

## Lenten Devotion #1

Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2010

Text: Luke 2: 1-7

We live by rules. We obey city parking regulations, for example, or file taxes in April (or submit an extension!). We abide by the laws of the authorities that govern us. Probably few of us have been subject to a foreign authority that took control without our consent.

In Luke 2, this is the situation. Caesar Augustus issues a decree, which is for all the world (to Rome, the “world” was the Roman Empire). Conquered lands feel Rome’s grip is not always life-giving, but Caesar views himself as the giver of peace, the Savior Lord of all the earth. Rome’s global charity needs money to feed its worldwide armies and pay military salaries. As long as the army is fed and paid, it’s happy. And when the army’s happy, the lands possessed by Rome are secure. What a privilege, then, for all nations to register for taxation! So, the Empire’s response to Rome’s decree is to begin traveling in order to register.

In small Palestine, a man, Joseph by name, with his pregnant fiancé Mary, begins to travel, too—back to Joseph’s family roots in Bethlehem, the ancient city from which came David, the beloved king of once-independent Israel. How ironic that Caesar and David “meet” in this story—a named imperial ruler conjures up the memory of an ancient national king, who also bears a name in the hearts and minds of Israel.

Joseph and Mary’s story is unassuming. While in Bethlehem on imperial business, Mary gives birth to her first-born son. A story with little to draw our attention. We don’t even know the baby’s name. Like a good mother, Mary tightly wraps the babe in cloth strips to cuddle him securely. The only odd detail: she lays him down, not in a crib or bassinet, but in a feeding trough or manger. Why? Because the house where they are staying doesn’t have an unoccupied “guestroom” (often translated, “inn”) upstairs where the family lives. So, Mary and Joseph have to stay downstairs where the animals are stabled. Such a quiet story in the midst of imperial events. Yet, a careful positioning of Caesar, David, Mary and Joseph—with God behind it all.

God begins in unexpected, sincere ways. Today, Ash Wednesday, we recognize that we are beginning a journey with this very baby who entered the world so quietly. Yet in his life and death and resurrection, God is acting for the sake of us and all the world, which is truly God’s, not Caesar’s.

Almighty and Ever-living God, on this Ash Wednesday we humbly turn our hearts, our minds, all that we are, in repentance and longing, to journey with your son Jesus Christ in his walk to the Cross. Be with us in this journey as we follow him. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## Lenten Devotion #2

Thursday, 18 February 2010

Text: Luke 2: 8-14

As Luke continues, we meet shepherds near Bethlehem, outside at night. After June, shepherds live in the fields with their flocks, whereas earlier, the animals are stabled. So, the shepherds are out in the fields doing what shepherds do: protecting the sheep from night dangers. Another commonplace event in Israel.

Suddenly, a single angel from the Lord God (not from Lord Caesar!) appears. The glory of the Lord shines all around. What exactly is this mysterious shining glory? No wonder the shepherds “fear a great fear,” as the Greek says. They are watching out for dangerous predators and are struck dumb by a lone angel! What a night!

The angel quickly commands them to stop fearing. The angel has a more critical announcement for them—not for Caesar or Jerusalem. The angel brings Good News of a wildly joyous event, not just for the shepherds or Israel, but for all the peoples of the earth. Caesar can issue a taxation decree for all the empire, yet this angel has Good News for all people. Are Caesar and God going toe-to-toe?

What is this Good News? “To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Unlike Lord Caesar, born in great Rome, this true Lord is born in little Bethlehem. And the news comes to the shepherds, the lowest group in society. Yet, the shepherds ply the trade of the shepherd-king David. Perhaps they know God’s promise made through the prophet Ezekiel to Israel long before: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, ... he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (34:23). So Israel has waited under Rome for God to fulfill God’s promise of a Savior, a Davidic Messiah.

Ironically, the Savior is a swaddled baby lying in a feeding trough.

The angel is on a roll. A heavenly army, unable to hold back its response to this glorious news, breaks out praising God. Heaven is ecstatic with praise. Glory and peace for heaven and earth are inaugurated! Where are the shepherds? We don’t hear a peep from them; heaven is drowning them out in joy! What a birthday song! What a birth announcement!

