

Christ Episcopal Church

1035 Lafayette Road, Portsmouth, NH 03801

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS – 2010- Vol. 1



The stories in this devotional booklet are those of the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Portsmouth, NH. The meditations have been written by the members with some additional material added. The Bible passages are from New International Version .

Christ Church Mission Statement

The mission of Christ Church is to share the light of Christ in the world. As Progressive Christians we welcome all people into our sanctuary, regardless of race, economic circumstances, gender, sexual orientation or religious background. We gather to worship, sing, celebrate, acknowledge common needs, be fed at God's table and care, love and nurture one another. From here we go forth into the world to be **active servants** of the spirit of Jesus, ministering to those in need and taking God's grace and peace into the wider community

Wednesday, February 17, 2010 (Ash Wednesday)

Sunday's Palms are Wednesday's Ashes

Sunday's palms are Wednesday's ashes as another Lent begins;
Thus we kneel before our Maker, in contrition for our sins.
We have marred baptismal pledges, in rebellion gone astray;
Now, returning seek forgiveness; grant us pardon, God, this day!

We have failed to love our neighbors, their offenses to forgive,
Have not listened to their troubles, nor have cared just how they live;
We are jealous, proud, impatient; loving over much our things;
May the yielding of our failings be our Lenten offerings.

We are hasty to judge others, blind to proof of human need;
And our lack of understanding demonstrates our inner greed;
We have wasted earth's resources; want and suffering we've ignored;
Come and cleanse us, then restore us; make new hearts within us, Lord.

Rae E. Whitney

Saturday, March 13, 2010

God's Unfailing Love

John 15:9-11

⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

This passage was not my first choice but after reflecting on it I am glad that I was given the chance to write about it. After thinking about it I tried to search for a deeper meaning but realized that the real meaning is in the challenge that Christ is presenting. From that perspective I found myself greatly humbled. How often I think of times when I feel alone, hurt or uncertain of what lies ahead and forget that He always loves me, without fail and it is up to me to pass that love along each day with every opportunity to experience the joy that Christ wants me to have. How simple, yet what a great challenge it really is.

Lee Hoginski

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Psalm 51

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me,
and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and
grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.
Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

This is a traditional scripture for Lent. You may pick a line or two of this Psalm and use it as a mantra during the 40 days of Lent.

Friday, February 19, 2010

Preparing The Way

Matthew 3: 1-3

¹In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea
²and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ³This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' "

John the Baptist "appeared in the wilderness." Why in the wilderness? When you stop and think about it, it doesn't seem to make sense that God would announce "in the wilderness" that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Wouldn't such an announcement best be made in the Temple or in a Synagogue or another place where people are gathered in greater numbers? But it is in the wilderness that this announcement is made. Perhaps it is only in the wilderness that such an announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven can be heard, and so it is where it must be proclaimed.

I have found that it is in the wilderness, that I can escape the noise and the clutter of my life which at times threaten to devour me. I have found that hikes through the woods or walks along the ocean in the winter, to be such wilderness experiences for me. They are some of the best ways for me to quiet my mind and my spirit, and listen to God. And it is only when I quiet my mind and listen to God that I can have the eyes to see that the kingdom of heaven has indeed come near. As we move through the season of Lent, I know that I need to build in some wilderness experiences. I invite you to do the same.

***Rev. Dan Bernier
Vicar, Christ Episcopal Church***

Friday, March 12, 2010

Perfection Matthew 5:44-48

⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies¹ and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

These are some of the most uncomfortable words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. They seem to point the way toward a standard of behavior that is contradictory in every way to our basic human understanding of what it means to survive in an often hostile world. The whole passage seems to be full of impossibilities from *loving our enemies*, to *praying for those who are actively hurting us*, to *being as perfect as God*. When we get to those last words about being perfect, most of us throw up our hands and throw in the towel. "This is way beyond me! Why bother even trying!" So the words get glossed over, the meaning is not pulled out, and we can go on to a part of scripture that makes more sense, or at least makes us more comfortable.

