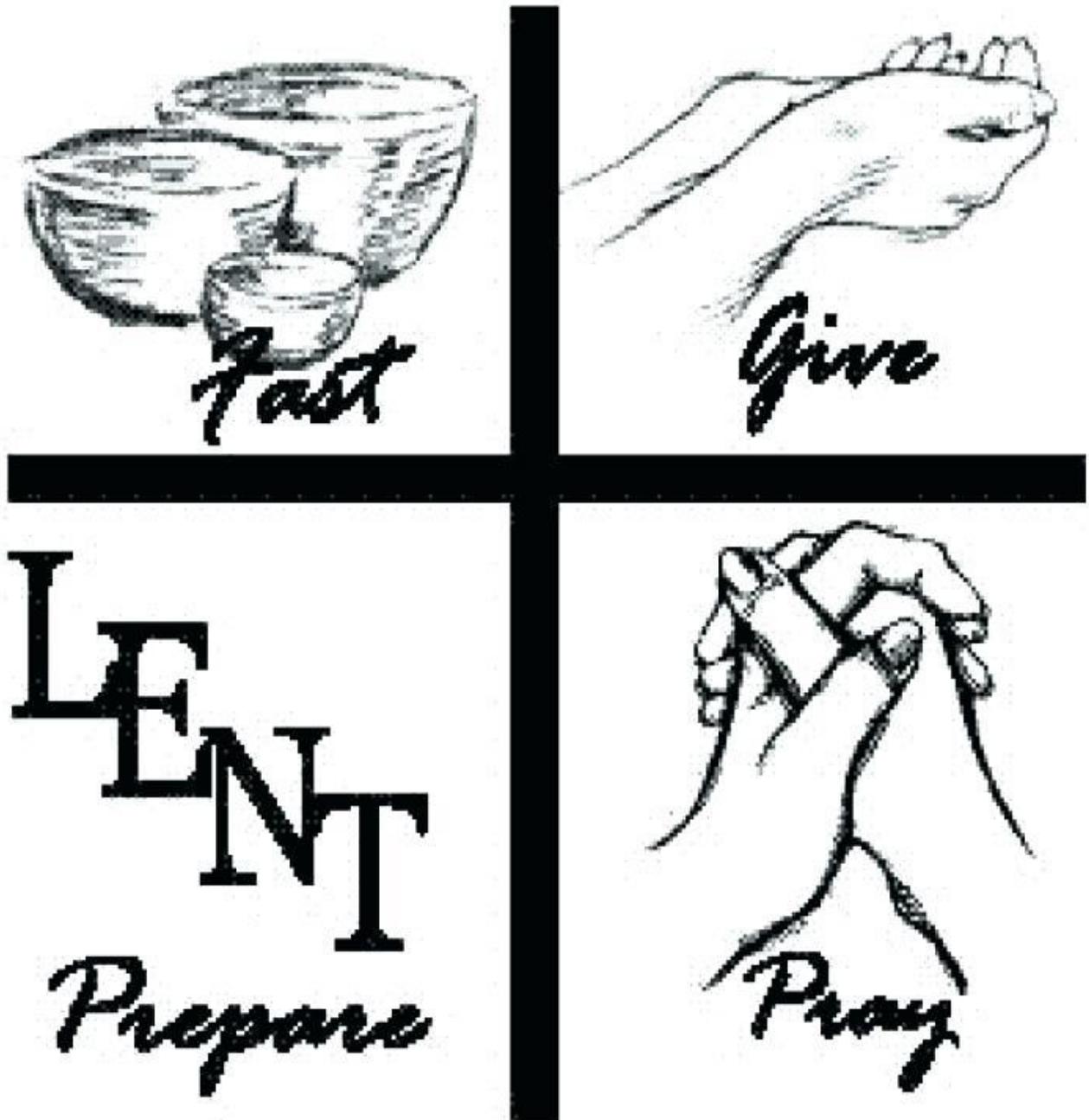


# Bethany Baptist Church

## Lenten Devotionals



March 6 through April 20, 2019

Rev. Timothy L. Adkins-Jones, Senior Pastor

**Wednesday, March 6, 2019**

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

I've come to really appreciate the repetition of the Christian liturgical year. Though some of our sisters and brothers in Christ would prefer more spontaneity in our worship, I believe that God's Spirit moves mightily through the discipline of our Church calendar. Every year, as we shift into this Lenten season of rest, reflection and repentance it feels as if it is right on time. Every year I feel, and I don't think I'm alone in this, that this is exactly what my spirit needs and exactly what our Church family needs. Maybe the whole truth is that it is always the right time to rest, reflect and to repent. Joel certainly seems to think so.

Joel's prophetic call to the community to fast, lament, and seek God's face comes as a result of a devastating plague of locusts which destroyed their crops and led to the decimation of their livestock. This "Day of the Lord" was understood to be a day of judgment from God and Joel wanted to call the people back to God, hoping that God's Grace would protect them from any continued calamity. Unlike what we see in other prophetic oracles, Joel doesn't blame the people for the calamity or suggest that this judgment came because of some sin that they committed. Instead, Joel recognizes that this time of high calamity is a time where they need to rededicate themselves to God. Joel doesn't believe that this rekindling of their relationship with the Lord will necessarily prevent calamity from occurring to the people but that it will undoubtedly strengthen their ability to live and thrive through whatever comes. Scholars suggest that though our regular understanding of repentance means turning away from sin, it can also be a rededication to God. In many ways, those are two sides of the same coin. To turn away from sin is by definition to turn back towards God.

Joel calls us to return to a loving, gracious, patient, God who wants to see us prosper and be far away from calamity. This Lenten season as we rededicate ourselves to our loving Mother God, feel the focus that comes through the rest of our lives. I know that as we focus on God, we can finish that which God has called us to. Those projects that have been sitting as simply ideas in your mind or your inbox can become reality with God's help and our focus on the God that keeps us safe.

**Meditation:** As we enter this time of rededication, what do you need to finish? What vision has God given you that you haven't made progress on for whatever reason? What are you waiting for and how will you use this time to advance the vision that God has given you?

**Prayer:** Dear God, might You help us focus our hearts and minds on the depth of Your Love for us. God help us see that You have placed ideas, visions, and dreams in us that are waiting to be birthed and that it is our discipline, our focus on You that will help us see it through. With Your help dear God, this season will be one of innovation and exploration of Your Grace. We love You, and we wait in joyous expectation to see what You will do and what You will do through us in this season. Amen.

**Pastor Adkins-Jones**

**Thursday, March 7, 2019**

**Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16**

### **The Problem of Protection**

What does it take to feel safe? Perhaps the locks on your doors, or the video camera on your doorbell? Maybe a security alarm or a well-lit street? What about metal detectors and militaries?

While these things offer the trappings of safety, they are in reality only procedures and precautions. More than anything they reflect our access to privilege and feign a false sense of protection from invisible foes. They are safety measures, not safety itself.

Our Psalm today is one that proudly proclaims God's protection and provision for us: a home in the midst of hardship, a shelter in the time of a storm. It declares a space where safety and assurance transcend all borders and boundaries.

She who dwells in the shelter of the Most High ...

Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty ...

No evil shall befall you...

No evil. What does this truly mean in a world riddled with bombs and bullets? In a world that teems with capitalism, greed, and pride? A world where evil seeps beneath the edges of our existence, without a clear source nor an end in sight?

Perhaps the answers to these questions are found on the road to the Cross. When Jesus entered, fasting, into the wilderness, at the start of His ministry, Satan quotes vv. 11-12 of this psalm as a means to tempt

Jesus:

“If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands, they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’ ” (Matt 4:6)

Jesus will reply with what is written:

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Matt 4:7)

The question for us, particularly during Lent, in our fasting and seeking of God in the midst of the wilderness, is: why would this passage serve as a source of temptation? Why would safety and protection, a trust fall, and a leap of faith, be out of the Will of God?

Maybe one reason is that this world will never be safe.

Not from violence, not from harm, and certainly not from sin.

Horrible things happen every day without rhyme or reason; the remnant shortcomings of a fallen world. Christ has come to redeem it all, but as we await His return, we live in a precarious liminal reality of the “now, not yet.” We live out this paradox, proclaiming that there is Good News, pushing back against a world filled with darkness and lies disguised as alternative facts.

And yet, the psalmist still declares. Surely she was no fool! Rather, her wisdom speaks calmly to the storm, asserts assurance even amidst the asinine:

She who dwells in the shelter of the Most High ...

Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty ...

No evil shall befall you...

I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” (Psalm 91:2)

The temptation to test God’s provision and protection makes a grand mistake about the promises of this psalm: taking this world to be our true home.

God is indeed a Mighty Fortress, and God does indeed cover us in love and shelter. But the protection of God isn’t for our bank accounts or material goods, or even for the preservation of our worldly bodies or the continued respirations of the air we breathe. God’s greatest protection, God’s greatest gift, is the

promise made for our hearts and our minds and our very souls. It is the promise of eternal life.

Jesus shows us that it is the work of the enemy to tempt us to name God's protection as a selfish endeavor, as a solo enterprise, and a singular exercise that is wasteful and marked by hubris. Jesus, of course, sees straight to the heart of the matter:

Protection becomes a problem when we fail to recognize it as a privilege.

Protection becomes a problem when it serves to excuse the behaviors of oppression.

Protection becomes a problem when it comes at the cost of others' safety.

Protection becomes a problem when you are more invested in protection for protection's sake without asking why people aren't safe, to begin with.

God's refuge does not mean that all threats cease their fire, that the evils of this world cease to persist. But for the one who dwells in sacred shadow; for the one who finds courage to trust God's provision in the midst of resistance and speaking truth to power; for the one who finds hope in resting, staying, communing, and sharing space with God—the God in this psalm is the God who has promised to keep and to guide; to be our present help in the time of trouble.

When we live our lives in the shadow of the Almighty,

when we live our lives as though no evil can befall us,

when we know that this world is not our home,

when we know that “we good” and “it's gonna be all right.”

... who can shake us?

... who can stop us?

... who gon' check we, boo?

**Meditation:**

When was the last time you truly stepped out on faith, not because you had something to prove, but because you were confident in the God we serve? Lent is the time to examine your life of prayer, worship,

service, and love over the last few months. Do you look like you've only been renting at God's refuge, or have you been abiding and living in God's Presence? What is one area of your life where you have not "let go and let God," where you have struggled to truly trust in our Creator? Can you think of at least one thing you can do, one step you can take, to give it over to God?

**Prayer:**

Help us to remember, O God—

That You alone are our shelter.

You alone are our homes.

You alone are our refuge.

You alone are our protection.

For Your truth is our shield,

And Your angels, they surround.

In Your Presence, we are safe.

For this psalm finishes out with the truth:

"14 Those who love me, I will deliver;

I will protect those who know my name."

"15 When they call me, I will answer them;

I will be with them in trouble,

I will rescue them and honor them."

"16 With long life, I will satisfy them,

And show them my salvation."

Help us to live out,

Now, more than ever before, that

“In God we trust.”

Amen.

**Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones**

**Friday, March 8, 2019**

### **Psalm 13**

This Psalm reminds me of Jesus’ cry from the Cross at Golgotha. That first line, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” in verse 1 echoes the cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” a verse that, in His anguish, Jesus quotes from Psalm 22 (Matt. 27:45-46).

I love this Psalm because even though it starts out with sorrow and anguish, it ends with the sense of peace that comes with faith in God’s faithfulness. Psalm 13 begins with a lament, transitions into supplication, and ends with praise. The Psalmist cries out, “How long? How long will you keep acting like you don’t hear me screaming, don’t see the tears I cry each night, don’t know the number of times I overthink myself into a depression? You don’t seem to hear me, barely to notice me. Why aren’t you answering me? I’m so depressed--my soul is so lifeless that my eyes have become dim. I may as well be dead.”

Yet, despite this, the Psalmist expresses assurance of God’s goodness: “I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me” (Ps. 13:5-6). This is an “already, but not yet” praise. This is a praise that comes from already having experienced the faithfulness of God, but not yet having been delivered from the current situation. This is a praise that says, “I know I am still standing face to face with my enemy right now, but God has defended me before, and God will surely defend me again.”

It seems counterintuitive to be encouraging praise in the midst of Lent. Shouldn’t we be sitting around mourning in sackcloth and ashes? Well, yes, but we are also historically living in a post-mm era. We have read or heard the story, and if not, here’s a spoiler alert: Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again! So while we are mourning and memorializing our Saviour, let’s remember that He will be

victorious, and let that foreknowledge give us hope.