O Lord God, as we journey with your son Jesus Christ, once a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, who first lay in a manger, may we, too, join in heaven’s ecstatic birthday song of praise, rejoicing that you do come to us, to all people, wherever we may be in life, whatever our condition may be, to bring to the earth peace. In Jesus’ Name. Amen

Lenten Devotion #3  
Friday, 19 February 2010

Text: Luke 2: 15-21

The heavenly army is unstoppable in its praise response to God. It's as if earth has to wait for heaven's wondrous marveling! Once heaven has settled down, the shepherds get a word in: "Let's go see this matter spoken about and revealed by the Lord to us." These understated words make us smile: they are so tender and humbly curious. When the shepherds hurry off, sure enough, they find Mary, Joseph and the infant (still unnamed), who is lying in the manger. (Luke keeps telling us this. Why?)

The shepherds now reveal what they have heard. All listen to them, marveling at their story. We smile again. The shepherds are speaking up! And revealing to others (who are they?) the very news first announced to them! These shepherds are the first evangelists! They have heard and seen, and now come and see the infant for themselves.

But, that is not the end of the shepherds' story: they return to their fields, praising God for all they have seen and heard. They have been transformed into "seen and heard" people, who go back to their lives, filled with praise and the need to tell.

Before we finish, we hear one last tender word in a grand text of speaking and praising. Mary treasures all these matters and words; she ponders them in her heart. What a modest last word that sends us onward. Through the shepherds, we see, hear, and glorify God for what has been revealed to us. Through Mary, we ponder, also, this baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Could the swaddling clothes point to the linen wrappings used to wrap the Jesus' body at his death? Could the manger point to the tomb in which Jesus' body was laid? Is this what is meant by a Savior who causes heaven to sing gloriously and which brings to earth peace? Is this how God acts? Like Mary, we ponder these things in our hearts.

O Lord, you have given to us minds to know and ponder you, hearts to love you, and voices to sing your praises and proclaim your love to all. Fill us with your Spirit that we may celebrate your glory, worship you in spirit and truth, and witness to your love wherever you will send us in your world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #4  
Monday, 22 February 2010

Text: Luke 4:14-15

This week we follow Jesus as he begins his ministry amongst his people Israel. At Jesus' baptism, we are told the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove; a heavenly voice declares, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased." Then, full of the Spirit, Jesus is led by the same Spirit into the Wilderness to be tempted. Today, we read that Jesus returns to the Galilee, full of the Spirit's power. The Spirit now directs Jesus into ministry, into his calling or vocation, his "job." What will Jesus' ministry in the Spirit be like, we wonder?

Luke wants us to know that Jesus' appearance makes him "famous." News about him spreads quickly. People hear this new. They speak well of him, praising him. Jesus has made ancient CNN Headline News! Yet for what is he famous? He's just beginning his ministry; we haven't heard him do or say anything really. There's great expectancy in the air, yet what's all the buzz?

Frankly, Jesus is not seeking renown or fame. He is not on a quest for recognition, or public acclaim. He is not ambitious in his job. We are simply told, "He began to teach," or possibly, "He was continuously teaching," in the Greek. His teaching is an ongoing event.

In the Spirit, Jesus attends to his ministry of word and instruction, in the places, synagogues, where everyday people meet. Jesus is with them, teaching and teaching. The news and praise comes from others. Jesus has no need to draw his identity from self-praise or fame. His identity is grounded in the Spirit and his obedience to God's calling to him. Yet, ironically, even as Jesus doesn't seek this spreading news, it's as if when God is at work, the countryside cannot help but buzz! Yet does the countryside recognize this is God at work? We ponder.

As we follow Christ in this season, we ask ourselves, what gives us our identity? Do we seek it in our own need for recognition, our striving for a good word and acclaim, our ambitions and need for respect, the endorsement of our world around us? What is the anchor of our identity?

Eternal God, draw our hearts to you, control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, to your glory and the welfare of all your people. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

## Lenten Devotion #5

Tuesday, 23 February 2010

Text: Luke 4:16-19

Yesterday we read that Jesus begins his ministry teaching in the synagogues. Today, Jesus comes to his hometown Nazareth and, as is his custom, goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus is a faithful synagogue-goer. He's also a student of Scripture, rising to read and carefully unrolling the scroll to the prophet Isaiah, a text he seems to have a special purpose in reading.

