ *Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord.*

² *Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*

³ *If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*

⁴ *But there is forgiveness with You, so that You may be revered.*

⁵ *I wait for the Lord; my soul waits, and in [the Lord's] Word I hope; ⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*

⁷ *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with [the Lord] is great power to redeem.*

⁸ *It is [the Lord] who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

LAMENT

There are times when each of us can be overwhelmed. The psalm writer captures the depth of God in receiving our cries, listening and hearing us, holding us and inspiring/providing for us a way forward.

Unfortunately, some people haven't realized this mechanism of Grace and try working through challenges on their own with poor result.

God hopes for each us. God hopes for each of us wellness and increasing trust in Spirit-led resolutions as we walk *the Way* of faith.

Any situation is redeemable, nothing is too great for a better-way forward to be the result of a humble heart following the Divine lead.

Sixth Week of Lent

Saved Through Faith

2 Kings 4:18-37

Tuesday March 28, 2023

Jackie Walsh, Bethel Lutheran Church, Auburn

“Elisha summoned the Shunammite woman and said “Take your son”. She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left”.

The story of the Shunammite woman in the Old Testament Book of 2 Kings is a strange one, containing a non-stop donkey journey for hundreds of miles, the use of a staff to bring a child back to life, seven sneezes....but like many Old Testament stories, a woman and her husband are given a son late in life. This was granted to her by “the holy man of God” to whom she and her husband had provided a guest room for. As the son grows older, he is working with his father as part of a threshing crew, suffers a head ache, possibly sun-stroke, and dies. The rest of the story tells the unshakeable faith and fortitude of a mother to bring her son back. Without telling the boy’s father, she set off on a donkey with a servant to find “the holy man of God” Elisha. The woman’s faith and obedience-and divine intervention-restores her boy back to life.

We all, as parents, will do anything to protect our children. In this story, it was death...but, it could be for any of us...a child addicted to alcohol or drugs, mental illness or self-destructive behavior. We will do anything “to bring this child back to life”. Sometimes though, we...as did Job....do everything right. So, why do we lose everything? We spend our lives telling and preaching that “God is good”. Does that mean when trauma or tragedy strikes that “God is not good”?

Psalm 143:111-12 tells us that our relationship with God depends on who God is...not what we do. We are saved through faith, not because of it....Ephesians 2:8. It is a gift of God. During this Lenten season help us to seek and accept God’s grace. Amen

I Thank God For You

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Philippians 1:1-11

Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester

"I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, ⁵ for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, . . ."

"The Second Religious Society in Oxford, To the Brethren and Believers in Providence sendeth Greeting. We congratulate you on the happy period which holdeth forth a free toleration of Religious Liberty to every Denomination of Christians."

These words of greeting from the correspondence between Universalist Societies in July 1875 is an example of the kind of letter that went often between communities within the fledgling Universalist movement. It is very much like the greetings that one reads in the epistles of Paul. It is something we've lost in the era when denominationalism seems on the wane. I wonder what it would be like to return to this kind of awareness and desire to speak to the welfare of other communities of faith. Furthermore, I wonder what it would be like if such correspondence went between religious communities of differing faith. I have long believed that religious communities are not fundamentally in competition with each other and that the health of religious community in general is a reflection of the health of each of the communities which grace our community at large.

Could we imagine time spent at each meeting of the governing body of our communities hearing a report on the welfare of other communities in our area? Could we imagine what it would mean to greet each other out of a larger sense of welcome and interest in each other's welfare? Could we imagine offering the best of ourselves in service to the health and welfare of another community who might be quite different both theologically and culturally from our own? What might our larger "community of faith" look and feel like then?

Making Sense of Love
Saturday, April 1, 2023

Mark 10:32-34
Pr. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

Mark 10:32-34 NRSVUE

³² *[The disciples] were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him,* ³³ *saying, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles;* ³⁴ *they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again.”*

MAKING SENSE OF LOVE

Today these verses of Mark’s writing are understood by many theologians to represent that pastor’s recorded work in helping his parishioners understand the magnitude of Divine forbearance in dealing with human-systems and societal-brokenness in making the Essence embracing us, encouraging humanity known: Grace and Mercy as manifest Love facing the elemental spirits of this world with us.

Jesus’ ministry impacted the world in such a way as to never be forgotten as his selflessness confronted insensitivity, ignorance, unbridled ego and selfishness head-on to reveal a better *Way*: a grounding in Wisdom and trust in Truth to feed the soul of humanity created in the imago Dei, the image of God.

The synopsis of Jesus final days, the tensions at-play, his resolute nature to give the full-measure required for us making sense of Love seeking our wholeness and wellness despite worldly pressures and circumstances makes this text inspired in working hope within the believer!