But what if Jesus was teaching us something not only do-able, but profoundly necessary for the survival of our souls and bodies, lives and creation? What if he was giving us the chance of a lifetime, to really get it; to really live out the greatest story on earth? Then would we be willing to listen to his words with a whole heart, putting aside our fears and preconceptions and learn to live in the kind of inclusive love he was talking about? Are we capable of doing this? Jesus said all we had to do was be *perfect*. In face, he commanded it! "Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect." No equivocation there!

The definition of the word *perfect*, in contemporary English, means *complete; without flaws or defects*. In the language of Jesus, the word had a broader significance. It meant *potential*. Jesus was telling us that our heavenly Father lives up to his potential; and we are designed to do the same, each one of us *living up to our potential*. We can shake off the hubris of being without flaws or defects and take on living out of the gifts, healing, and deep inner resources of our souls that make each of us unique. We have the *potential* to love our enemies by letting go of the hatred, anger and vengeance that destroys our spirit and clouds our vision. God's way is by loving both the just and the unjust equally. Each of us carries the potential as well. We can pray for those who persecute us by turning them over to God's mercy and love. We can piggyback our potential on the potential of our heavenly Father, for we do none of this alone. Who knows what powerful changes will occur in the world when we all live up to our potential and pray for our enemies? Have we tried it? Is this too uncomfortable to contemplate?

Today, let us be less afraid to struggle with the uncomfortable words of Christ. Let us pray for growing into our own potential so that we may truly be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Jean Shula

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Psalm 71: 1-9; 14-18

¹In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame.

²Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me.

³Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go;
give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

⁴Deliver me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of evil and cruel men.

⁵For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth.

⁶From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.

⁷I have become like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge.

⁸My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long.

⁹Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

¹⁴But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.

¹⁵My mouth will tell of your righteousness,
of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure.

¹⁶I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD;
I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone.

¹⁷Since my youth, O God, you have taught me,
and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.

¹⁸Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God,
till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.

As I myself age, and as I care for those who are aging (I practice geriatrics), I realize how important it is to have faith. It is a privilege to see God's faithfulness over my lifetime. My troubles don't seem to grow any

smaller as I age, but I feel more capable of handling problems, knowing that God has been there throughout my life. Society may reject my wrinkles and my gray hair, but God is there, and has been right along.

I am thankful that I made a decision early in my life to learn more about Christ. It has paid off as I age.

I know that God's love will continue to be with me and guide me as old age creeps in.

Mary Anne Totten

Saturday, February 20, 2010

Psalm 145: 8-16

⁸ The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.

⁹ The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.

¹⁰ All you have made will praise you, O LORD;
your saints will extol you.

¹¹ They will tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,

¹² so that all men may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.
The LORD is faithful to all his promises
and loving toward all he has made. ^[c]

¹⁴ The LORD upholds all those who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.

¹⁶ You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

The last two verses of this excerpt from Psalm 145, used in one of the traditional formulas for grace before meals, portray a God who meets all our human needs. I find it very difficult to rely on God for all my needs; I would much rather imagine myself as being in control of my life. But a quick look at the inner turmoil I often feel, and at natural disasters like the earthquake in Haiti, quickly convince me that we are ultimately dependent on forces beyond our control. That could lead to despair if we did not trust, like the psalmist, in a good, merciful, and generous God who holds us when we fall and lifts us up when all seems hopeless. For me, however, that is easy enough to believe when everything is going well, but I struggle to believe when God asks me to launch out into the deep despite my fears and hesitations. And yet I know that it is only as I can take that first step that God's grace will flow. Of course, relying on God does not imply that we need make no effort to calm inner turmoil or take measures to avert disaster, but perhaps it can strengthen us to face the unknown.

Grover Marshall

Sunday, February 21, 2010 (1st Sunday in Lent)

The Temptation of Jesus

Matthew 4: 1-4

¹Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

This is one of favorite verses. it tell me that temptation is all around us. Everyday we are tempted by people and or things that we feel we need or want, but Jesus tells us that all we really need is God. He will provide us with all we need. In my own life, I have been tempted many times to take the easy road, so simple, no hassles, but when I look past all that I find it is not where I need to be. I realized early in my life, what seemed easy really wasn't. I took many years to find what I really needed, I knew all along. I needed God in my life and He would provide for my needs.