**Meditation:** Have you ever felt like the writer of Psalm 13, as if things just couldn't get any better--I mean, worse? Pressed in by troubles on every side and it seems like the Lord just isn't listening? Take heart in knowing that not only does Jesus know how you feel, but He has also experienced it. He has also overcome all of it. As you count down the days until Easter, let this thought give you peace.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank You that even when it seems that You are not there in the midst of our pain, we can look back at the perfect track record of Your faithfulness to us. Even though we can't see you working or hear Your voice, help us to trust that You're working it all out behind the scenes. Intellectually, we know and can repeat sayings like, "If He did it before, He can do it again," but help us to truly believe it in our darkest moments. Amen.

**MIT Henrietta Keazer**

**Saturday, March 9 2019**

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

From the Wisdom Writings associated with King Solomon comes the sober writing regarding the cycles of life. We are familiar with these verses, we have quoted them, memorized them and tacitly affirmed them until it is our turn to "mourn, weep or refrain from embracing." The oft-ignored first line "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens" might encourage us because GOD IS IN CONTROL. The writer envisions life's balance for all of humanity overseen by our Creator. We can resent it, rebel against, bemoan the circumstances but we have no authority to change the timing. WE need not suffer through the ebbs and flows of life. Instead we find solace in the fact that our situations (desired or not) are in Divine order. We are humbled by our inability to dominate our own lives. Yet, we know we shiver and bundle up in the chill of winter knowing spring is on the way. God moves with us, heals us, comforts us and motivates us through all life's changes. On the roller coaster, that life is--God is the Divine operator.

**Mediation:** The vicissitudes of life sometimes feel like too much to bear. This is true. Yet the times to die, times to uproot, times to give up are in perfected harmony with the times to embrace, times to mend and times of peace. Would we appreciate health if we did not experience sickness? Would we cherish love if we didn't know what hate looks like? Probably not.

**Prayer:** Holy God, we kneel in your presence because you are wise. You know us, we would never choose anything but "good times" then we would not appreciate your grace and mercy. Thank you for Divine order. Amen

**Minister Renee Johnson**

**Monday, March 11, 2019**

**Psalm 17**

As we read this Psalm of David, we see that David is praying from a time of crisis. Praying from a time of crisis is common for David, and if truth be told, it's quite common for many of us. David is in trouble – again – as this time his enemies have encamped about him and are plotting and seeking ways in which to bribe him, destroy him and bring him down. His plea to God is that he has done nothing wrong – this time – as his hands are clean and his heart is upright. David's plea is for God's mercy and deliverance. Believing that he has done no wrong, David believes his cry to God is just. It is God who searches the heart and determines whether it is upright, not we ourselves. Jeremiah 17: 9-10 says:

“9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? 10 I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.”

David acknowledges this truism in verse 2:

“Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.”

What is remarkable is David's deep trust in God; that God will deliver him out of his trouble. He calls upon the Lord to help him, and there is no wavering in his belief that God will hear his cry, come to his aid and rescue him.

Our faith is truly put to the test when we are in the midst of a storm. It's easy to have faith in the abstract, but it's when the fiery trial is upon us that our true trust in God is revealed. When we are attacked the natural inclination is to attack or fight back. But in verse 4 David made a choice not to fight back, although he could have, but rather chose to put his trust in God and let the Lord fight his battle. Oh, that during this Lenten season we might learn to trust in the promises of God!

**Meditation:** Have you ever taken matters into your own hands instead of waiting on God to fight your battle? If so, how did that turn out for you? Have you ever crashed through a door instead of waiting for God to open the door for you? If so, what did you learn from that experience? We all make mistakes. The question is, what have we learned from our mistakes? If we had the opportunity to do it all over again, what would we do differently?

**Prayer:** Dear God, our hope in a time of trouble, help us to always put our faith and trust in You. Let us

not lean on our own understanding, but be guided by Your Spirit into all truth. Give us a clean heart and a spirit of thanksgiving and praise. Always hear our plea and give us the faith and strength to hold on and hold out until Your answer comes. In Jesus' Name, we pray, Amen.

**Minister Ross Upshaw**

**Tuesday, March 12, 2019**

**Zechariah 3:1-10**

Zechariah, a minor prophet in the Hebrew Bible, wrote from visions. In this text the prophet Zechariah in verse 3 states, "Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel." The prophet Isaiah and others in the Bible point to the filthy rags imagery as in 64:6 which says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." The idea of taking off what is unclean to clothe ourselves in righteousness beckons some immediate thoughts around the ability to distinguish knowing what is clean versus what is unclean and the ability to have access to these new clean garments. Is this a paternalist jab at the stereotypical poor, dirty, homeless individual because we know of a better vision? And just because we appear "clean" does it mean we are indeed clean? Why do this message and image permeate Old and New Testament? Because filthy rags are a powerful, familiar and effective image in capitalists nations. They challenge and wreck the elitist paradigm associated with power, status and "cleanliness."

In verses 4 and 5 we read, "The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.' Then he said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you. Then I said, 'Put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.'"

Joshua, a successor to Moses, is given a clean turban for his head. Traditionally priests wore turbans, sashes, and robes to set themselves apart from lay people. In a very similar text, Isaiah 26:3 reads, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusted in thee." Perhaps we have to begin our transformation with our mind. What comes out our mouths reveals our thoughts. However, we have to be careful not to make legalistic or deeply cultural held assumptions about what is clean and what is dirty since we are no longer under the law.

Lent is a time for introspection and examination of the garments that clothe our minds, homes, lives,

workplaces, prayer closets, relationships, and finances. The obedience that the Lord is asking for is an opportunity to draw nearer to the pureness of His Love. If we are going to move the boulders out of our way we need to have a clean, bright light.

In verse 10 we read, “In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree, declares the LORD Almighty.”

This charge echoes the gyrations we sometimes go through before we invite folks over for dinner. If you are like me you have to do a massive cleaning, hiding papers, washing clothes, mopping, dusting and scrubbing, so guests are able to visit without the distractions of filth. How much easier it would be to have a clean, consistent, loving testimony.

### **Meditation**

What are the things that cloud your faith walk and muddy your way? What prevents you from obeying God? Are there things that make it tough to have a clean heart and mind? Is there any place in your life where you can remove the dirt without judgment from others and especially from yourself? Are you a hindrance to anyone’s walk and testimony because of your status, culture, or tradition? In what areas in your life can you do some spring-cleaning?

### **Prayer- Remix (inspiration from C. Michael Hawn, Tamela Mann)**

Dear Lord,

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

And renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from Thy Presence;

Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.

Please, Father,

Restore unto me the joy of Thy Salvation;

And renew a right spirit within me.

Lord wash me through and through.

Holy God,

Change me oh God.

Make me more like You.

I beseech You,

Change me oh God.

Wash me through and through.

Change me oh God,

So I may worship You.

I humbly ask You to

Hear me pray.

Amen!

**Dr. Antoinette Ellis-Williams**

**Wednesday, March 13, 2019:**

**Job 1:1-22**

**“When It All Falls Down”**

What happens when it all falls down? This question could be integral to our initial read of this passage surrounding Job and this introduction to his life. Upon the first encounter, this story sounds wonderful, as Job is a man who has wealth, wisdom, and the respect of his community. Job is also one who is highly committed to God. Even in the midst of the possibilities that Job’s sons and daughters may have sinned, Job does not find it out of rationale to continue to intercede on their behalf. Job is perceived to be in a position to continue to experience all of that which is deemed consequential to such a deep level of piety.

However, Job meets with considerable circumstances.

In the midst of an experience where Job seemingly is greatly blessed, impending doom seems to become his reality. His misfortune is not a result of his inactions, but rather a result of a seemingly divinely ordained quadruple occurrence of tragedy. The loss of livestock, loss of property, the raid and murder of the workers (resulting in economic devastation), and ultimately the natural disaster, which resulted in the loss of his children, drove Job into deep grief; so deep that Job took the position of mourning. We had not heard one word from Job since the beginning of this story in his prayer for his children. His actions continue to speak for him, until we hear the words in verse 21, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

What happens when it all falls down? We can often be in moments where we are flourishing and lose sight of how important our time with God is. Many of us had parents or grandparents who were just like Job that “prayed for us, had us on their mind, took the time and prayed for us.” However, when tragedy hits our families and communities, and all that once seemed secure is now on sinking sand, our responses may be unpredictable. Loss can occur on many levels and look a myriad of ways causing us to act without rationale. All that we have been accustomed to doing such as praying, devoting time to God, and being wisdom wells in our community can be overshadowed by our need for fight or flight. However, Job gives us a picture of what may seem irrational to some. Mourn. Lament. Process.

You are allowed to have the space to be human and experience the full realm of emotion. In the words of Hezekiah Walker, “flowing from our hearts are the issues of our hearts.” Sometimes it may seem irrational to express ourselves, but allow yourself in any way you see fit to process how you feel, even if that means you have to “holla and throw up both your hands.” However, return to who you know holds all things together, and that is God.

**Meditation:** Have you allowed yourself to mourn, even in the midst of uncertainty and the unresolved? What unresolved hurts are you holding deep within that occupy your everyday actions? Have you felt yourself separating from God because of something you don’t understand?

**Prayer:** Dear God, I must admit that there are things that I do not understand. There are moments that I have allowed to separate me from You because I did not know how to express my disappointment. In this moment, I place my heart in Your Hand, and I give myself permission to process and release. Although I may not immediately feel the healing needed, I trust that You are on this journey with me. Give me the strength to continue this journey, trusting that You are always in control. Amen.

**Minister K. Nichols**

**Thursday, March 14, 2019**

**Philippians 3:2-12**

We live in a society that has a need for resumes. Children are often told to start building one at an early age, to show all the things they have learned, experienced, and accomplished. While we may need a resume for a job, our achievements have nothing to do with building a relationship with Christ.

This text warns Christians to look out for false teachers, especially those with impressive resumes who speak as though they know the Gospel. Paul even lays out his resume which is full of impressive credentials and good deeds. Yet, Paul compares his accomplishments to garbage. He explains that only faith can save us, and fellowship with Christ is all that really matters.

“7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.”

The most important point here is rather personal for me. You see, when I was a little girl, I tried to do everything that I thought would get me closer to Christ. I got good grades in school, stayed out of trouble, was respectful to my elders, and spent a tremendous amount of time volunteering and giving back to my community. I thought for sure that these things would earn me a spot in Heaven. However, I remember a conversation that I had with my grandmother in which she explained that despite my good works, they earned me nothing toward my position in Christ. Instead, our relationship with Christ is far greater than anything we can own or accomplish, and it is nothing that we can earn. The relationship we are called to in Christ is by Grace through faith alone.

Therefore, we must teach ourselves that Jesus is more desirable than any job, house, car, or anything else that we can buy or enjoy as entertainment. While these things are not sinful, they often interfere with our love and pursuit of Christ.

**Meditation:**

What are you doing to focus more on God, and less on building your resume or acquiring new things?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, thank You for Your Grace and Love towards me and to all those that are Your children. May I rejoice greatly in You for You are my hope and my joy and my everlasting hope.

**MIT Dr. Donna S. Beck**

**Friday, March 15, 2019**

**Genesis 14:17-24**

In 1963 Quincy Jones produced the feminist manifesto “You Don’t Own Me.” This song, recorded by 17-year-old Lesley Gore, shares a young woman’s declaration that a man who is in pursuit of her does not own her. This song reminds me of the interaction of Abram and The King of Sodom: you don’t own me. Abram has come back from an assignment, and he has returned with several goods along with the rescued people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram gave the priest, King Melchizedek, a tenth of the goods that were captured. The priest, who is a believer in the Most High God, blesses Abram. Handing over a tenth of the goods to the priest for Abram is a tithe, as the goods could not have been attained without God. Truth be told, all the goods belong to God because God owns everything. Knowing this, when the King of Sodom calls for Abram, the King of Sodom does his best to negotiate and bargain with Abram. Abram refuses. What does the King of Sodom want with Abram? The King of Sodom wanted the people to be returned to him, and in exchange, Abram could keep all of the goods that were taken from Sodom. Abram has the full permission of the King to keep the goods for himself. However, Abram was not convinced. Abram was clear that the King of Sodom does not worship the one true God. Abram does not want the King of Sodom to tell people that he is responsible for Abram’s riches. Abram refuses to associate with the King of Sodom at all costs. Abram is faithful to God and God alone.

There are some associations and people that desire to be connected to you. There are people who try to bargain and arrange ties to people in order to say that they are in a relationship with you. However, like Abram, there are some associations for which it is not worth risking your reputation. There are some things that God has blessed you with, specifically, that are not worth people tying their name to. The King of Sodom did not have a pure intention, and Abram recognized that early on. As a result, Abram in essence boldly declared to the King of Sodom, “you don’t own me because I belong to God.” It is

important that we understand not only who we are, but whose we are. We must move forward in the hope that we are God's and God's alone. Everything that we have also belongs to God.

### **Meditation:**

Take a personal assessment and examination of your life. To what or to whom can you be bold enough to claim: You don't own me? What are the things or who are the people who try to have a stake in your life? Are there things or people occupying unnecessary space in your life?