Jesus chooses Isaiah 61:1-2. These words have a special history in Israel's life. Long ago, the Babylonian Empire captured Israel. Jerusalem was destroyed; the Israelites were exiled to what is now Iraq. Many in Israel viewed this exile as the punishment for Israel's failure to be God's obedient, chosen people. When Israel was released from captivity and allowed to go home, Israel still felt that captivity wasn't over. They weren't free to be God's people but were oppressed as a conquered people. They were physically out of exile but not spiritually.

So, Israel waits for God to rescue them finally from their oppressors: someday God will send a special deliverer, a Messiah, anointed for the purpose of deliverance. This Messiah will free Israel, forgive Israel's sins and establish God's reign in the land. Israel will then know that God is looking favorably on them. Last of all, God will invite all nations through Israel to come to God.

Jesus reads this glorious vision of the Messiah's coming and restoration. It's breathtaking: the Good News of God's favor and forgiveness comes to the poor, the blind, the prisoner, the oppressed. It comes as restored sight, release from prison, new life.

In reading this passage, Jesus reminds the synagogue of God's faithful, loving activity in Israel's past. God has always been with Israel, in days of sin and of promise. God has never let Israel go, in exile and punishment, in homecoming and the promise of a Messiah. Whether Israel knows it or not, whether we know it or not, God acts and works. God follows us through all the days of our lives. God is our past and our present. God is our future. Jesus, who faithfully goes to the synagogue and reads Scripture, reveals to us that God insists that our days are in God's hands. In Christ, we rest in that assurance.

O God, as we follow your Son Jesus to the Cross, we humbly acknowledge that you are the author of all our days. Our past, our sins, our joys, our present, our hopes and dreams are in your hands. Your loving hands bring to us only Good News that in your Son, through the power of the Spirit, is forgiveness and restoration. We rest our lives in your care this day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #6  
Wednesday, 24 February 2010

Text: Luke 4: 20-21

Before his hometown synagogue, Jesus reads the prophetic words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor....”

The one anointed by the Holy Spirit at the River Jordan, who has aroused so much interest, reads the Isaiah passage describing how God will work again in Israel’s midst. Who will this anointed one be? How will he restore the blind to see, give release to prisoners and preach to the poor? Who are the blind, the poor, the captives? When will this be? Where?

Carefully closing the scroll, handing it back to the synagogue attendant, with deliberation, Jesus sits down. His action signals to the congregation that a teacher is about to teach (as teachers sit to instruct). The people wait expectantly. Jesus’ action tells us and them an important moment has come. In expectation, all the eyes of the synagogue--and our eyes, too--are upon Jesus.

“Today,” Jesus says (and we sense he is looking slowly around the room, catching each person’s eye), “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Stunning words. Every time they are read, they demand a half hour of silence and pondering in heaven and on earth.

Without much ado, Jesus implies: all the past promises of God, all Israel’s hopes for God’s forgiveness and restoration, God’s release and rescue, meet in Jesus. As the people sit and hear, God is acting dramatically. The waiting is over. The history of Israel with God is now current event.

This is stunning. Inescapably cosmic. Jesus was and is and will be the one for whom the entire world waits. He is the one the poor, the blind, the captives, the prisoners, the oppressed await. Every nation longs for him. He is the one who announces and ushers in true release, true forgiveness, true restoration. And this is today. Today in the life of the synagogue so long ago. Today for us who hear and read this text in this hour. Today, Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing.

Gracious God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth together in a single peace. Let your great love shine on the brokenness of our sin and sorrows, and give peace to your church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, peace to the prisoners and oppressed, the poor and the blind. May your restoration in your Son Jesus Christ be today. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

## Lenten Devotion #7

Thursday, 25 February 2010

Text: Luke 4: 22-24

We had to stop yesterday when Jesus closes the Isaiah scroll, sits down and announces, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is such an astounding declaration that we had to pause for a day to take it in—to wonder over the Good News of God’s favor, love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ for us and all people.

Jesus’ hometown synagogue also marvels, speaking well of him and his words. Can’t you hear Jesus’ family friends turning to each other and saying, “Now isn’t this Joseph’s son!” Not because they don’t know him but because they can’t help but exclaim that Jesus has gone far. Almost as if they are saying to this hometown boy, “We’re proud of you. You speak well. You ‘done good’.” Do they really “hear” what Jesus is saying, this one anointed by the Spirit who invades their sanctuary? Or, are they hearing “Joe’s boy”? The fellow they have always known so well?