Chick Anderson

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

The Light of God

Hebrews 10: 32-36

³²Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. ³³Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

I close my eyes and go back in time when my life was full (or I thought so) of new adventures. I traveled with friends to exotic and fun places. I went to college and enjoyed the life experience along with the education. I toured as a dancer in Dance Theater in California and was living the life. I was lonely but never alone. I didn't know what I was missing until I found my perfect mates, in spirit and in life. We found each other and the light of God. We got married and enjoyed each other's company, growing closer to each other and to God with every passing year, even though some people thought we would never last. We lived in the city with temptation all around us. We fell into some traps and lost our way, losing housing and having nothing of our own but a little innocent baby to take care of. We forgot that God was with us and would guide us if we let Him. We moved to Maine, away from the temptations and negative drama of city life, wanting to start over. We learned to keep God in our lives and have Him grow with our family. Life has been fulfilled with His light. We don't need superficial things to make us happy. Love and faith is all we need to keep us going.

Tanya Miranda

Tuesday, March 9, 2010

Isaiah 51: 12-13; 15-16

¹² "I, even I, am he who comforts you.

Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass,

¹³ that you forget the LORD your Maker,

who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth,
that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor,
who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?

¹⁵ For I am the LORD your God,

who churns up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD Almighty is his name.

¹⁶ I have put my words in your mouth

and covered you with the shadow of my hand— I who set the heavens in place,
who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, 'You are my people.' "

We are swept along on the ancient words of the prophet, Isaiah, from the center of our fears to the unfolding of God's power. These words move us from the cowering isolation of our fearfulness to the promises of comfort and healing that God tells us are already in place for each one of us.

Through the poetry of this language, the prophet reminds us over and over that it is our fear that not only holds us back, but is the center of our daily living. "*You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor who is bent on destruction.*" (vs.13) And when we fear all day long, it drains our energy, keeps us bound and so focused on the uncertainties of life that we fail to hear the words of "*he who comforts..*" We hand over our inner selves, not to the Comforter but to "*the fury of the oppressor.*" In a profound way, God cautions us that the choice is ours. We can choose to remain focused on our fears, in these turbulent times, or we can choose to seek out the one who created all. God tells us that we have the words and actions we need: "*You are my people.*" What a gift!

When we sit quietly with these words in Isaiah and allow them to sink deeply into our inner self, they are like a mirror reflecting back the cobwebs in our own soul. They offer us an opportunity to prepare our inner selves for becoming a person who rises above the fears that hold us back, and growing into one who seeks comfort in the hiding place in the shadow of God's hand.

In this time of quiet and reflection:

- 1) What are my fears?
- 2) How do they influence my life?
- 3) What words has God put in my mouth?
- 4) How can I be God's person in a broken world?

Jean Shula

Monday, February 22, 2010

Returning to the Lord

Joel 2: 12-13

¹² "Even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning."

¹³ Rend your heart

and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.

These words of the prophet Joel, spoken at a time of political crisis in Israel, convey the comforting news that it is never too late to turn to God and to enjoy God's love and mercy. As I have recently discovered (or, more accurately, rediscovered), God sometimes breaks our hearts in order to get our attention and to remind us to let God into our lives. This passage reminds me to listen for God's voice and to return to the source of my being. I most often wander away from God through inattention rather than malice, but God is always calling me back and always ready to reach out to me in love.

Grover Marshall

Tuesday, February 23, 2010

New Birth

1 Peter 1: 3-8

³*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

New birth is both joyful and painful. It is so tempting to hold on to what we have and refuse to look at the new life which God is offering us, particularly since that new life is often hard to imagine. It's like heading out into dangerous territory with no guideposts and no protection. We sense that much of what we hold onto is passing away but what will replace it is shadowy and undefined. What I find hardest is that taking the leap God is asking me to take requires a kind of blind faith which goes against my nature. Yes, I believe that God is on the other side of the abyss, waiting to catch me when I leap. But what if God's not there? That for me is the testing Peter is talking about, the willingness to risk everything to find new life.