### **Prayer:**

Dear God, we first want to acknowledge that we belong to You and You alone. We also acknowledge that everything that we have comes from You and we are responsible for tithing a portion back to You. At the same time, God, we want to have the boldness to declare that no one owns us or has a hold on us. In Jesus Name, we pray. Amen.

**Rev. Porsha D. Williams**

**Saturday, March 16, 2019**

### **Psalm 27**

Psalm 27 is a familiar Psalm that has two distinct parts. The first part deals with David's declaration of belief in God (verses 1-6). And the second part deals with David asking for deliverance by God. He starts off by saying, God is my light and my salvation, and a stronghold of my life and asks the question of whom shall I fear? He realizes that his adversaries are closing in fast on him. Still holding on to his faith David says this one thing. This one thing is everything that David believes in, that God will prevail and will not let his adversary defeat him. David continues to give God the glory in spite of being in the midst of trouble.

Then David acknowledges his confidence in the Lord and says I will wait for the Lord. There are a few things that happen when one waits on someone or something. In our daily lives, we wait for the traffic light to change. We wait in line at the grocery store. We wait in the waiting room at the doctor's office. Wait, wait, wait, wait, and wait. Then things start to happen when we wait; we get anxious, nervous, and impatient. And perhaps David was feeling the same way for a moment before he remembered that his faith is in the Lord. We too should wait on the Lord. But most of the time the Lord is waiting on us. He's

waiting for our prayers, praise, and worship. He wants our whole being so He can deliver us and bless us with His Salvation. This is why we must not be afraid for God will guide and direct our path. God is our salvation, strength, and refuge.

**Meditation:** Have you truly put all your trust in the Lord or do you find yourself impatient? Have you asked God for His deliverance from those things that are blocking your blessing? Do you know Jesus as your personal Savior? All you have to do to preserve your life forever is to believe in what Jesus did for you at the Cross on Calvary. Have you considered the benefits of salvation? Don't delay, believe the truth of the Gospel of your salvation today and like King David you too can know how the Power of God sustains your faith.

**Prayer:** Most Gracious and Holy God illuminate us with Your Holy Spirit Father God. Enable us to have the faith to rely on You in our daily lives. Help us not to lose focus of Your Love that was demonstrated on Calvary. Create in us a clean heart and saturate us with Your everlasting Love we pray.

Amen!

**MIT Crispin N. Johnson, III**

**Monday, March 18, 2019**

### **Psalm 23**

The 23rd Psalm is without question the best-known psalm in the entire Bible. It is one of the first passages we teach our children to memorize when they are young, and these familiar words are spoken often at funerals. During this time of fasting our hope is to experience God in brand new ways, so I invite us to look at these old words with new eyes. The psalm opens with these words "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" and then goes on to paint a beautiful picture of green pastures and quiet waters. In addition to evoking a sense of peace, grasses and streams also supply the basic necessities of food and drink for sheep. So perhaps we would do well to consider the power of this psalm to nourish us as we walk the paths of our daily life; not only in times where death is near. The Lord prepares a banquet for us to feast on even in the presence of those who do not care for us, and our cups are literally running over. David has done a magnificent job of letting us know that we are the sheep of God's pasture who have absolutely nothing to worry about. Our basic needs are provided our whole life with the Lord as our Shepherd!

**Meditation:** Ask yourself, "Do I really believe I have everything that I need?" Perhaps you need to

redefine what is meant by NEED. In your daily devotional period, take time to stop and close your eyes. Imagine yourself lying down in a lush green field with miles of grass around you on all sides. Then visualize yourself walking beside a gently babbling brook of crystal waters flowing. How do you feel - content or worried? Courageous or afraid? Satisfied or lacking? Prayerfully, the positive feeling envelops you. How can you transfer these feelings into your daily life so that you are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have EVERYTHING you need to be content in this world?

**Prayer:** Jehovah Jireh, God my provider, thank You for giving me everything I need. I do not have to want anything with You as my Shepherd. When I find myself making lists of all the things I think I want, remind me that I have food, drink, and shelter. Remind me, generous God, that You already gave me everything I need a long time ago, on a Cross at Calvary – the gift of Eternal Life through the Sacrifice of Your Son Jesus Christ. So instead, help me to make a list of everything You have so graciously provided for me according to Your riches in Glory. Then I will be careful to give You thanks and praise for all of Your good and perfect gifts each and every day of my life. In the generous and matchless Name of Jesus, I pray, Amen.

**Pastor Adkins-Jones**

**Tuesday, March 19, 2019**

**First Corinthians 10: 1-13**

**WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" Santayana**

Pastor, Teacher, Guide, Evangelist Apostle Paul said more simply "I don't want you to be ignorant", Ignorance kills. In these verses, we find Paul retelling the sad history of the Israelite's punishment while under the protection of God. We know God "brought them over and through" the waters; provided food, put up with their complaining but the breaking point for God was their ingratitude and idol worship. We know and the scripture confirms they were favored and guided to the Promised Land. Paul says they became arrogant even self-indulgent and paid the price. It is in this context that the Apostle responds to Corinth's questions regarding "eating food prepared for idols" and their desire to keep contact with idol worshippers. Historical remembrance is Paul's chastening rod, because these Corinthians consider themselves wiser, richer and more sophisticated than their predecessors. They question Paul's admonitions overly strict adherence to inconvenient laws that make no sense in their lives. They see no harm in their behavior. They resist the idea of giving up their social routines for God's sake. Sound familiar?

WE know socialization is never the main issue. Rather, a mindset of rebellion, patterns of indulgence, exciting enticements, excuses and rationalized sin are the traps that take us down. God strengthens us

when we are weak. God knows our weaknesses and warns us there are limits. When we move beyond our limits, we too can fall prey to tempter.

Meditation: All around us are opportunities to “slip into darkness”. Some we may see coming others lay in wait for us. WE serve a God who not only knows what is coming but she helps us to prevail against the force that would destroy us. We must keep watch and restrain ourselves from some of the situations that seem innocent but will take us down.

Prayer: Thank you God, our friend and our refuge. You bring to our remembrance the pitfalls in life. Some situations seem so enticing that we can easily fall into the traps. Guide us Lord so that we can live our lives and be pleasing in your sight.

Amen.

**Wednesday, March 20, 2019**

**Luke 13:22-31**

At the beginning of this scripture, someone unnamed and unidentified asks Jesus an interesting question: “Lord will those who are saved be few?” It’s not known why the question was asked, nor what the intent may have been. But Jesus never directly answered the question. Instead, He says in verse 24:

“Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”

In other words, Jesus is telling them to worry about their own soul salvation first, before they worry about someone else. Make sure you are in the door first. You can’t help someone else get in if you’re not in yourself. In the sense of your own personal salvation and relationship with God, the door is narrow and exclusive, not wide and all inclusive – there are requirements. “Strive” is the operative word here. There are some things that one must do in order to enter through the narrow door. There is some work that needs to be done. The door is narrow, and we have to fit through it. That may require shedding some things and leaving some other things behind. Things like unbelief, hatred, envy, jealousy, self-righteousness, unforgiveness and being judgmental, just to name a few. These are things we need to let go of as soon as possible because we don’t know when the Lord will shut the door, and we won’t be able to enter at all.

The misconception may well be that because we go to church and serve on a committee or a board that all is well with our soul. Today’s scripture refutes that. What is our personal relationship with Jesus? Have we striven to enter through the narrow door? Those are the questions we need to ask ourselves.

There are some that are deemed by others not to be worthy to enter through the narrow door because of their background, past mistakes, whom they chose to love and how they identify themselves. But thanks be to God, only the “Master” can make the determination as to who enters and who does not. Those that are thought to be last may well be first and vice versa.

**Meditation:** Have you let go of that which puffs you up and may hinder you from entering in through the narrow door? During this Lenten season are you willing to let go of the things that so easily beset you? Are you willing to do some self-examination to honestly determine your strengths and weaknesses in your walk with God? Is it worth your time and effort to do the work necessary to have a better understanding of who God is in your life and what God requires of you?

**Prayer:** Precious Lord, take our hand and lead us to be and to do what You have called us to be and to do. Help us to lay aside those things that would hinder us from entering into Your Presence with joy and thanksgiving. Help us to formulate an authentic and loving relationship with You. Forgive us of our sins of commission and omission and bless our going out, and our coming in. In Your wonderful and Matchless Name, we do pray, Amen.

**Minister Ross Upshaw**

**Wednesday, March 21, 2019**

**Psalm 63:1-8**

### **An Empty Tank On An Empty Road**

It only took one time, one time—late on a highway stretch on the south side of Virginia—for me to learn my lesson. With a gas light glaring orange and a red-lit, dying phone that refused to charge, I found myself frantic, searching, and desperate for a place I could stop. This wasn't the Garden State Parkway, full of Sunoco's and Starbucks. This was an abyss of rural wilderness that had no end in sight, and I was about to be stranded, without any means of communication, in the middle of the night.

It felt like an eternity of miles before I found an exit. I pulled off with a spark of momentary relief, only to stop, look both ways, and realize my mistake—I was met with darkness. Still, I searched for the station that the cobalt blue highway signs had promised would be there, but to no avail. Half a mile down an empty two-lane road, I circled back, horrified by my circumstance, in tears over the precious gas I

couldn't afford to have wasted on a wild goose chase.

My prayers that night were fervent. I chastised my 20-something self, always careful, always organized, knowing better than to have allowed myself to get into this situation. Why hadn't I paid more attention? How did this even happen? I pushed back against the panic circling ominously around my heart. I fought back the fear rising in my throat, resisting the imagined scenarios of what might be to come.

And, I began to pray.

By many narrations, Psalm 63 is a morning prayer, one filled with beauty, finesse, and praise. It is often recited as if sung by someone whose heart is full and whose mind is clear. This is the kind of song you play when you wake up, and it is finally "Fri-yay," the kind of song you sing when you feel like clapping your hands and stomping your feet on a Sunday. It's the kind of song you sing when you've been fasting during Lent, and you finally sit down salivating in a "praise-the-Lord-for-my-Moma's-cooking" kind of moment.

"O God, You are my God! Early will I seek you!" (Psalm 63:1)

Yes, Lord, Yes!

But, no.

David actually writes this psalm in a situation that couldn't be further from a joyous context. We find David here in the midst of his own desperation, flung far from the oblique assurances that "everything will be all right," bound up by obstacles that are occluding every horizon of his possibility. Here David is, in fact, running from the rebellion of his own son, Absalom, his one bloodline who would have him dead. (2 Sam 15-18)

This is not David's first time in the desert. It is a place he has been more than once before, far from a peaceful shore, out of his depth, sinking to rise no more. He is taunted and shamed, reminded of all the atrocities he has accomplished, of all the atrocities he has allowed. David's cries are embodied and very, very real:

My soul thirsts ...

My flesh longs ...

In a place with no peace, out of options with nowhere to turn, David prays. His victory has not been

prophesied, his triumph has not been foreseen. But God is David's God. David has seen God move, has beheld the Power and the Glory of the Lord, has felt a Love that was bigger and better than life—even as he may very well be on the brink of losing his own—and David still sings glory to the Lord's name. What do you do, when you've done all you can?

Dark moments do befall us when we have sown discord and disregard. Dark moments do befall us, even when it seems we have done everything right. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. (Matt 5:45) Sometimes our tanks end up on empty. But no matter where we find ourselves in life, no matter what news scrolls the work of evil across our screens, no matter what that source of stress is that keeps us awake with worry through the watches of the night ...

You are my help.

God is indeed our help, and in God shall we trust.

When we find ourselves out of gas, with no one that we can call, when it is late in the midnight hour, and we look for direction to only be met with darkness, when we feel ourselves too many miles down an empty road, when we are at a loss for what to do... you do this.

Remember, recall, and resolve to press onward, because You are my help.

(PS: And if you're still wondering, what happened that night? I made it, even when the miles left in my reserve tank said that I wouldn't. I was safe, and I had survived. The Lord kept me in the shadow of Holy Wings. Amen.)

### **Meditation:**

What do our prayers say, not just about who we are, but about the mighty God we serve? Are we intentional in regularly remembering God's faithfulness to us, so that it is not so easily forgotten in the time of storm? In a world filled with terror and worry, what might it really look like for our soul—as individuals, but also as a congregation and community—to truly cling to God?

### **Prayer:**

Help us to remember, O God—

When fear camps around us,

Your Power and Glory, we have already beheld.

When we feel beyond the bounds of Your Presence,

You have promised, when we seek after You, to be found.

When we are fainting with thirst,

You offer living water from an infinite well.

When our hearts are broken,

They can be mended by the memories of Your faithfulness.

When death stalks our dreams,

Your unfailing Love is better than life.