Jesus catches them up with the proverb: “Doctor, heal yourself.” He knows this is what they are thinking: Has he healed elsewhere? Then let him heal his own family and friends. Has he done amazing things elsewhere? Then let him do them amongst his own people. If he is taking his show on the road, he should bring it home, too. This is what his hometown wants of him. And this is to misunderstand Jesus, to not hear his words: “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

A student once said, “I left my country and lost my God.” Why? Because in leaving home and people, he discovered that his understanding of God in Christ was not only the understanding he had in his hometown box. God in Christ cannot be boxed in. Jesus comes to Nazareth and he is still Joseph’s son.

Jesus makes a radical, earth-shattering announcement: Jesus is the one anointed by the Spirit to bring Good News to Nazareth, to Israel, to us and our neighbors and enemies, to all the world. In Christ we learn that God forgives us, loves us, reaches out to us by the power of the Spirit and brings us back into God’s deep and overwhelming embrace. Are we listening to Christ’s words?

Most gracious God, grant that our ears might be open to the words of Christ to us. Bind them to our hearts through your grace, that they may produce in us the fruit of a good life, to the praise and honor of your name. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Lenten Devotion #8  
Friday, 26 February 2010

Text: Luke 4: 24-30

Jesus' hometown synagogue does not grasp what Jesus says to them or who he is. They do not understand his ministry. Evidently Jesus has been doing more than teaching, because he indicates that they want to see him do what he has been doing elsewhere. This is part of his fame that has spread so far and wide. What has Jesus been doing? Presumably healing, although Luke never says. Nazareth wants Jesus to "perform," as a magician might. Their interest is more in what Jesus does than in what he says. They want something from Jesus.

Jesus does not let his own people off the hook. To illustrate that a prophet is not accepted in his hometown, Jesus critiques Nazareth on a fundamental level. He chooses two great Israelite prophets: Elijah and Elisha. Both are revered men through whom God has spoken and acted for Israel. Yet Jesus dares to point out that even Elijah and Elisha do not always find belief and hearing in Israel. Even Elijah and Elisha acted for foreigners—the widow in Sidon and the Syrian leper—when Israel does not receive them.

Even God, through God's prophets, can't always get through to God's people! So what does God do? God acts for the foreign widow and leper, because God is a God who must reach out. Israel's calling is to be the one through whom God reaches out to all. If Israel misses that calling, God is not stopped.

Hearing this, Nazareth immediately understands that Jesus criticizes not only them but all Israel. The very chosen ones of God who should most recognize God in their midst cannot. This is the deep irony of Israel. Instead of repenting upon hearing Jesus' words, they turn on Jesus and attempt to hurl him over the cliff. The irony deepens. The very one the synagogue marvels over is now the one they wish to kill. Death enters Jesus' ministry.

This all happens because today Jesus declares the Good News that God in Christ forgives and loves all.

We, the Church, know Jesus well. Does our familiarity lead us to carry Jesus to the cliffside? Can we bear this Good News that God in Christ forgives and loves everyone in the entire world? That God in Christ is free to love and forgive everyone whom God has created?

Lord God of our salvation, it is your will that all people come to you through your Son Jesus Christ. Inspire our witness to him who is free to act where he will, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection. We pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #9  
Monday, 1 March 2010

Text: Luke 5:17

This week we follow a day in Jesus' ministry. Jesus doesn't lose one opportunity to teach and announce God's favor and love. Obviously, this Good News has spread even further than before. Now the Pharisees and Teachers of the Mosaic Law sit in front of Jesus. They are a large crowd, from every village in the Galilee (How many villages are in the Galilee?), as well as the heartland of Judea and the capital, Jerusalem. The fact that Judea and Jerusalem make an effort to come tells us that Jesus is causing a serious stir.

Who are these visitors? The Pharisees are an observant, powerful religious group who stress getting back to the purity basics of the Mosaic Law. The Law Teachers have special religious training. Both are the guardians of the Law, the heart of the Jewish religion. Both are connected with Jerusalem and the Temple, where the religion is centered.

Yet, Jesus' ministry lures these religious authorities out of their lairs of power.