Grover Marshall

Monday, March 8, 2010

Psalm 4 (NIV)

- ¹ *Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
be merciful to me and hear my prayer.*
- ² *How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods*
- ³ *Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;
the LORD will hear when I call to him.*
- ⁴ *In your anger do not sin;
when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*
- ⁵ *Offer right sacrifices and trust in the LORD.*
- ⁶ *Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?"
Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD.*
- ⁷ *You have filled my heart with greater joy
than when their grain and new wine abound.*
- ⁸ *I will lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

Paraphrase of Psalm 4 by Betty Lane

*God will answer when I remember to call, For God is my defender.
God can set me free when I feel pressure from all sides.
God will have mercy and hear my prayer.*

*"How long will you O people dishonor the Creator?
How long will you worship money and possessions which are your false Gods?"*

*Remember that if you are faithful you will see all of God's wonders.
Remember that you only need to call upon God to be heard.*

You may be afraid, but you need not sin. Tell your heart to be silent and listen.

Do what you know in your heart is right. And trust that God is with you.

Many people say "when will things get better." But they will not draw upon God's light.

*O God you have made my heart glad
More than when I have a wealth of possessions.*

*I am peaceful when I lie down, and sleeps comes quickly
For I know that I am held safely by God.*

O God, help us to remember to call upon you, for you are always there if we but seek you. Help us to be still that our heart may listen and hear you. Help us to then be faithful to what heart tells us is right. For by doing so we will have joy and peace in you, In the name of the Holy Trinity, on God, Amen.

Sunday, March 7, 2010 (3rd Sunday in Lent)

Asking and Receiving

John 16: 23-24

²³In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Jesus speaks these words in John's Gospel following the Last Supper, before going to the Garden at Gethsemane. This passage makes me think about what it is we ask for and what we truly need. Sometimes the two are not the same. What we think we need and want may not be what will be most significant or revealing in our lives. Many of us have faced uncertainty, economic and otherwise, in the past year. Things we have taken for granted, like jobs, have disappeared. We are right to ask for help through this difficult time, to pray for jobs and greater security. But are there gifts in the uncertainty? Are we being given things we would not ask for? This is what I try to discern. We need to be open not just to asking but to receiving.

Katie Towler

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

Proverbs 8: 1-7

- ¹ Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice?
- ² On the heights along the way,
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;
- ³ beside the gates leading into the city,
at the entrances, she cries aloud:
- ⁴ "To you, O men, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind.
- ⁵ You who are simple, gain prudence;
you who are foolish, gain understanding.
- ⁶ Listen, for I have worthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
- ⁷ My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness. "

I like the image of Wisdom standing beside the gate of the city. But of course most cities and towns today don't have gates. Here in New England, the gate to the town often seem to me to be that sign on the road as you pass from one town to another that says "Welcome to Dover," or whatever town you are entering. Wouldn't it be great if we could just go up to a town line and find Wisdom there to go up and talk to, and just by talking to her become wiser? To me this image and this passage reminds me that as we go thorough our journey of life wisdom is always there for us, if we just look for it. Wisdom is another name for or aspect of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always available to us, if we just acknowledge it. And what is this Wisdom that is ours through the Holy Spirit? Wisdom is more than knowledge, although knowledge can lead to wisdom. As this passage suggests, you do not need to be intelligent to have wisdom. That any one can learn prudence, that is to do the right thing at the right time. Also by seeking we can gain intelligence, which is information, and the right way to use it. How do we know what wisdom is? Well, this passage gives us some clues. True wisdom is speaking what is true in a loving way. Wisdom is not using any knowledge we may have to harm someone.

So the Holy Spirit as Wisdom is always there for us to be our guide, if we just seek and use it. Through study and from others we gain knowledge, but the right use of any knowledge we have comes by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We may experience Wisdom as a still small voice of God inside us or as guidance from wise teachers. But true wisdom from God is always for good. As we grow in the knowledge of how to speak and act for what is good, we become more wise.