“Action”
Sunday, April 2, 2023 (Palm Sunday)

Matthew 21:1-11
Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant Church

For those who desire a highly caffeinated life, Palm Sunday finally provides the real action you have been waiting for. Palm Sunday begins the end and a new

beginning of life itself. Jesus finally makes his way into the city. He will not stay in the city but will move in and out of the city each day of the week choosing to find rest and prayer just outside of the city each evening. The days will be instructive and contain the high points of his teachings. He will clear the temple. He will serve at a dinner. He will refuse to be broken by the power of Roman capture and interrogation. We will learn much if we follow the daily events of this final week. If one wants a daily examination of the final week, read Mark, it is the only gospel that breaks it into daily installments. The week is action packed – what actions will you take to stay in solidarity with Christ?

Holy Week

Not So Simple Rule

Maundy Thursday, April 6, 2023

John 13:1-7; 31b-35

Pr. Andrew Borden, Grace Ministries

John 13:1-7, 31b-35 NRSVUE

13 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² [Evil intent had influenced] Judas son of Simon Iscariot [who] would betray Jesus. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

^{31b} When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the [Hebrew people] so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

NOT SO SIMPLE RULE

A major part of Moses' legacy is in bringing the LAW of God down from the heights of Sinai to meet us with ways for conditioning our hearts and minds to best know God, ourselves and each other, while orienting everything we are from within the Love that is God's Essence.

The gospel writing reveals Jesus as having summed the Ten Commandments up in the simple LAW of LOVE, which is to love each other as he has Loved us. It turns out to be a not so simple rule, right?

As a species we like to hold grudges. We like to be "right". We are proud. And pride is what gets every one of us into trouble with ourselves and each other, plus out of sorts with God's LAW.

But to sum up what God hopes in us, Love to be embodied and lived-out, is a great reminder for us each and every day so that we might lean into it better and better and over a lifetime with the result a more gracious interaction of participants in faith through God's Essence that improve conditions and honor our Creator.

"Holy Saturday"

Saturday, April 8, 2023

John 19:38-42

Mark Nilson, Salem Covenant

Some days have a feel all to their own. Holy Saturday is one of them. It is unlike any other day. Something so significant has happened in global history that the whole world, all humanity, is required to take a breather from the daily disciplines that absorb our lives. The problem with "Holy Saturday" and our need for breath is that there is no air to breath. The air available is so thin that one is unable to replenish their body with the necessary molecules of oxygen. It's as if our oxygen saturation is hovering around 70 to 80% leaving us gasping and groaning for air. The blood that courses through our veins is not clean and it fails to refresh any of our organs. We are left weak, delirious, and just hanging on. Only a miracle could reverse the situation. Only a miracle...

What Story Do You Tell?

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

Rev. Aaron Payson, UU Church of Worcester

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

The authors of the Book After Jesus, Before Christianity note of the end of the Gospel of Mark:

Perhaps the darkest joke in Mark’s story makes fun of the idea of happy or sad endings. Its madcap version of Jesus’s resurrection (or mysterious lack thereof) doesn’t let things get too happy or too sad, but they are all confused. Mark’s Gospel, a writing of good news, was probably drafted in the aftermath of Rome’s grinding war against Israel in 68–70 CE and the resulting Flavian propaganda. While Rome was arguing over who was going to be the next emperor, Judea and the Galilee had managed in 67 CE to free themselves from the empire. But when Rome figured out who its next emperor was, it came back and recaptured Israel in vicious fashion, ending with Jerusalem in flames, the Temple destroyed, thousands of people crucified by the Romans, and many more thousands carried off in enslavement (see Chapter 5).

In the wake of these events, Mark’s good news—full of sadness, healing, loss, and humor—was written. The truest vein of humor aimed straight at the terror of such violence. In Mark, Jesus heals many people; but strangely, when he does so, he commands them not to tell anyone about the healing. When no one pays any attention to his directions, he becomes a famous healer. Then Jesus is crucified and buried. None of Jesus’s male followers come to his tomb, but several of his female followers do, to anoint his dead body. When they approach the tomb, however, they see only a young man, not Jesus. The young man tells the women that Jesus has been raised to life and the women are to tell his followers to meet him in Galilee where they used to be together with him. But the women are amazed and afraid, so they run off and never tell anyone about Jesus’s resurrection. Now, for the first time, no one tells; no one ever knows that Jesus has been raised. And the reader is left to ask, “What happened?”

Among the things that stand out for me in this version of post-crucifixion narratives in the Gospels, I find the notion that for those who first heard this version of the story, they would intimately identify with the fear that is on full

display given the social context of the times. Secondly, I think those who first heard Mark's narrative understood implicitly that the "true Emperor" wasn't the one chosen by Rome. Furthermore, I suspect that the lack of an ending to the story, as it was originally told, also spoke to the place of the community at the moment as if to say "This isn't the end. In fact, it's just the beginning." And those who heard the narrative understood that the ending hadn't yet arrived, that their fear was real, and that the choice was now theirs to do with the story as they were led by the Spirit to do. Which begs the question, "What story do you tell?"

Vearncombe, Erin; Scott, Brandon; Taussig, Hal; Westar Institute, The. *After Jesus Before Christianity* (pp. 48-49). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.