So they come and sit around Jesus as he speaks. We aren't specifically told that they are listening to Jesus, although we presume so. They are men of Law. They sit as if they're judges, upon their judgment seats. How daunting to teach with such critics about!

Yet, even as these guardians of Israel's God sit, the power of their Lord is upon Jesus to heal. The Greek for "heal" or "cure" can refer to physical restoration after a sickness, but it can also refer to restoration from sin, spiritual restoration. The one who teaches is empowered to restore holistically. Word and deed, that's what Jesus is about.

So, we ponder these men who come so far to sit around Jesus. What is their agenda? What do they want? What do they know is true and what do they expect?

Does Jesus' freedom to act and speak outside the centers and beyond the keepers of the "faith" challenge our own lives and understanding of who this Jesus is? What do we know and want? What do we expect of Jesus? Let us ponder this day how Jesus' freedom to act and speak demonstrates itself in our lives, as we move about our tasks and activities today.

O God, your Spirit blows where it will and your rain falls where it will. Help our ears to hear and our eyes to see the signs of your presence, not only where we would expect to see them, but wherever your bounty bestows them. May we praise your goodness and restoring love to all. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #10  
Tuesday, 2 March 2010

Text: Luke 5:18-20

The room in the house can not be very large, as Jewish homes in the Palestine countryside are modest. It's filled with Pharisees and Law Teachers who flock from all over to check Jesus out. A large, critical crowd taking up all seats and space around Jesus. No wonder when the paralytic's friends try to get him through to Jesus—not to place him amongst the judging audience but to bring this man to Jesus for healing—they find the physical passage (and the spiritual path of belief, too?) obstructed.

How to reach this one whom the friends believe can heal? The need to come and bring their friend to Jesus bears witness that in Jesus God is forgiving and restoring Israel. Whether the friends realize this or not, the friends believe and come.

The crowded room (and perhaps the disbelief of the crowd) does not daunt the friends. With creative determination, they remove the roofing, lowering the paralytic on his cot before Jesus. (We are thrilled yet appalled—what mess to clean up later!) Greek states that they lower him “into the middle before Jesus.” The middle of what? Certainly the physical crowd. But also the middle of the authorities' disbelief?

Seeing their belief, Jesus declares to the man, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.” “Forgiven” bears the idea of dismissal, cancellation or release. What is Jesus doing?

When Jesus declares, “Your sins are forgiven you,” he is “walking the talk” of his great synagogue announcement, “Today in your hearing this scripture has been fulfilled.” Isaiah 61 is now realized. God is canceling Israel's sin and separation from God in order to establish God's new people. God does this because God is a God of relationship, a God who cannot bear to fall out of love.

And this is what Jesus' word to this backwater Galilean paralytic means. God forgives and calls us all back to God's own self. All are included, all who come by the very gift of God's own Spirit. It is Christ's Spirit who plants faith and gives us the ability to come. We cannot do anything on our own. We come and believe, through Christ, by the power of the Spirit.

O Lord God, in your Son Jesus Christ you have given to us a true faith and a sure hope. Help us believe and trust in him this day, and strengthen this faith and hope in us all the days of our life. Through the love of your Son Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #11  
Wednesday, 3 March 2010

Text: Luke 5:21

Two obstacles to healing exist in the house where Jesus is teaching: physically the room is crowded and spiritually the Pharisees and scribes come with disbelief and judgmental attitudes. The atmosphere is charged with entrapment.

When the Galileans bring their paralyzed friend (via the roof!) to Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes have even more to question. Who are these backwater peasants that they go to such lengths to reach Jesus? Yet we hear nothing of this. These authorities are much more concerned with what Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven you,” and the claim behind it, “Who is this who speaks in such terms?” they ask. “Only God can forgive sins. Who is defaming God’s reputation by commanding in the place of God?” As God’s Protection Squad, the Pharisees and scribes know that these questions will not be “properly” answered by Jesus. Jesus isn’t one of them. He isn’t a Jerusalem Religious Party Member or the Temple Elite. Jesus is a Galilean talker. And a defamer of God with a following, at that.

It seems by their grumblings that the Pharisees and scribes are glad to find Jesus defaming God and commanding forgiveness of sins. Now they can be righteously angry for God’s sake. Now they can rejoice that they have caught Jesus saying this. Their mission of judgment—their suspicions about Jesus?—are confirmed. Their need to listen to Jesus is dismissed. The issue will be what to do with him, not to listen to him.