Betty Lane

Thursday, February 25, 2010

Entertain Strangers

Hebrews 13: 1-3

¹Keep on loving each other as brothers. ²Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

When I was in my early twenties, I contracted viral meningitis. I was hospitalized, placed on the critical list and moved into an isolation room. Because I was unconscious when I was admitted, one of the lines on the Patient Information Page which lists religion was left blank. I was told after my recovery that my name had been seen by a minister who came to the hospital in hopes of visiting patients who did not have a declared religion. The nurses, who did not recognize the minister, had seen him praying for my recovery outside my hospital room door every day that I was in isolation. I don't remember much about the time I spent in the hospital, but I do remember the three people who sat at the end of my bed and comforted me. I later asked the nurse where they had gone. She told me that I had been in isolation so it was highly doubtful that I could have been conversing with anybody. She said that I could have been hallucinating due to my high fever or medication. I have often wondered who the mystery minister was. Who were the three people who had taken away my fears and comforted me? Are there angels in the world today that guard us during certain times of our life? I believe there are. I wonder how many times I have walked right by angels, and maybe Jesus, Himself? I think that what God is trying to tell me in this experience is that God cares for me in ways I may not realize and that God ministers to me through other people. In return, I have promised God that I will comfort people in God's name and share God's hope. I would love to hear if any one has had a similar experience.

Linda McVay

Saturday, March 6, 2010

Wealth From God

Deuteronomy 8: 17-18

¹⁷You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

When times are bad I think it is human nature to ponder, "God, why are you doing this to me?!" But when times are good we can so easily say, "Look what I did!" Though in reality we know all things come from God and are for God. If we keep mindful of that in the good times it will keep us grounded and humble. It will also give us strength when times aren't so good that what we're facing isn't punishment, it's part of the path of our lives. I pray that we all keep faithful along the highs and lows of our Lenten path and grow from our travels.

David Burke

Friday, March 5, 2010

John 8:1-7

¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

I am fascinated by what Jesus might have written on the ground with his finger. Was this a common practice among rabbis? I do not imagine it was idle doodling and the author says he wrote on the ground, suggesting letters and words.

Jesus seems almost distracted by the clamoring mob. At first he doesn't even respond, but keeps on writing. He has already addressed adultery, stating that anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of adultery (Matthew 5: 27-28). The teachers of the law and the Pharisees had something else in mind. They presented a woman accused and, in their minds, convicted of adultery. They demand an answer. "Now, what say you?" Today these authorities might be known as Taliban, but in American history we have known them as the Know-Nothings or American Party in the 1850's and McCarthyites in the 1950's and many others in their vein.

Finally, Jesus stands up and dissipates the crowd and the rage with one utterance. Perhaps some walked away simply stymied by the challenge, but there is forgiveness in the air, not the forgiveness of a magnanimous gesture, but the transformative forgiveness that is a change in consciousness. Palpable forgiveness of the past, the present, and the future.

The air had changed and Jesus, the eternal word of God, returned to his writing.

Chuck Ott

Friday, February 26, 2010

The Anointing of Christ

Mark 1: 9-11

⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' first entry onto the scene is in this story of his baptism. Mark skips the stories of Jesus' birth and childhood and begins the gospel with this moment of adult baptism. Indeed, we are told that John the Baptist has been busy baptizing many people in the Jordan, explaining to everyone that he himself is not the Messiah. "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (v. 8) In this context, v. 9-11 give us the "big reveal" in the book of Mark; the first moment that Jesus, the Messiah, steps into the story.

After only 3 verses of introducing us to Jesus through his baptism, Mark continues by stating in v. 12-13: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness...tempted by Satan...and the angels waited on him."

My head spins at all the drama Mark offers in only a few short verses! We meet a man named Jesus who causes the heavens to open and a voice from heaven to speak; who is immediately shuttled into the wilderness for 40 days to be both tempted by Satan and waited on by angels. Mark seems to be crying, "Hold on to your hats, folks! This is going to be one heck of a ride!"

Am I ready for this journey with Jesus? Not only the journey of his life 2,000 years ago, but the journey of my life today as a follower of Jesus. The more serious that I become about following Jesus Christ, I feel a sense of adventure in my life as I risk vulnerability within my church community; as I acknowledge the pain and suffering in this world and consider my responsibility for ending it; as I choose the riskier path toward social justice because I know that Jesus calls me to walk with him. Lets hold on to our hats together and see where our collective journey with Jesus Christ takes us this Lenten season!

Nancy Morrison

Saturday, February 27, 2010

Isaiah 12: 1-3

Songs of Praise

¹ *In that day you will say:*

"I will praise you, O LORD.

*Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.*

² *Surely God is my salvation;*

I will trust and not be afraid.

*The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation."*

³ *With joy you will draw water*

from the wells of salvation.