Your Wings cover, shadow, hide and protect us.

Your Right Hand upholds us...

And for this, we will always sing. Amen.

**Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones**

**Thursday, March 22, 2019**

**Revelation 3:1-6**

In verses 2 and 3 the Lord cries out for us to, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."

For the walking dead, zombies, and the undead, the only purpose is to spread the virus--to create more undead creatures to move about the earth. Most of what we see, hear and read is centered on destruction and mindlessness, an undead life. This spoke directly to my heart. I have found myself just going through

the motions; disconnected at times unable to connect. It has been hard to even write these devotionals because the fact is they bring back to memory my father's life and death. As many of you know I spend a great deal of time on social media to push back against the temptation to disconnect from people who need a word of encouragement. My newsfeed reflects this challenge to wake up and reflects the very real perils of the undead. Some are stuck, dead because of depression, trauma, anxiety, and pain. One friend recently revealed, "Almost two years ago, I had the opportunity to think about ending my life. I was in a really dark space for a moment in time and couldn't navigate through it..." His bold declaration stunned most of us. This seemingly vibrant, national leader with a beautiful wife and small loveable children was undead. How could we have missed the signs? Are we too wrapped up in our own dead lives, faking life, just too blind to see? Others are asleep because of fear of failure, a colonized mind, living under systems of oppression or just sheer exhaustion from navigating life.

In Spike Lee's movie *School Daze*, Dap, at the end of the film comes out with a big school bell and screams, "WAKE UP!" He warns us that unless we Wake Up, we will continue to cannibalize one another, spread the virus of self-hate and live in ignorance. John, in this Revelation text, sounds the alarm, warning us that if we are asleep, we will miss the return of the Savior.

But how can we wake up when every cultural message makes us want to continue in our malaise? "...Strengthen what remains and is about to die." In my Facebook friend's confession, he further writes, "I grabbed a gang of post-its and started to write out as many things I've been in denial about, and it literally was the best actionable step I could take at that moment...Fast forward a year or so later. I came full circle, faced my denials, and connected to life and my insecurities..." He woke up with the assistance of therapy and other work to strengthen what remained. If there is any life, there is hope. There is a possibility. "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 3:6

### **Meditation**

What holds you back from experiencing the fullness of God's purpose for your life? Are these roadblocks socially comfortable to stay dead because you are afraid? Have you made peace with your past? Is there a place you see a light that you can run towards? How much no talk, hate talk, won't talk, do you engage in with yourself or those closest to you? How much time do you spend on life-giving, God sanctioned, Holy Ghost powered activities and meditation?

### **Prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father,

I confess that I am weak. I am sometimes too tired to even move forward. My body is weak and so is my spirit. Quiet my soul from all the noise and temptations of this world. Search my heart Lord and reveal to me anything that keeps me dead. Give me the strength and courage to break away from those things and persons that seek to kill my light and my life. Awaken in me a new spirit of praise, joy, power, and love. Grow in me that seed down deep inside so I can be more like you. Make me a living example, a living testimony of Your Grace and Mercy. Let us have ears to hear Your Word.

In the Mighty, Matchless Name of Jesus.

Amen.

**Dr. Antoinette Ellis-Williams**

**Saturday, March 23, 2019:**

**Luke 6:43-45**

**“Walking Through the Grove”**

I can still remember the days of visiting my grandmother's house in Atoka, TN. Living on five acres, she had the most beautiful flowers and shrubbery in the front; large bunches of collard, mustards, and turnips in the back; and the very rare fig tree which was tucked neatly into the corner of her fence at the beginning of the driveway. The most noticeable was the row of trees that lined the west side of her property. These large trees were towering above me as a young child. I thought of them as canopies to the heavens, for as far as I could see up, their foliage was reaching high into the sky. These trees would yield peaches, lemons, and apples from them.

I would get joy going to grandma's house and tasting the fresh fruit that she would collect from the trees as they yielded their fruit. However, it was important to know that sometimes the fruit that would come from the trees would not be healthy for consumption. That fruit would be considered bad, and Grandma Lillie would have to inspect each one to ensure that no one would eat this fruit and subsequently become sick. Whether it was environmental factors or poison from external sources, all the fruit wasn't good fruit. Sometimes what grew on the trees would look like fruit, but rather it was something that had grown as a hybrid from some other plant. All fruit isn't good fruit.

In this passage, Jesus teaches us “each tree is known by its fruit.” When a tree produces bad fruit, it can no longer be classified as a healthy tree. In comparison, plants can only produce what they are capable of

producing. In the process of development, there can be negative factors introduced from the outside during the stages of growth which impacts those things on the inside, thereby impacting the way in which we express what's really on the inside of us. Out of our mouths speak the wealth of our innermost being.

Your fruit doesn't have to be bad fruit. However, sometimes we can be accustomed to accepting people and their ways for just who they are. Our challenge is to not only inspect motives in others, but also in ourselves. "Perception is reality" because what we show is what we really are. What we give others is what we yield. In our context today, we see that the ways in which the fruit of Christianity is being questioned as the landscape, seems to have strong trees that yield fruits of hate, injustice, and inequity. However, all trees are not the same. We are not required to accept the labels of those trees, which look like us but don't produce the same fruit as us. You are known by the fruit that you bear. When people look at the grove of trees, will they see your fruit as good or as bad?

**Meditation:** Am I constantly seeking evidence of my innermost connection with God? Does the fruit I bear display my witness as good or potentially dangerous? Am I producing my absolute best in all that I do? Where can I allow God to discard what could potentially harm others while continuing to nourish what gives life to others through my willingness to be fruitful?

**Prayer:** Dear Creator, my heart abounds in Your love and Your goodness. May the goodness that You have created me with show through the ways in which I produce in my everyday life. May those things, which seek to alter Your plan for my life and my actions, be detached so that I may continue to do what I have been created to do. Let no deception present itself as Your plan. May Your perfect plan always guide my production. Amen.

**Minister K. Nichols**

**Monday, March 25, 2019**

**Psalm 39**

Two things always make me think about how short life is: my birthday and funerals. Every year, in the days after my birthday, I look through old photo albums as a way of reflecting on my life. However, I always get a bit teary eyed at pictures of family and friends who have died. One minute they were here, and the next they were gone. Psalm 39 reminds me of why we need to "get right with God" now. So, instead of living for today, how can we live for eternity?

Psalm 39 reflects on David's struggle with this question. David is being punished by God for a sin of which he is guilty. He is ill and believes that he is going to die. Yet, instead of speaking out against God to others, he speaks to God.

"4 Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life."

"5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath."

It is easy to forget how short life is when you are healthy and strong. You almost feel invincible, as if you will always be around. Then, a friend or family member becomes ill, and no matter how much you pray their life still comes to an end. It is then that we look at life differently and how short it really is. Yet, despite David's suffering, he continues to put his trust in the Lord.

"6 Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it."

"7 But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you."

When you start to think about how short life is, you begin to question the energy you put into those things that give us false security; things like cars, homes, jobs, etc. We need to understand that God is the Source of our lives. He is the One in complete control, and only He can give us true security.

**Mediation:**

What are you counting on to make you happy? Only the Lord will satisfy. Put your faith in Him. Since life is short, what are you doing to make your years count for eternity?

**Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, forgive me when I sin and fail to live up to Your Glory. Give me a loving and forgiving heart toward those who do me wrong. I ask that You bless those who are suffering or struggling. In this, I pray, Amen.

**MIT Dr. Donna Beck**

**Tuesday, March 26, 2019**

## **Ezekiel 17:1-10**

When I was growing up, my mother and I would watch The Soaps in the afternoon after school. My favorite Soap was the ABC hit, All My Children. For one, Newark actor Michael B. Jordan was on the show, which was a reason for me to watch. However, my mother enjoyed watching what trouble Erica Kane would find herself in every day. In Soap like fashion, you would never know at the end of the episode, because the episodes always ended with a cliffhanger. Cliffhangers are designed to keep us guessing and push us to ponder on the multiple possibilities and outcomes of a storyline. Cliffhangers leave us with questions that require an important answer, yet that question may not be answered for some time. In this portion of the text, Ezekiel 17:1-10, we are presented with a cliffhanger from God. This portion of text ends with questions for Ezekiel's consideration as he is instructed to share the oracle with the Israelites. This oracle, in the parable, shares of two eagles and a vine. One eagle plants a seed of the cedar by abundant water and in fertile soil, yet it grew like a willow with branches, hanging low with leaves, with its roots directly underneath it. Another eagle comes, and then those roots begin reaching towards the water. The vine moved its roots towards the second eagle with the hopes that the eagle would provide water. The connectivity to water and the intake of water allows for the vine to grow fruit.

We ultimately witness a story without a direct answer. God asks us to discern which is better. Should the vine stay put in its original soil? There was nothing wrong with its original habitat. However, with the presence of the second eagle, the vine now recognizes that it wants and desires more, specifically, more water. However, will uprooting the vine allow it to flourish and bear fruit? As we consider our own lives, if things are transplanted, will they still survive? Will the vine stripped of its fruit wither? It may; it may not. Staying connected to a familiar source presents stability. Yet, there are moments where being transplanted has its benefits, as change can be healthy. Knowing what works best for the vine will only come with discernment over time. These cliffhanger questions compel us to think about these things.

**Meditation:** Inspect the roots of your vine. Are your roots flourishing and thriving? Is your vine rooted in good soil? Are the roots thriving and reaching out towards the water? Is your vine bearing fruit, or are the leaves withering? What would be the risk of being and/or not being transplanted? Take some time to meditate on some of these questions.

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, as we journey through this day, help us to be mindful of where we are planting our seeds. Lord, help us to remember that the True Vine is in Jesus, The Christ. Help us to assess the health of our vines to bear fruit and not to merely exist in the garden. In Jesus Name,

Amen.

**March 27, 2019**

**Luke 13: 18 – 21**

There are some distinct characteristics of the mustard seed. The mustard seed is 1 to 2 millimeters in diameter and can grow 4 to 15 feet in height with a spread of 20 feet. But in order for the mustard seed to reach its full potential, some preparation has to take place. The seed has to be planted into the soil, nourished by watering it so that the seed can sprout up through the soil and receive sunlight, and breathe the air so it can grow. Just like the mustard seed, some preparation has to take place in order for our faith to grow. Our faith starts off small. It has to be nourished with the Word of God. Then we have to believe God's Word, and repent and confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. In the second parable, it explains how yeast and three measures of flour are needed to make dough expand. We have one parable talking about starting off with a small amount of faith and growing into larger faith. The second parable talks about the ingredients that one needs to experience the Kingdom of God.

Just like the mustard seed God's seed (The Holy Spirit) has been planted in us and has to be nurtured through His Word and prayer. As our faith grows in God, God's faithfulness grows in us. We then develop a relationship with God. Now there are some ingredients needed to make the relationship with God complete. The mixer is the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just like the flour needs the yeast in order to become dough, we need The Father for He is the Creator of all things and the First Person of the Trinity. Then The Father sweetens the Trinity up with The Son (Jesus) and follows Jesus up with the main ingredient, the Holy Spirit, so that God's Kingdom comes and His Will is done on earth as it is in Heaven.

**Meditation:** Do you have the faith of a mustard seed? Do you have the right ingredients to experience The Kingdom of God?

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, right now in the Name of Jesus we come giving You all the glory, honor, and praise. You said if we just have a little faith that You will turn it into abundant faith. So here we are asking for Your forgiveness for not being totally dependent on You. Shower us with Your everlasting Love. Create in us a clean heart and a new spirit we pray In Jesus' Name.

Amen!

**Thursday, March 28, 2019**

**Joshua 4:1-13**

We see in this scripture that Joshua was directed by God to leave a memorial of 12 stones to attest to the fact that God had delivered the people of God once again. It is a testament to the fact that God keeps the promises that God makes. The people of God were able to cross over the Jordan on dry ground without harm. It was another miracle of God that needed to be remembered and passed down from generation to generation. Like Joshua and the children of Israel, we should always make room to remember what God

has done for us. The universal church as a collective does remember the life and sacrifice of Jesus as noted on the liturgical calendar or Christian years; such as Lent, Easter, Advent, and Christmas. These religious seasons and holidays are times of remembrance as to what God has done for us individually and collectively. Joshua wanted the stones to not only be a memorial but an opportunity to engage younger generations in dialogue regarding their meaning and how they represent the Love and faithfulness of God.

What are our memorial stones as Christians? What can we show or tell our children and future generations about our faith in Jesus the Christ? Perhaps one of your stones is your baptism; that memorable day when you made a choice to give your life to Jesus. Maybe one of your stones is your church membership; when you decided to get involved in Christian service by using your gifts and talents to make a difference within the church and your community. One of your stones could be your testimony of healing and deliverance; how God and only God brought you through sickness, grief, harm or danger. Whatever your memorial stones may be, they are to perpetuate the memory of the love and blessings of Jesus in your life for your children and generations to come.