Like Pharaoh so long ago when Moses and Aaron go to him and ask that he let Israel go from Egypt, the scribes and Pharisees harden their hearts. They close their eyes to the one in front of them; they shut their ears and shutter their minds to his words and actions right before them. Neither the Spirit’s prompting of the friends to come to Jesus nor the words of forgiveness Jesus pronounces to the paralytic can move these guardians. For all their access, they cannot see and hear. For all their knowledge, they cannot understand.

For all our access, where are our ears and eyes? For all our knowledge, where are our hearts and minds?

Eternal God: You see us through the eyes of your Son, Jesus Christ, and you accept us for his sake. You hear us and know we need your forgiveness and mercy. Teach us your Son’s way of hearing and seeing you and those who surround us, in whatever circumstance they may be. Teach us understanding and compassion, that we may be pleasing unto you. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #12  
Thursday, 4 March 2010

Text: Luke 5: 22-24

We love how Jesus is sensitive to the true unspoken thoughts and issues that swirl about him. (It scares us, too!). He's like a parent with eyes in the back of his head who can catch the child at some naughty act. He's uncanny in being able to read what is "really" going on. In verse 22, Luke writes, "When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'" "Jesus who has x-ray vision.

Understanding the disbelief of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus proposes a challenge: "Which is easier (we would have expected him to ask which is harder!), to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"

Obviously Jesus can go around all day playing God and telling people their sins are forgiven. Empty, blasphemous words in a game of trickery? "Easy" words? Without actions to back up his words, he can be adulated or dismissed. But Jesus arrests all doubts and takes the challenge of harder words and actions: take up your pallet. Why? To demonstrate that for God, acting in Jesus, these are the easy, the true, authentic words of forgiveness and restoration. God's favor and love are concrete and physically real for Israel. The lame do walk; the blind do see.

Jesus shows his critics that God acts in word and deed. Words of forgiveness interpret walking and walking interprets forgiveness. When God in Genesis 1 says, "Let there be light," and there is light, word and deed bind together for life, at God's command. When Jesus binds forgiveness with the command to walk, word and deed bond together for life, new life in Jesus.

Today, Jesus says to each one of us, "Your sins are forgiven you. Arise and walk."

Eternal God, as we walk with your son in this Lenten season, help us to hear in his prayer the one purpose he went through the agony of his passion and death: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Forgive us this day our failures in every way and remind us that in your forgiveness there is life. Help us to arise and walk this day in your son. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #13  
Friday, 5 March 2010

Text: Luke 5:25-26

We can't imagine how stunned yet joyous the people are when the paralytic unfolds his legs and stands up. Luke says it happens immediately upon Jesus' command. The man stands amidst the sitting crowd—he is ever the odd one in the lot! He picks up his bed (Did he wave it above his head since it has always been under him?) and he goes home (Did he skip off or run or hop? Did he go right home, or did he hit every house in between first?). He goes glorifying God (How wondrously happy we are with him!).

The reaction of the crowd is equally wondrous. "Amazement seized all of them." This includes the Pharisees and the scribes, too! In fact, they are no longer singled out—they are a part of the villagers now, a part of a new community circling about Jesus, witnesses to his words and deed. They are a new people of God, seized by wonder. And, they respond, too, by glorifying God and speaking in awe.

The angels who appear to the shepherds at Jesus' birth begin this glorification of God—and now even Jesus' critics, in the face of the activity of God in Jesus, in the face of a lowly paralytic standing up and walking away, glorify God. Glorify God for not forgetting God's people. For not leaving us broken and far from God. For coming to us poor sinners and loving us so much.

A young student once said, "I don't really get into the Bible very much and the whole thing with God. I've done every bad thing in the book and I'm too big a sinner for the Bible." In Jesus we see that God has no entry requirements (God threw away the "No Sinners Allowed" sign). Forgiveness and life are for all, the paralytic, the religious authorities, the young student. For us all. We don't have to get into the Bible or this God thing. God gets into our lives and world. God is the one who comes to us. God is the one who reaches out to us all.