When I was much younger, I believed that God was very angry with me. Even though my parents always told me that God was a loving and forgiving God, I felt that I wasn't worthy of either. There were sinners and then there was me.

But on a July day in 1987, I found myself not caring if I lived or died, alone in my mind and without hope. I remember staring at the ceiling and wondering why God just didn't put me out of the misery that I had created. The phone rang and it was my mother. (My mother did not call me unless someone died though I was to call her every other Saturday and write the weeks I didn't call.) She said she just wanted to hear my voice. Was it maternal instinct? I expect so, but after we said our good-byes, a tremendous bath of emotion presented itself. I was frightened by the intensity of my own reaction to myself. God knew my need.

In a small voice, head down, I finally found my strength, my song and my salvation. The Lord forgave me and the anger I felt for myself went away. I had been comforted and now it was up to me to share my experience with others. Sing, shout and make known that all can be forgiven, if we ask for it. Give thanks and spread the glory by word and deed. A simple message by each of us can make the whole world better.

Lynda Swartz

Thursday, March 4, 2010

Increase Love

1 Thessalonians 3: 11-13

¹¹*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*

¹³*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

I think this is a passage that has to be read in context, from at least the beginning of the chapter.

Paul is stuck in Athens and worrying about how the community in Thessaloniki in northern Greece is doing so he sends his companion Timothy to check up on them and make sure they are remaining faithful.

When Timothy arrives he finds a community that is growing in its faith and love and reports just that. Paul is astounded and delighted. At the end of the chapter Paul writes the invocation that is today's scripture passage to be that community's prayer to ask God to be with them and strengthen them.

Our Christ Church faith community reminds me of that group in Thessaloniki. A life raft in the seacoast we are faced with many distractions. There are far more opportunities here to lead the self-centered, materialistic life than those folks could ever imagine and while we are not at risk of our lives as they were, there is at best no cachet in this post-Christian world for those who choose to be followers of Jesus.

Yet despite the condescension, hostility or indifference of that greater community which spends its time rushing between big box stores, we have amongst ourselves a community that is truly growing in love and faith, that truly welcomes all and for which I never cease to be thankful that the spirit has brought me to this place. This is not something one can do easily by oneself, the love and support of a Christ-centered community such as ours is the key and each one of us makes a critical contribution. May today's passage become our own prayer!

Peter Monte

Wednesday, March 3, 2010

Faith

Hebrews 11: 10-12

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

As I've gotten older, I seem to always need a planner and a map. I see this as a virtue, part of the inevitable process of giving up the ways of reckless youth, when life seemed to be lived in a spontaneous, zig-zag way. I remember many years ago, when I was in college and about to leave for a long period of study and travel in Europe, the wife of one of my professors said, "Before you go, you must plan every detail, every hour." I recoiled in horror. What about the joys of hopping off the train simply because the station has bright blue trim and is surrounded by olive trees? But these many years later, I find I do almost exactly as she suggested. I plan, not just before a trip, but every day. Somewhere in my psyche the idea has grown that a day unscheduled might put me at the edge of the abyss. Reading about Abraham, however, I wonder whether I've gotten it wrong. By faith, Abraham chucked his planner and simply set out. *What would that be like?* My mind resists, rifling through the possibilities, clinging to the concrete: Do I walk, drive, take the bus or train? Do I go north or south? How much luggage can I bring? As I read this passage again, I let myself sink into its simplicity: by faith, he just obeyed, trusting God's command. In other words, the planner and the map are tools for navigating the human world, but they are not the point of the journey. Our faith gives us the confidence to just open the door and go.

Susan Sinnott

Sunday, February 28, 2010 (2nd Sunday in Lent)

John 16:20-22

²⁰I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ²¹A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. ²²So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

When Christopher and I attended childbirth classes at Wentworth Douglass Hospital prior to Charlotte's birth, the nurse who led the sessions told us: Childbirth is painful. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. It's not insurmountable—otherwise no one would have children, and certainly people would not do it more than once (she was pregnant with her second child).

This was not exactly what the roomful of expectant mothers was hoping for.

However, she emphasized the pain of childhood as pain with a purpose. It will hurt. It may even be the most physically demanding experience of your life. But at the end, if all goes well, you get a baby--and they even let you bring him or her home with you.