After the children of Israel crossed over the River Jordan, they prepared themselves for war. Likewise, when we cross over our own “Personal Jordan”, we must prepare ourselves for battle. We prepare for battle by putting on the full armor of God as referenced in Ephesians 6:10-18:

“10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of

evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

**Meditation:** Have you taken the time to think about and remember your memorial stones? You might be surprised at how many you have gathered over time. How many times has God helped you to cross over a “Jordan” in your life; times you crossed over unscathed and unharmed? You didn’t even get wet! Have you talked about your “Jesus Stones” with your children and others? Before you leave home every day, do you make sure you have on the full armor of God?

**Prayer:** Dear God, open our minds to the message in Your Word and teach us more about You in Christ. Remind us to always be prepared for battle, for we never know when a fiery trial may come upon us. We never know when the enemy may try to attack. Thank You for giving us the full armor of God to protect us. Our testimonies, along with Your promises, are our comfort, for You are the same God yesterday, today and forever. In the Name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.

**Minister Ross Upshaw**

**Friday, March 29, 2019**

**Friday, March 29, 2019**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5: 6-15**

In the iconic words of Queen Bee” Such a funny thing for me to try to explain, How I’m feeling and my pride is the one to blame, Just how your love can do what no one else can-Got me looking so crazy right now, Your love’s got me looking so crazy right now”

In our Divine Imagination, we might consider this might be The Apostle Paul’s response to the Church at Corinth when they criticized him for his fervor over the Gospel message. Paul who by then, had been beaten, thrown out of towns, ship wrecked, lashed and imprisoned remained faithful and excited about work for Jesus. Yet, to the cynical eye, Paul confidence seemed like a man who was “out of his mind”. Even his enthusiasm about death gave the Corinthians pause. Paul turns the questions back on the questioners by saying “We walk by faith not by sight” Do you even know what you’re looking at, “ If you knew what I know about Jesus” you would behave this way also. You would not be able to resist, making disciples, honoring God with your whole heart. You would never worry about dying because in death we are reunited with the Savior Is this our testimony? Do we proclaim an exciting hope that is

grounded in the sacrifice of Jesus? Do we become discouraged in ministry by the criticism of others who are put off by our passion for the Lord? Paul was certain of his mission; questions about his competence did not sway him. He is our example of how to be “crazy in Love with Jesus” So crazy he had to tell everybody.

Mediation: Are we afraid to look and act “Crazy for God”? Are we “besides ourselves” with confidence in the salvation of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ? Do we walk confidently in our ministry in spite of the sacrifices and challenges we face? Paul is our example; nothing can keep us from being witnesses of God’s Great works in our lives Crazy in love.

Prayer: Lord, we Thank you for your steadfast enthusiastic love for us. Help us to share our joy with all whom we encounter. Help us to not hold back. Amen

**Friday, March 30, 2019**

**Exodus 32:7-14**

**Polite Impatience**

I’ll admit it.

Some people, who shall remain nameless, may have described my personality as “Type A.” Now, I’m not exactly sure about this prescription in full (hah!), but here’s the truth: I do like things organized, and I do like to get things done. This is because I know myself very well and if I put something off? Days, weeks, dare I say months may pass before I finally get back around to it.

This perhaps manifests nowhere more clearly than it does in my home. Let me tell you — my nesting instincts are fierce. At any spontaneous moment, like a flash of lightning from the sky, I may decide that all of the furniture? It must be rearranged! The paint on these walls? I can’t live like this, everyone in the car, we’re going to Home Depot! The art and the photographs? Everything must be rematted and reframed! This bed on the second floor of the house? I won’t be able to sleep if it isn’t taken out to the garage as soon as possible!

(I’ll pause here and say — can anyone relate? Surely I’m not alone in this!)

I am constantly organizing, purging, decluttering, minimizing, sprucing, editing, and decorating my home. I’m a person deeply affected by space, and if I don’t feel peace and ease, I can’t stop arranging until I finally do.

Often, I enlist my beloved spouse in these acts, in a script, some of you may have heard before:

Me: Hey love! I just had an idea, I really need that table to go down to the garage.

My Beloved: Of course, honey! I'll do that. (Plays video game)

Me: (Waits five seconds.)

Also, Me: (Gets up and starts moving the furniture myself, bad back and all.)

My Beloved: Baby!!! WHAT are you doing? I just said that I would do that and help.

Me: Well, I couldn't wait forever, so I'll just do it myself! Pfffft.

When I am in my own head, on my own schedule, the only time that I can see is my own. The sense of urgency and the anxiety that I feel are very real for me, but they do the work of distorting my own perception of need. I've got a great heart full of good intentions, fueled by a drive to get through to a destination and be done. In and of itself, that's not a bad quality at all—and in many ways, it's that kind of drive that gets honored in our society, as having “what it takes” to succeed. But it is the polite impatience of my personality, the seduction of self-sufficiency, whether it's not wanting to bother someone else or simply not being willing to wait for help, that can often put me in a situation where I'm more likely to harm myself than accomplish anything else.

Now, does that sound familiar? Because when the people of Israel were waiting on Moses to return from communing with God, when they were waiting on a fresh Word from their Lord, their “polite impatience” almost cost them everything. Instead of trusting their own truth, instead of remembering that the God of the Exodus had already delivered them from out of Egypt, instead of embracing joy and freedom right where they were, they let their anxieties preclude their realities. Their own sense of urgency distorted their understanding of who God truly is, and that the God who authored time would certainly not be the One they had to worry about wasting it.

But how often is ‘How long, O Lord?’ our true cry? Surely we have all been in circumstances where we have cried out to the Lord, perhaps in moments where there simply wasn't anything else left for us to do, no place for us to exert our control. But in this case, the people of God weren't at the height of their suffering; they weren't yearning with desire and need. They were just restless. To them, it seemed like Moses had been taking too long, to the point where the people weren't even sure that he was coming back. And so, they did what they had always done—they turned to old habits, familiar ways, golden

calves, and false idols, in search of an anchor in their comfort instead of the moving out in faith. They wanted to nest themselves in an atmosphere of nostalgia, instead of pressing into the presence of the One who had accomplished their liberation.

In this lesson, God is angered by this “stiff-necked” people, whose poor habits and internalized oppressions have left them blind to love. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people, and God, as God always does, relents in love. There are so many attempts to describe this passage in terms of what it says about God, but this story in scripture tells us so much more about the plight of humanity, and the failures of our memories to serve us well. Even when armed with our own clear testimonies of God’s Grace, how easy it is to take up the weapons of this world thinking that they will be how our battles are won!

Perhaps this is because liberation isn’t easy. Sure, we can all proclaim that we want to get free, but what do we want to be free from? What do we want to be free for? And are we really willing to leave the material things we’ve placed our trust and security in, to serve the God we say we love? Arguably, these people thought they were doing the right thing (even Aaron assisted them in their idol-making!), by serving God in the ways they had prescribed, in the ways they always had. But if we want to walk with God into a promised land, our steps can’t be shackled by the inherited bounds of cultural convention.

Lent is a time where we are called to examine just how stiff our necks are. What are the places in our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our world that we turn away from? Who are the people, what is the work, that God is calling us to, but that we refuse to see? What habits have we refused to give up, even in an effort to draw near to our God? What possibilities are being missed because they are relegated to the peripheries of our vision? God’s Love for us abounds, even when there is much in the world for God to be angry about. If God is faithful to relent in love, then why aren’t we?

### **Meditation:**

Maybe we don’t melt down gold into the shape of animals these days, but how many times in life are we “quick to turn away from” something God has said? Perhaps an affirmation, perhaps a plan, perhaps a promise? How many times have we decided that our waiting on God is actually wasting our time, and have headed out in our own directions only to be met with obstacles or frustrations? How many times have we made other idols—other images after which we measure ourselves, judge ourselves, and discipline ourselves— that have more to do with the promises of this world than the work of the eternal?

### **Prayer:**

Help us to remember, O God—

That we are not called

Away from any trouble in this world,

But instead, we are called to proclaim

Your promises

And to live out Your Glory,

Even while we wait.

Amen.

**Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones**

**Monday, April 1, 2019**

**Psalm 53**

David writes forcefully in verse 1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, and their ways are vile; there is no one who does good.”

Of course, as church-going folks, we may be tempted to do as Peter and say to the Lord, “I will never deny you!” But Peter serves as a reminder of what can easily happen when the nation-state rises up and threatens our basic needs. We see folks used as props and puppets because they are afraid and they need a job.

David speaks from a place of experience. He knows the depths of his own betrayal to the Lord, and better yet he knows God’s forgiveness to him, over and over again.

But what does denial look like in the 2019 church? Silence. Doubt. Worry. We are living at a time, not unlike the days of King David. Corruption, civil unrest, enslavement are not unfamiliar. However, the Church is too silent at a time we need to let the world know there is a God who hates evil, a God who is on the side of the poor, weak and outcast--children in cages, harsh deportation, women losing control over their bodies, environmental havoc, the rewriting of rules and policies on sexual assault, erasing the rights of LGBTQ+ and limiting of voting rights, to name a few. We are silent about ethical violations and

corruption of our leaders, especially those in our own parties. Maybe we don't want to deal with it or we believe these things of the world don't concern Christians. Here is the thing, we are called to be salt in the world not silent and invisible. Being in the world and not of it requires walking boldly in the midst of the mess and confusion. Jesus is the very embodiment of what it means to speak truth to power.

We see the escalating costs and closures of colleges and universities and begin to worry if an education even matters. Or perhaps we don't want to move across the country because we "don't know anyone." David cautions against this life of unbelief and denial. If we are afraid, we are suggesting that there is no God. Somehow we believe we have to take everything on our shoulders. God provides doctors, lawyers, teachers, electricians, custodians, and bus drivers. God provides everything we need. God sees us even when we cannot see Him/Her.

The problem is that we see God in very narrow ways so, therefore, His/Her power is limited. Our betrayal is evident because our faith is binary and restrictive. God is the rain, the fog, and the sunshine. God is everywhere. When we get hold of the power and majesty and breath of God, we will stand in awe as David did. God wants to restore all of us.

### **Meditation**

What worries you? What causes you to second guess that God is working on your behalf? Where can you become a bold witness to the mighty Love of God? Are you arrogant, controlling, and/or afraid? How can you turn over and release the things that weigh you down? Have you turned away from your call? Why don't we give everything to God? God is ready to welcome you just like She/He did for David and Peter.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord,

You are my Sunrise and my Sunset.

You are the Alpha and Omega.

I am grateful for Your Sacrifice on the Cross, for me.

Please forgive my unbelief in times of

Sickness, debt, heartache, unemployment, stress,

And incarceration.

Help me, Heavenly Father and Mother, to know You  
are right by my side in everything that You called into  
Existence.

You have done so many great things for me

When I know I didn't deserve Your favor.

Shower me with Your Holy Ghost Power and Peace.

Help me to give thanks when I cannot see or feel You nearby.

Remind me of Your Presence in times of joy and death.

I will trust You, my Lord because You have never failed me yet.

Amen. Amen.

**Dr. Antoinette Ellis-Williams**

**Tuesday, April 2, 2019**

**Revelation 19:9-10**

**“You Are Welcomed”**

In today's world, the celebrations of birth, marriage, and death are those events which mark significant life events in which celebrations are always in order. While the range of emotions may be broad, these occasions are those in which much time is spent planning. One of the most daunting tasks is to create the guest list. This guest list is meticulously thought out as these experiences are usually only reserved for those who have a close personal connection to the host. Usually, these guests are persons who have endured the ups and downs of one's personal life, been consistent in their presence, and in many times had to stand up for their decisions to have a relationship with the host. It is also a time of gathering where

those with deep soul connections with each other can celebrate how their relationships have survived the test of time, Party planning can be tough, but in the end, it is rewarding. Maintaining meaningful relationships can be tough, but they are worth it.

The writer gives us the glimpse of the great conquest of the empire that will happen in the Parousia - “Second Coming” in which the empire will be conquered, God’s people will see Salvation, and the Marriage of the Lamb and the Bride will commence. And according to the scripture, “Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb!” Those who are invited are those who committed themselves to follow the Gospel. This Gospel is counter-cultural to the empire under which the people lived, but they committed to living above the temptation, trials, and evil powers which sought to destroy their lives. They did not give into the social control mechanisms of the Roman Imperial system. They did not fall for the “fake news” but they held closely the Good News! Because they did not bend, they did not break, they are invited to take part in this celebration.