May we turn in faith to this God who unceasingly comes. May we rejoice and marvel in God's wondrous presence in Christ Jesus this day.

Eternal God: When morning gilds the skies, my heart awakening cries: May Jesus Christ be praised! When evening shadows fall, this rings my curfew call: May Jesus Christ be praised! Sing, sun and stars of space, Sing all who see his face, Sing, "Jesus Christ be praised!" God's whole creation o'er, Today and evermore, Shall Jesus Christ be praised! In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #14  
Monday, 8 March 2010

Text: Luke 10:25

This week we look at the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Luke 10 begins on a note of mission. Jesus sends 70 followers into countryside villages to announce, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." God draws near to Israel in favor; the age of the Messiah is here. Israel needs to hear this news, and Jesus' followers must go out to tell the people. Doing and hearing God's Word go hand-in-hand.

The 70 return, ecstatic about what they have been able to do and see. With them, Jesus rejoices, "...many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." Luke 10 brims with the excitement of mission.

But there is a spoiler: "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus." This religious expert in Mosaic Law rises for an argument and surely his test is a trap. We can hear the celebration suddenly lurch to a halt.

The question is simple (too simple?): "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, "How can I participate in the age to come?" "What do I need to do?"

We completely doubt the lawyer's sincerity; we are told this is a test. When the lawyer addresses Jesus as "Teacher," he is either patronizing Jesus or warning Jesus that Jesus is "only" a teacher. When the lawyer asks about eternal life, is he challenging Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God or reminding Jesus that the life to come is defined by the Jerusalem authorities? A true mess on a day that started out so brightly!

The lawyer isn't asking a sincere question; if he were, he wouldn't know the answer and would listen to the response. But, we suspect he "knows" the "answer." And so, he doesn't need to listen.

We view this lawyer unsympathetically. Testing God is something Jewish Jurists do. Yet, as we walk with Christ this week, we look at our own prayers and ponderings. We see that we, too, approach God's throne, presenting situations as we hope and deeply feel they should be. We, too, box Christ in, challenging him to meet our expectations without listening.

Almighty God, in repentance we come before you, acknowledging the sin that is within us. Forgive us when we fail to listen to you but put upon you our expectations of what you should do for us. Forgive us and change us by your love, that your Word of hope may be heard clearly throughout the world. Through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #15  
Tuesday, 9 March 2010

Text: Luke 10:26-28

Students “love” when a teacher answers a question with a question! In Luke 10, Jesus does just this. The lawyer asks ingenuously, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Teacher Jesus, like a good teacher in the ancient world, answers with a question: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

Jesus takes this Mosaic Law expert back to the Mosaic Law itself.

The lawyer turns to Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord God with all your heart (your will, feelings, thinking), soul (your personality), strength (power to do) and mind (intellectual faculty).” Deuteronomy 6:5 is a continuation of Israel’s great creedal belief statement in Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

As Israel hears that the Lord alone is Israel’s God, Israel is commanded to respond in its total being with love for this Lord God. Yet, the lawyer adds more: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” which comes from Leviticus 19:8. The lawyer weaves different portions of the Law together. What does the lawyer achieve? A three-pronged response: Israel is to love the Lord God, therefore Israel’s neighbor, therefore Israel’s own self. Expressed in this set of three, Israel’s posture in life is one of love. (Scriptural statements in three represent a complete idea.)

Jesus’ question to the lawyer sends the lawyer back to the basics, grounded in who God is, the one Lord, the God of Israel. And back to Israel’s commanded response: to love God with Israel’s total being, to love Israel’s neighbor as Israel’s own self. Jesus commends his student for answering “correctly.” So now Jesus proceeds to answer the lawyer’s original question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” “Do this,” Jesus says, “and you will live.” Jesus has helped the lawyer answer his own question, based upon the basics of the Jewish experience with God.

We hear Jesus’ response and are sent back to the basics. We live in response to God, who is been revealed to us and all peoples in Christ Jesus. What does it mean to trust and obey in loving God, and our neighbor as ourselves this day?

Oh, that the Lord would guide my ways  
To keep his statutes still!  
Oh, that my God would grant me grace,  
To know and do his will!