The disciples need to have this pain with a purpose as well. They need to lose their joy in order to find it. And once they've found their joy at the end of the pain, it is with them until the end.

What they don't tell you in childbirth class is that though the labor pain ends and may be forgotten or become a vague and distant memory, the pain with a purpose goes on. Parenting is full of joys, but also full of pain. The pain endured when you're faced with a sick baby and there's nothing you can do to fix it. The pain shared when your child cuts six teeth in two weeks. The pain in knowing she's going to get hurt and you can't prevent it. But it is through experiencing the pain that we truly appreciate the joy she brings and the central place she holds in our lives.

The disciples' find their joy, which makes a nice, neat end to the story...but it isn't the end of their story. Most of them experience pain through their attempts to share and spread the joy of Christ. But that joy is so wonderful and so important that they accept the pain--even unto death--so that their joy may grow.

Jessica McClain

Monday, March 1, 2010

The Armor of Light

Romans 13: 11-14

¹¹And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

¹³Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

When I read the “let us put aside the deeds of darkness” portion of this reading I hear the voice of my Grandma Burke, who would always say, “There is no good done after 11:00 o’clock at night” whenever my dad or his brothers, then later my sisters or I would plan to be out late. It didn’t come from a judging place in her, it was just common sense. If you look back on your life there wasn’t a lot of charity work or care giving at that hour. But of course the darkness isn’t just a literal night kind of darkness, it’s the darkness in our hearts. I think we all might get a twang of guilt when we read this reading. We’ve all experienced a bit of debauchery, jealousy and more. Although we all have darkness in us, there’s no sense in dwelling on what we don’t do right, what we need, what we envy and whom we don’t like. Let’s instead focus on the light; those whom we love, the things we can do well and the help we can provide to those who need it. And that light comes from our faith in Jesus Christ. Let’s share that light that is our armor in this world. The first part of the reading is indicative of how Paul and all the Christians of the time thought that Jesus was returning soon. If we all live as if he is returning soon, sharing his light, it would be like heaven on earth.

David Burke

Tuesday, March 2, 2010

Seek the Lord

Hosea 10:12

¹² Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

Hosea spends most of his prophesy denouncing the “wickedness” of Israel, which he calls Ephraim. In the line directly proceeding this, he compares Israel to “a trained heifer that loved to thresh” and declares that God had spared the yoke and let Israel do its own thing. That was a mistake, Hosea feels, and God will now “make Ephraim break the ground”. It is clear Hosea is saying that God will, and needs to, keep the people of Israel in line. The underlying meaning is God’s people have gotten distracted from the Covenant and need to reprioritize. Get right with God, if you will. In 10:12, Hosea is calling on the people of Israel (and Judah) to return to God. He packs lots of imagery of renewal into just this one line. Plowing and rain (showers) are both symbols of renewal and rebirth. We have turned from God and now it is time for us to be reborn into God’s love.

We do not speak of being “born again” in Christ Church but, really, that is what Hosea is imploring us to do. But how? What are the ways we can be “reborn” into Christ? How do we sow righteousness? I try to pray every day. Sitting down and praying for a half hour does not work for me, so I try to integrate prayer throughout my day. It can just be a quick “help me” or “thank you” or “alright, you need to take control here because I’m just messing everything up.” Prayer is nothing but our attempt to communicate with God and I doubt Jesus really cares how we do that. No relationship thrives without communication.

As for sowing righteousness, I’m not quite sure what that means. I’ll just say this: It takes a lot of work to let my baggage go. To not hold resentments and grudges. It doesn’t happen on its own. I need a constant contact with God to help me get rid of these things. When I place them in God’s hands, I feel better. It is impossible to accept unfailing love and to have fruitful communication with God when I am stuck in a pile of my own garbage. Put simply, my ego gets in the way and I start to think that I am God. Not in a literal way, but in an “its all about me” way. So, I have found my commitment for Lent, in spite of myself, it seems. Make a stronger effort to communicate with God and try to do as Jesus asks when he says “give up all your possessions and follow me.” While I’m not quite ready to give up my iPod and camera, I will commit to giving up on the spiritual and emotional sludge that keeps me from sowing God’s love in my life and the lives of others.

Shad Christopoulos