When we look all around us, we can see the ways in which people are excluded by barriers. These barriers have people feeling they aren’t welcomed to be a part of the accepted, although they faithfully do the work of liberation. Barriers do not bind this celebration in our reading, but rather it is inclusive of those who have taken the Gospel to heart and accepted the call to do this Work. These are those who have accepted the Prophetic Spirit of Jesus in their Work. When we accept the Prophetic Call, we do not limit it to foretelling, but also to forth telling by speaking against the capitalist, imperial structures, which seek to dehumanize, marginalize, and oppress others through the spirits of exclusion and exception. We also adopt the boldness to embrace a Kingdom mindset in which all persons are able to recognize and exist with their entire God-given being. This text lets us know that there are others who hold this same spirit, as we are all necessary to do this Prophetic Work, which Jesus embodied in the flesh during His time on this earth in the flesh. In the great Parousia, those who have taken this Spirit of this Work will all celebrate together. You are welcomed.

**Meditation:** Have I fully embraced the Spirit that comes along with the Calling? What more is worth fighting for on behalf of others?

**Prayer:** Dear God. You are my strength in these times. I am committed to doing this great Work, but I need Your continued strength. As I live out this Calling, help me to continue to be bold in the face of opposition. May You get glory from this Work that I do, and I look forward to that Great Day when all will be realized and we shall celebrate the victory. Amen!

**Minister K. Nichols**

**Wednesday, April, 3rd 2019**

**Luke 9: 10-17**

Our scripture for today is a familiar story. It is the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand with two fish and five loaves of bread. We have heard this story preached from pulpits, studied in Bible study, and taught in Sunday School. In this Lenten season, we are called to examine and reflect on the things that are familiar as we grow to understand new things about ourselves. Sometimes, we are so accustomed to getting to the miracle that we miss the moments that surround the miracle. Today, I invite you to pause and consider these things. First, the text tells us that the crowds have followed Jesus once they have learned that He was in Bethsaida. Jesus healed as he needed to. However, the disciples were more concerned about sending the crowds away because there was not enough food to go around for the five thousand. The disciples thought it would be better to send the people away to the villages and the countryside for food and lodging. Jesus, rather than entertaining the proposal, replies with a direct response, "Give them something to eat." Often times, we are looking for other people to solve an issue, or we want to refer people to other sources because we don't think we have the capacity to serve them. Jesus isn't concerned about how much the disciples have. He is more invested in giving the people what they have. The disciples make the excuse to say that they only have five loaves and two fish. Jesus instructed the disciples to group the people into groups of 50. Then Jesus gave thanks for the food and had the disciples distribute it to the people. The best part is, there were broken pieces of bread that were left over after the feeding.

In essence, what we come to understand is that there are people in need who are following what we are doing as a ministry. Given this, everything we need to serve them, we already have. It may not seem like much at times, but the resources can stretch when we place it in the right hands. A lot can be done with a little; however, it is in how we perceive the possibilities that make the resources endless. In addition, we come to learn that the disciples are looking to Jesus for an answer as opposed to trying to find an answer within themselves. For instance, no one asked, "Teacher, what can we do for the people? The people are in need, yet all we have are these fish and this bread. What are the options for us?" What is wrong with asking for help? Or are we trying to hoard the resources for ourselves, instead? Asking how they can stretch is not a practical thing for our situations. This season of Lent is not just about our own personal journey. It's also a communal journey. We must find ways to make sure the community is full and

supplied for.

### **Meditation:**

How are you willing to share your resources with the community? Are you waiting for Jesus to enact a miracle or are you willing to assess what you have and feed the people? What will be your commitment to making sure everyone has access to the resources? How can we help the resources stretch? What is the importance of giving thanks?

### **Prayer:**

Dear God, we give You thanks for all that You have supplied for us. Because we believe that we are active disciples, help us to share our resources with all of our brothers and sisters as You see fit. Help us to trust You with the little. And help us to be good stewards over the excess and the leftovers.

**Rev. Porsha D. Williams**

**April 4, 2019**

### **Philippians 2: 19-24**

I remember graduating from college and landing my first real job. It required that I get a car to get back and forth to work. I did not have any money. So, I bought the cheapest thing that I could get, with no money down, and low car payments. It was a Pontiac Lemans, manual! Yes, a stick shift, and I had never driven a stick. Still, I got the car and called the best teacher I knew, my mother. When she arrived at the dealership, she looked at me and shook her head. But, when I explained why I got the car, she smiled. Then, she got behind the wheel and drove me to an empty parking lot behind a vacant building. My mother explained how I needed to press on the gas and ease off the clutch, she demonstrated, then let me try. We followed this concept of teaching and learning for about two hours. Finally, I was good enough to drive myself home. The next day I drove to work. That was thirty years ago, and I've been driving a manual car ever since. Imitating competent models is an important part of learning any skill. My mother died many years ago. Still, I often think about how she served as a great Christian model for her children and all those who she encountered. She had a genuine concern for the welfare of others, and she did her best to live as a Christian. She was loving, patient, giving, and compassionate. Those things defined my

mother.

“19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. 23 I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. 24 And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.”

In Philippians 2:19-24, Paul writes a letter to the Philippians and introduces Timothy as his spiritual “son in the faith.” Paul plans to send Timothy to a church in Philippi as encouragement. Paul trusts that Timothy will show genuine concern for the people there and will serve as a positive role model of Christ-like living. Paul tells the Philippians that Timothy genuinely cares for the welfare of the people and that his interests are in Jesus Christ. Basically, Timothy is a good man, who can be trusted. This is what defines Timothy, and this is what we all should want to define us. We should strive to be defined as someone who genuinely cares for others, and who seeks to glorify God.

### **Meditation:**

What defines you? Are you willing to make the commitment needed to have a Christian character? What steps will you take to surrender to Christ?

### **Prayer:**

Father, teach me to be a person who genuinely cares for the welfare of others, and who is willing to demonstrate that care in selfless acts of service. In doing so, I pray that I serve as a Christian role model to all those I encounter.

**MIT Dr. Donna Beck**

**Friday, April 5, 2019**

### **Isaiah 58**

Growing up I remember my dad always drinking diet soda. Personally, I try not to drink too much soda, but when I do, I definitely do not drink diet soda. In my humble opinion, it’s bland and a weak substitute

for real soda. Now it's possible that my dad enjoys the taste of diet soda, but more likely, I think that my dad has convinced himself that drinking diet soda is healthier than drinking regular soda. While I dislike the taste, I can't argue with the point that drinking diet soda is healthier. But if I'm remembering correctly, he'd often order a diet soda while in the drive-thru at McDonald's. This made me wonder, what's the point of drinking diet soda if you're eating McDonald's? My friends, I don't want to pick on my dad any longer, but his drink of choice illustrates the same point that is made in Isaiah 58. What is the point of fasting if everything else you do is not according to what God says? God is reminding us here that fasting without following the Lord's commands is empty. If we are going to fast and humble ourselves before the Lord, then we must also follow His commandments and walk the way that God has called us to walk. This week let us re-commit ourselves not only to the facets of our fast but also to lifestyles conducive to God's Word. We're not fasting just so that we can say that we did it, but this is a time that we dedicate to being in the Presence of God so that we can be conformed into the image of His Son.

**Meditation:** What have you learned about your weak areas thus far in our fast? Where and when are you most vulnerable to breaking the fast? How were you able to deal with the many temptations that came your way last week? What can you do to make sure that this time of fasting does not become a time where you "go through the motions" but that it continues to be a time of real connection to the Lord?

**Prayer:** Lord we surrender ourselves to You and ask that You strengthen us as we continue on this journey. We pray God that You would allow us to stay focused on You and Your Son Jesus throughout this consecrated time. Please, Lord, help us be recommitted to this fast that we may grow closer to You and have our hearts mended and guarded by Your Peace. We pray these and all things in the blessed and beautiful Name of Jesus the Christ, Amen.

**Pastor Adkins-Jones**

**April 6, 2019**

**John 11: 45 – 57**

There is one in every crowd isn't there? A tattletale, a trouble maker, someone who isn't a fan. Here, it is Jesus knowing that raising Lazarus from the dead would cause a stir, not to mention be dangerous. The Pharisees called a meeting to discuss how to stop Jesus from performing His miracles. They were afraid that the people would start believing and following Jesus. Then Caiaphas prophesied about Jesus' death

and didn't even know it. He thought that they were plotting to arrest and kill Jesus. But God was using Caiaphas for a greater good. The religious leaders were intimidated by Jesus. When we let our fears rule, we can see all sorts of scenarios. The evil one will take advantage of our weakness and exploit it for his own agenda and then use us to carry out that agenda. Now Jesus did take heed and stepped out of the public eye. We should heed His example when the going gets rough or we feel like our adversary is lurking. We need to take cover and protect ourselves to deal with what is happening around us. We don't need to worry about fighting every battle. It would be too easy for us to get caught up in the drama and fall prey to sinful behavior. It's sometimes better to take shelter from the storm and let God work it out for us. It's sometimes difficult to walk away from a situation we think we can fix. For who can be a better fixer than God? God's solution will no doubt look different than ours. But won't it be much better than we could imagine?

**Meditation:** When the storms of life are raging all around us, we need to remember where our protection comes from. We need to let go and let God and watch God's Amazing Grace work. For the battle is not ours, it's God's.

**Prayer:** Lord we thank You that You are always with us. Forgive us when we try to fight the battle without our armor. Help us to resist the temptation to fix every situation that comes our way. For we know the battle is not ours, but it's Yours.

**MIT Crispin N. Johnson III**

**Monday, April 8, 2019**

**Psalm 20**

It is believed that Psalm 20 was a prayer/song on behalf of David, King of Israel. It was a prayer to deliver the king, and thus Israel, out of trouble, and lead to victory over an enemy. It's possible that it could have been prayed or sung just before they entered into battle. The fate of the people was dependent upon the success of the king; if he won, they won. If he lost, they lost. It was in their best interest for the king to win, so they fervently prayed to God. It's obvious that the people had a vested interest in praying that David be successful in battle, but, it is also a beautiful example of intercessory prayer. Psalm 20 can be seen as a common form of prayer for the Church. We all find ourselves in trouble, and in need of prayer, at some point. Oh, how blessed we are if we have some praying folks to intercede for us in our time of trouble and need. The prayers of others are magnificent, but praying for one's self can also bring

about miraculous change. Why would we ask others to do for us, that which we won't do for ourselves or others? Prayer changes things.

The enemy has forces that are more powerful than we are, and he's constantly influencing the ungodly to oppose us, but the enemy is not more powerful than the Son of God. Jesus defeated the enemy at Calvary, therefore, we have the victory. As the children of God, all we have to do is trust in Jesus and He will fight our battles. Jesus is the answer through prayer and supplication. How wonderful it is for an Almighty God to hear our prayers and to answer our prayers. It is by faith that we expect God to hear and answer our prayers. We trust God not to remove all crises and difficulties from our lives, but to bring us through them. As the Psalm indicates, we don't put all our trust in chariots, horses or brute force; we trust in the Mercy and Grace of God who is our Protector and Redeemer.

**Meditation:** How consistent is your prayer life? Do you find yourself praying only during times of crises and trouble? Is intercessory prayer a part of your prayer life? In other words, do you pray for others; your family, friends, church, neighbors, and nation? When you pray do you find yourself constantly asking God for something, or do you also thank and praise God for what God has already done for you?

**Prayer:** Most loving and all-knowing God, help us to have a consistent prayer life. And when we pray, help us to pray from the heart. We know You are not looking for poetic and flowery prayers. You want sincere and heartfelt prayers. Teach us to pray for others as well as ourselves. We know and believe the prayers of the righteous avail much. Let us give thanks and praise to You for Your many blessings and how You keep us from dangers seen and unseen. Help us to walk with You every day and be a blessing. In Your precious Name, we pray, Amen!

**Minister Ross Upshaw**

**Tuesday, April 9, 2019**

**Judges 9:7-15**

**The Wisdom of the Trees**

I remember the days I used to dream of becoming President.

I suppose times were simpler then. Circa third grade, I was less concerned about how exactly I would

make my path to being the (then) first Black AND (still, yet) first woman President at the same-dang-time, and more concerned about how extremely old I thought the “35 years of age” requirement was. Oh, I was precocious but so very naive!

But back then, I was in a class of dreamers. All of us had plans to change the world, for the better. I planned to end world hunger and inaugurate world peace. I planned to make it so that all of the folks who worked at the M&W and Yokohama and DuPont factories wouldn’t keep losing their jobs and their ability to feed their families. I planned to make it so that all of the farms in my community weren’t being cannibalized by large scale companies. I planned to find an alternative use for tobacco plants that would make clean fuel or maybe compost, anything instead of cigarettes, but that wouldn’t make the crop obsolete to those who depended on it. I would campaign around equality and free speech and adoption incentives because I had cried many tears about male-child-preference and the one-child policies of China. I would get rid of the KKK and buy new desks for our schools so no one had to stare at those initials every day. I’m also pretty sure that I vowed every day in the cafeteria to have pizza and french fries and to maybe build us a McDonald’s in town, but alas, I was still a 7-year-old girl.

What I didn’t know then was that, despite the legacies and narratives around charismatic leadership in this country, the transformation doesn’t happen by way of figureheads. Miracles don’t manifest through the individualism of neoliberal policy. Changes don’t get made in closets and movements don’t make sense without a groundswell of people. Real hope only happens with the power of the people, not the prestige of endowed positions.

In a season of candidacy declarations for the next leader of this country, I can’t help but recall my younger self—bright-eyed and good-hearted—and the ways we have all been conditioned to pin hope, survival, and change, on the hierarchies of one person. But even in 2019, we are not foreign to the cry out for leadership, to the cry out for someone with the power to help alleviate the social ills that have been neglected and festered by the system at hand.

Our text meets us at the familiar edge of unrest and uncertainty. By the help and grace of God, Gideon had miraculously defeated the Midianites, and the Israelites were at rest for forty years (Judges 6-8). Despite being asked to become King, Gideon refused, stating that the Lord would be the One to rule—not him, nor his sons. Yet, the people made a golden idol of Gideon, an early sign of the temptation to come.

By the time Gideon dies, the nation of Israel has once again forgotten about the goodness of the Lord (how quickly we forget!) and turned again to false gods. It is also no surprise, either, that of Gideon’s 70 sons, at least one desires the power he thinks is owed to him. This time it is Abimelech, who goes out and

kills all of his brothers in order to make a claim to this throne. Only one, Jotham, is able to hide and escape.

It is Jotham's grieved voice that echoes over the land, crying out the fate of the trees who wished to anoint a king for themselves. In this story we see the trees, begging for someone they can submit themselves to, not thinking about the consequences or implications.

They come first to the Olive tree, who is uninterested in being distracted from producing her own oil as she was created to do. They come next to the Fig tree, who also proclaims her confidence and value in the sweetness and deliciousness of bearing her own fruit. They come next to the Vine, who too takes delight in the wine she ferments. These three ask, what is it to give up the lushness of their created purpose, joyfully fulfilled, for the seduction of leadership? What is it to stop in order to "sway over the trees," if this is not what would bring God glory from their being? The Wisdom of the Trees points out that leadership for the sake of position is, quite literally, fruitless.

It is a critical question, in a world deeply focused on ideas of celebrity and importance and wealth, often at the expense of God's Will. Alas, the trees are unrelenting. Finally, they come to the Brambles—dangerous, defensive—and ask if she will be their King. She agrees, offering shelter in the farce of her shade, but also subjugation—if you fail to serve her in the ways she wishes, her destruction will wildly burn.

I have heard Jotham's parable stated this way:

"Be careful what you wish for; you might just get it."

This story in Judges is part of a well-recognized cycle that happens again and again throughout the book of Judges. It is like watching Groundhog's Day on repeat. The Israelites find themselves in trouble and oppressed. They cry out to the Lord, who hears and raises up a judge to deliver them. There is gratitude and peace until Israel forgets the goodness of the Lord and subsequently turns away from God. God judges Israel, allowing them to be defeated by their enemies. Finding themselves in trouble (and suddenly with much sharper memories), the cycle begins again, with a repentant Israel crying out to the Lord for help.

But are we so different from the people of Israel then? Are we not so often desperate for leaders, for the Lord's anointed, to rise up and lead the way to freedom? Are we not looking for another gifted pastor or preacher or teacher or boss or CEO or Representative or President to fix things and get us back on track? Of course, we are. But at what cost are we willing to pay to see the leader we want to gain their power?

Jotham's cry does not declare that leaders or positions of power or influence are inherently bad (though, in full disclosure, any leader and every institution are prone to corruption), but rather that it is far too easy to sell out to power than it is to speak truth to power. The people of Israel didn't need a new leader—they had both the proof and the promises of God to bear witness to them as a people. They had an opportunity to work collectively as a community. They needed no new hierarchies or social stratifications. But they too were swayed by the seductions of political prowess, of personal gain, of preeminence on a world stage.

And when the Word became Flesh, we did not recognize Him, for He did not meet the standards of this world. We wanted a Messiah who would come in on a stallion, not a donkey. A Messiah who would overthrow governments, not be carried on a Cross. We want to see the world changed, but can we still trust and believe, even when God's ways are not our own? Our parable today is a reminder to us to consider with care the priorities of our desires and reconsider where we place our trust. Often there is much more at stake than we realize when we miss the forest for the trees.

**Meditation:**

What are the places in our lives where we feel ourselves attempting to force solutions instead of being open to God's answer to a problem? What if the strategies for success that we have imagined and designed are the very thing subverting God's Will in our lives? In what circumstances have we justified compromise—of ourselves, our communities, our commitments, or our dreams—in order to remain in a comfort zone? And as we come to the final steps of our journey to the Cross, what would it mean to look again, in all aspects of our life, to the leadership of the One who was hung from a tree?

**Prayer:**

Help us to remember, O God—

In times like these,

You are yet faithful.

In times like these,

You are our sun and shield.

In times like these,

You have called Your people by name,

In every situation,

In any outcome,

Your covenants are trustworthy, and

Your promises are good.

Some trust in chariots and

Some trust in horses

But we trust in the Name of the Lord.

Amen.

**Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones**

**Wednesday, April 10, 2019**

**Habakkuk 3: 2-15**

Have you ever had an intense conversation with someone special? You just do not understand what they were doing or not doing? In the past, you had observed their courageous acts of standing up for justice but now it seems they are reticent to act. What is going on? You go back and forth with this person; they have explained their actions; You hear them; you are reconciled to their decision but you really don't like the conclusion. These verses are a culmination of an intimate and tense conversation the prophet Habakkuk has been engaged in with God. Here, Habakkuk writes a passionate hymn meant to be sung as a lament with instruments. Think about the Psalms of David. The prophet makes one last plea for immediate justice "In our time revive your work". It never works out well telling God what to do. Yet, we can relate to the urgency of viewing enemies on the horizon; knowing their inclination toward destruction; seeing that they could strike at any moment and anticipating a Holy God will not intervene. It seems as if God does not care. Why is God slow to act? Will God allow evil to prevail? This is the same God who has vanquished enemies of Judah before right? Why does God now seem quiet, unmoved by the danger we face? We ask these questions daily when we see children starving, the antipathy of the rich,

and the struggles of the poor. Habakkuk questioned God and received a response “in due time there will be justice”. We never want to hear the phrase “not yet”. But there it is, the dreaded answer you will have to wait. Lord help us by faithfully waiting for You to act.

**Meditation:** Consider the alternative, what if God’s timing was persuaded by our demands for action? What if our impulses could control a sovereign God? God sees the whole picture, not just the one we paint. The Babylonians would indeed be punished, but Judah also had to be humbled. God is available to listen to us. We need not succumb to despair. Patience is a verb. We can still fight for justice knowing the final outcome and final answer will belong to God.

**Prayer:** Thank you all wise God for not reacting to our demands, even our demands for immediate justice. We know You see the past, present, and future. We may not always comprehend Your decisions. Help us to trust You. We depend on Your wise judgment. Help us, Lord, to inquire of You and help us to wait for the victory.

Amen!

**Minister Renee Johnson**

**Thursday, April 11, 2019**

**Hebrews 2: 1-9**

The authorship of the letter of Hebrews is still questioned. But what is clear about the purpose of this great epistle is its emphasis to encourage Christians to endure and not lose hope or faith in the Lord.

Superheroes serve many important purposes in our culture; he or she gives us hope in someone greater than mere mortals. There is an eternal fight of good versus evil. Many are acculturated to believe we need rescuing; still, others want to be the hero to save and drive dependency. But even our heroes, she-heroes and fortresses of solitudes will fail.

Some argue that recently 34-year old LeBron James is now more prone to injuries and is underperforming. There are chips in his armor. Superman cannot withstand kryptonite. Thor was able to enter Wakanda, even with the presence of Vibranium and the protective shield. In all these instances none of our superheroes or fictional kingdoms want to suffer or be considered ordinary. Their failures betray our fantasies of super humanness. In verse 5 it warns us that, “it is not angels who will control the future

world we are talking about.”

It is easy to go adrift because our gaze and time are on the wrong things.

Perhaps we look in the wrong places, at the wrong things, and at the wrong heroes. Verse 9 says, “and because he suffered death for us, he is now ‘crowned with glory and honor.’” Suffering is not heroic and certainly not desirable but the ability to find joy and to tunnel through in the midst of trials is very heroic. This is why God sent Jesus for us to reexamine and complicate the hero construct. If we aspire to these impossible extraordinary non-suffering iconic (in most cases) mythical, no pain figures we may go adrift. The ability to see God’s Power in suffering is what is divine. The signs and wonders are more basic than we imagine; sitting in a hospital room singing to your beloved, doing an all-night study session with your friend even though you completed the work, seeking help after abuse, or smiling even at the death of our beloved.

Howard Thurman argues that “Whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace.” (Meditations of a Heart, 1981)

We can have peace in the storm. God sent His only Son, Jesus, for us to experience the heart of God, the brokenness of humanity and reconciliation available through Salvation.

### **Meditation**

What lessons are for me in your suffering? Why is my suffering happening now? Have I gone astray? Am I adrift? What ways can I become like Christ? How can others see Jesus in me? What am I missing? How can I get back on track? Is it possible to create sanctuaries in common spaces to build my spiritual power? What can I unlearn to help me address suffering or pain? Who can I ask to pray with me and for me? How can I be still during hard times? What can I do to grow my faith?

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus, the Christ.

Forgive me for taking my eyes off of You.

Remove any strongholds that prevent me from believing You.

Help to remember Your joy.

Help me to feel Your Peace.

Give me the strength to endure when I feel like giving up.

Thank You, Lord for loving me.

I bless Your Name at all times.

In Your most Holy Name,

Amen.

**Dr. Antoinette Ellis-Williams**

**Friday, April 12, 2019**

**Hebrews 2:10-18**

**“Keep Pushing Through”**

It can be quite hard to equate suffering with perfection. Yes, this may be one of the hardest realities to accept, as suffering is usually not the desired process one would choose to endure. When we think of wholeness, we would automatically think of freedom as a way to represent complete healing or restoration. This freedom exists after having survived and escaped the dehumanizing experiences that often render our bodies broken and traumatized. Jesus came to earth and experienced all of this as a “pioneer” meaning that He was the One to whom we can look to for examples of how to endure suffering. Jesus is the point at which we can place our faith in our God who is with us in the midst of our suffering. In fact, as Jesus in all of His flesh endures the vicissitudes of life, He ultimately triumphs suffering by not succumbing to His fate, but rather showing that God is still all-powerful in His resolve to “give up His life” for His brothers and sisters. The same God that operates as a parent for Jesus is the same God who operates as a parent for us all. Lifting the words that are parallel to the text in Psalm 22:22 “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” NRSV speaks of the ways in which deliverance from suffering is an act that God will deliver in the midst of suffering. Such assurance can lead to the realization that perfection comes not through our demise in the midst of suffering, but rather how we can be delivered in the midst of suffering with a God who keeps everlasting covenant promises with God’s people. Therefore, our response will be the testimonies and praises

declaring who our God is, how our God has intervened, and how our God is faithful in the midst of our suffering as we keep pushing through.

Deon Kipping's song "Let Your Power Fall" comes to mind when I read this passage:

"Let your power fall when your name is called.

Prove the doubters wrong, you're still mighty and strong.

Fight this battle for me, help my unbelief;

So I can tell my friends that You have won again."

While it may seem that suffering may sometimes be our portion, the faith that God shall deliver us offers us the reassurance that God is a very present help. Jesus himself experienced the realities of suffering, and therefore understands the realities of humanness. Jesus also understands what it means to be oppressed, despised, rejected, and subject to the systems of the world that can render us helpless. Because of this, we do not serve a high priest that does not understand what it means to be weak and vulnerable, but rather we have a Jesus who can walk with us and talk with us about everything that we endure. In your weakest moments, remember that Jesus has experienced all that we go through. God will get you through all of it.

**Meditation:** At what points have I given up and given in? Where can I spend time alone so that I can refocus my gaze on the One who understands suffering? Have I truly considered the best option, which is trusting in God who is a very present help?

**Prayer:** Dear God. In You, I will continue to trust. You are very present to me. Jesus, You understand what I am going through. Because God is my hope and Jesus You are the example, I trust to find deliverance from suffering. I trust to find joy in darkness. I trust to see Your Mighty Hand deliver and save. Amen.

**Minister K. Nichols**

**Saturday, April 13, 2019**

**Leviticus 23:1-8**

Is your life becoming more and more like it is all about work? Are you so pre-occupied with your job that you don't have time for Christ? Leviticus 23:1-8 reminds us that there is more to life than work and that God set aside one day out of the week to worship Him.

“3 Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the Lord in all your dwellings.”

God said that for six days you may work, but on the seventh, you must withdraw from all business and work. I view this as a spiritual rest from the sins of the world, and complete rest in God. I can only imagine how lives must have changed when Moses delivered this message from God to the people of Israel. In other ancient cultures, there were no days off and there were no holidays. The Sabbath offers a regular pause in our busy lives to regain perspective on God's Love and who we are as Christians.

It's not easy. We live in a world where time is money, and God's call to stop working goes against the grain. More and more businesses are open on Sundays and on religious holidays that once set aside time to rest and worship God. No consideration is given to the need for rest.

I admit, like many of you, I am guilty of working too much. For many years, I worked two full-time jobs. There were times when I worked six or seven days a week. I look back and realize that my life revolved around work. I rested, just so that I could get up and go to work. I ate foods that were unhealthy because that's what was convenient while I worked. I seldom saw my family and friends, so my relationships suffered. Most important of all, I didn't communicate with God as often as I used to, and I seldom attended church. I had to force myself to stop working so much, and instead, refocus my thinking on what's really important.

#### **MEDITATION:**

Is your life consumed with work? God wants us to be still and know that He is God. When are you going to rest and make time for Him?

#### **PRAYER:**

Heavenly Father, help us to work hard for Your glory, and to rest in You every day. Remind us that work doesn't define us. Instead, it is Your image in us that describes who we are. Amen.

**MIT Dr. Donna Beck**

**April 15, 2019**

**Psalm 36: 5-11**

In Psalm 36:5-11 we find David expressing gratitude to God. He finds himself reflecting on the goodness of God and steadfast Love. God's Love for us is not moved or changed. His Love is unconditional. It is not based on our actions, but on the fact that God is the true definition of Love. In spite of our sinfulness, God still loves us. When we were not agents of God, God was still working on us. And despite everything that we did, God was always looking to bring the best out of us. But first, we had to stop running from God and run towards God. God is a shelter in the time of a storm. God's Faithfulness has no limits no matter what kind of circumstances we are facing. He is always faithful to give us the strength to make it through anything and everything. For God is a Just and Holy God. We can turn to Him for protection, peace, and comfort. God gives us drink from the river of His delights which are found in the spiritual and eternal life of Jesus Christ. God offers true Light in darkness even in our darkest moments. Light is invisible, and yet everything is invisible until the light strikes it. God's Light is able to shine through and give us the clarity to see. God will surround us with His protection from the proud. And God we need You to protect us from our own pride.

**Meditation:** Take time out just for a moment and think of God's Compassion, Faithfulness, Love, Mercy, and Grace, and how God brought you out of the darkness into His marvelous Light.

**Prayer:** Father God; You are Righteous and Just and filled with unfailing Love. Your Love is everywhere! In the shadow of Your Wings, we are protected and find refuge from the storm. Thank You for Your steadfast Love, Grace, and Mercy. Keep our hearts and thoughts pure. You alone are to be praised, for You are the One True Eternal God.

Amen!

**MIT Crispin N. Johnson, III**

**Tuesday, April 16, 2019**

**Isaiah 49:1-7**

## **“By Any Means Necessary”**

Sometimes the task for us may seem to be daunting. We may feel confident in some things. However, there may be some callings and challenges that we encounter that may very well intimidate us to the core of our being. Although Israel is in exile and their labor seems in vain, there is reassurance that God has not forsaken those who have been chosen. The prophet in this passage speaks of the ways in which his calling equipped him with what was necessary for the process. The reference to a sharpened sword and a quivered arrow highlights the ways in which God has equipped him to serve.

While looking to God for guidance in this work, I can imagine that the prophet had to struggle with speaking truth to Israel while having to continue to walk in excellence to help them reimagine and recall the responsibility that they had given up. However, it is only the strength of God that will sustain the prophet in the work that is ahead. “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth” affirms that the work the prophet does will not just affect his immediacy but will bring salvation to the world at large.

We often possess all that we need to face any situation that we conquer. Our callings may require us to operate in the prophetic where we challenge systems with righteous indignation. At other times it may require our ability to communicate with those who do not recognize their worth nor accept the promises of God for their lives. While this work is not easy, God will not only give you the strength for the journey but also reassurance that there are those in positions of influence and power who will heed the calling, and submit to the ultimate Will of God by any means necessary,

**Meditation:** Have you denied any part of yourself because of a doubt? What strengths do you possess that can be used for God’s glory? In what areas do you feel weak or less able to do what you have been called to do? Have you talked to God about those weak areas?

### **Prayer:**

Dear God, I have an inclination of the call on my life, but I pray for clarity. In the areas where I feel weak or less capable, show me the ways in which growth can occur. Allow me to walk, talk, and act with boldness in the face of opposition, oppression, and inequity. Allow my tongue to have the grace to navigate any situation. Allow my heart to do Your Will, and I trust that You can handle the things that I may not feel equipped to conquer. May my life and my witness change the world. Amen.

**Minister K. Nichols**

**Wednesday, April 17, 2019**

**John 13: 21-32**

The Gospel of John promised from chapter one to be different than the other Gospels. Remember, “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God”. Jesus, the Word (the logos), is never powerless, is always prophetic in John’s Gospel. This is especially true, as we come to the familiar scene of the Last Supper and Jesus’ betrayal by Judas. This scene is unique to John’s Gospel and is couched in the numerous times Jesus prepared those around Him saying “that the Son of Man (Jesus) will be glorified.” Yet, we find ourselves ill-prepared for the prospect that Jesus was overwhelmed with emotion before He named His betrayer (didn’t He already know who it was? Of course He knew!) Why was He emotional? We are even more astounded by the idea that there is a Blessing in Betrayal! This sounds like an oxymoron. The awesome point in these verses reverses conventional wisdom and conventional reading of the text. Jesus not only “saw it all” but orchestrated it all for our salvation!

Judas may have been the most honored disciple, the most valiant and the most humble. For all the honor we give Peter, James and John, we may have been mistaken in using the noun JUDAS as a metaphor for the greedy, evil betrayer of Jesus. Without JUDAS’ betrayal, there would have been, no Garden, Roman soldiers, no standing for Pilate, no Cross and no Resurrection. The suspicious acting keeper of the purse was Jesus’ special agent; he was the path to Resurrection. We never saw that coming did we? But we don’t see most betrayals coming either. We complain about the displays of distrust by our loved ones; the injury incurred by having our secrets displayed by word, deed or media and the backstabbing by our friends. Did we ever suspect there’s a blessing in it? Our Lord says AFTER Judas “took the sop” Satan entered in him” Judas was not inherently evil; he was trusted to care for the physical needs of Jesus and the disciples. Our Lord says to JUDAS (in the confused disciples hearing) “do quickly what you are going to do” and finally Jesus says “now the Son of Man has been glorified.” It was all in the plan! No accidents no mistakes.

**Meditation:** Is betrayal ever a good thing? Our emotional self, having been injured by untrustworthy agents says NO! But, on a spiritual level betrayal always brings revelation, wisdom through pain and a change in our circumstances. We have to stop for a minute in the midst of betrayal-we have to review and reset. We remember being betrayed and we are forever changed. Such is the method of our salvation. Someone had to betray Jesus in order for Him to be glorified before our Holy God. That betrayer was Judas.

**Prayer:** Thank you Lord for Your Divine presence in our lives. You rob the satanic forces of betrayal from having victory when by Your example You tell us to look deeper. You show us Divine Purpose in all situations. We are humbled by Your Grace and Mercy, and we live because You were glorified by God.

Amen.

**Minister Renee Johnson**

**Thursday, April 18, 2019**

**Maundy Thursday**

**Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19**

In some denominations, the observance of Maundy Thursday is a commemoration of when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. In fact, Maundy Thursday is given its name because of the command or mandate that Jesus gave His disciples to wash each other's feet. In this story, found in John 13, Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me....One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean....So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:8b-14).

This theme of washing or cleansing is echoed in today's Psalm. The psalmist uses images reminiscent of communion and baptism ("the cup of salvation" and "fulfill[ing]...vows in the presence of all [God's] people") (Ps. 116:13-14). These rituals are public signs of our faith in Christ, designed to be done in the community. While baptism usually happens once in our lives, we must still work out our faith in community. This is why, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us to wash each other's feet; to remind each other of that first public vow that we made to follow Christ for the rest of our lives.

**Meditation:** Do you remember when you made a public confession of your faith in Christ for the first time? How have you been able to maintain your faith since then? What advice would you give to newer Christians or new members of the Bethany Baptist Church community? Better yet, how can you be a companion to them and wash their feet as they take their first steps in the community?

**Prayer:** God, help us to be partners in faith with one another; to keep each other accountable to the vow that we first professed. Help us to remember that this walk is one that can only be done effectively in

community, side by side with our brothers and sisters. We ask for the strength and courage to speak Your Truth to one another in love, so we may continue to have a share in Your Salvation. Amen.

**MIT Henrietta Keazer**

**Friday, April 19, 2019**

**Psalm 22**

Today's scripture is being read on Good Friday. As we read this scripture, we can't help but be drawn into the agony that is being depicted through this Psalm. David, as a type of Christ, is in trouble, and he is praying and calling out to God for God's help and deliverance. The words in the first sentence are very familiar to us; they are the same words that Jesus cried out to His Father when He was hanging on the Cross at Calvary. Of course, the overwhelming difference is that David was not suffering unto death and was not carrying the burden of the sins of all humankind upon his being as did Jesus. Only Jesus is and can be the sacrificial Lamb of God for the sins of the world. Jesus knew the scriptures, and in His suffering, He called out David's Psalm 22:

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

It's also possible that Jesus, as He hung upon the Cross for hours and hours, repeated all of Psalm 22. This Psalm captures the profound suffering of Jesus, and, also the praise He had for His Father. Jesus knew the Word because He is the Word. David prays that God will not be far from him in his time of distress. Jesus did the same as He cried out to His Father as He just hung there. In Jesus' and David's darkest hours they still trusted in God. Jesus never gave up on His relationship with His Father. He never mistrusted the power or the faithfulness of God His Father. It reminds us of Job 13:15a:

“Though he slays me, yet will I hope in him;”

In our humanity, we sometimes find ourselves and others in distress, pain, and suffering. Suffering and pain are innate to the human condition. In our darkest hours, we sometimes wonder if God has forsaken us when we ask the questions: Why am I sick? Why am I alone? Why am I unemployed? Why did my loved one die? Why am I abused? Why am I depressed? Why did I fail? The realities and questions of suffering and pain are myriad. The pain is visceral when we see children being ripped from the arms of their undocumented parents and taken away. We feel the agony when unarmed black people are gunned

down simply for being black, and when students and others are mass murdered by crazed individuals.

The reality is we don't know why bad things happen to good people. We don't know why suffering and pain are a part of life. What we do know is that Jesus suffered also. Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, took on our pain and suffering. He didn't have to do it, but He did. And because He did, we can go to God in prayer knowing that God can relate to our physical and emotional pain. Our God understands mental anguish and a sense of being forsaken. We don't serve a God who can't relate to our humanity and pain. Jesus took on mortality so that, like Him, we can one day take on immortality. God's suffering in human form is the answer to understanding what a Mighty, Compassionate and Loving God we serve!

**Meditation:** Do you ever feel forsaken by God, family, and friends? If so, how do you cope? In those times do you quiet yourself and think about where God has brought you from? Do you consider that as bad as it might be, it could be so much worse? Consider the man who was distressed because he had no shoes until he met the man who had no feet.

**Prayer:** Jesus, our Lord, and Savior, today we think about Your suffering and pain on the Cross. We think about how You suffered, bled and died so that we might have eternal life. We thank You for Your Sacrifice; how You took on human form so that You might identify with our pain and suffering. We know and understand that You suffered and died that You might glorify the One who sent You on our behalf. Be patient with us O' God, increase our faith, forgive our sins and make us more compassionate. We will be sure to give You the praise, honor, and glory. In Your Precious and Glorious Name, we do pray, Amen!

**Minister Ross Upshaw**

**Saturday, April 20, 2019**

**John 19:38-42**

Today is a day of waiting. It is a day of uncertainty. It is a day of sanctified anxiousness as we rest between death and resurrection. Waiting for anything is difficult, let alone the Resurrection and Return of our Lord. But while we wait today, we do so, in a Garden:

“41 Now in the place where He was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.”

**Meditation:** What does it mean that Jesus' burial takes place in a Garden? What is beautiful about this day? How can we handle the waiting? What do we do with ourselves in this in-between time?

**Prayer:** Most gracious God, help us to have the grace to wait, the grace to receive, the patience to move through this day without rushing ahead. Saturate us in quiet, as we calm ourselves, and wait for Your Return.

**Pastor Adkins-Jones**