Make me to walk in your commands,  
‘Tis a delightful road;  
Nor let my head or heart or hands  
Offend against my God. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #16

Wednesday, 10 March 2010

Text: Luke 10:29

So far, the lawyer poses a tricky question to Jesus but Jesus turns the tables on him. Further, Jesus commends the “lawyer-student” as a teacher does, praising his correct answer. Then Jesus uses the lawyer’s response to answer the opening tricky question.

But the lawyer is a tenacious bulldog, with his teeth in Jesus’ robe hem: “But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” What does “justify himself” mean? In Greek, it can mean, “to render a favorable verdict.” Can it be that the lawyer’s test has a projected outcome in mind, and Jesus foils that outcome? Is the lawyer going to give Jesus one more shot in order to entrap him?

The lawyer’s new question is also telling in Greek, because he stresses two ideas. First, he stresses the “my” in “Who is **my** neighbor?” Second, he doesn’t use the word for “neighbor” that Luke uses elsewhere. He actually asks, “Who is **my fellow human being**?” (This idea for “fellow human being” is very broad and found only here in Luke. Elsewhere Luke uses a very common term for “neighbor” that refers to someone who lives close by, a member of one’s group, an ethnic and cultural neighbor.)

The lawyer’s question is a tight one, asked by an authority of the very people who know they are God’s chosen, set-apart people. Israel, by its calling from God, will not, can not mix with its foreign neighbors, such as the Egyptians or Romans. Nor can Israel mix with the Samaritans who live next door, in the area of old Samaria, the “county” between southern Judah and northern Galilee. Why? Because the Samaritans are ethnically and culturally different, enemies of Israel ever since wars and conquests in Israel hundreds of years earlier. (This is like saying Missouri and Minnesota can’t deal with Iowa because Iowa has done something to both in the past.)

So, by God’s calling, who are Israel’s “fellow human beings”?

This is our question today: we hear it often. How do we answer this when we feel we are called to hold the truth, called to be God’s people in the world? How do we answer this not only as individuals, but as the New Israel, the Church? Who are **our fellow human beings**? And, when we ask this, are we trying to justify ourselves?

O God of all, with wonderful diversity you create all people in your image. Free us from prejudice and fear that we may see your face in the diverse faces of people here at home and around the world, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #17

Thursday, 11 March 2010

Text: Luke 10:30-35

Finally, we come to the Parable of the Good Samaritan! As always, Jesus' parables are couched in a story; they make little sense outside the context.

When the lawyer asks, "Then who is **my fellow human being**?" Jesus responds with this parable.

There is a man. We don't know his background ethnically or culturally. Is he Jewish or not? We don't know. He is a human being. He journeys the rugged, often bandit-ridden route from high Jerusalem to low Jericho, and, sure enough, he's attacked by robbers, robbed and beaten (not unlike many on such routes today throughout the world). He's left for dead. By coincidence, a Jerusalem Temple authority, a priest, comes by. He does see the man but moves to the other side and goes on. He should give relief: the Law tells him to. But he chooses not to get involved. Doing so will make him religiously unclean and unfit before God.

Another Jewish authority from the Jerusalem Temple, a Levite (perhaps a Temple singer) passes by. He actually goes, looks, then decides to pass by on the other side. Perhaps he is also worried about becoming unclean, disabling him from his singing in the Temple.

Finally, the old enemy, a Samaritan passes. (Samaritans are especially despised for not revering the Jerusalem Temple but for worshipping the same God at Mt. Gerizim—heresy of heresies!). He, too, sees and has compassion. His compassion is extravagant: he bandages the man's wounds, pours wine and olive oil on them to cleanse and heal them, puts the man on his donkey, brings him to a hotel, cares for him and even gives two day's pay to the hotel manager to care for the man, promising to come back and pay whatever else is on the bill.

The Samaritan's extravagance is stunning. Is the wounded man the Samaritan's friend or foe? Is he Jewish or not? We never know. It doesn't matter. The wounded man is a fellow human being in need.

We wonder how the lawyer hears this story. How do we hear it? Because it is so familiar, we worry that we don't really listen. We could re-tell it ourselves. But this story begins with a lawyer who isn't listening. How can we stop telling the story and listen? Let us pause here and listen for this day to the words of Jesus' reply.

Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word. You have commanded us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us. Help us not to be satisfied to love our friends only but to reach out with true love and justice to all your children, to our fellow human beings. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #18  
Friday, 12 March 2010

Text: Luke 10:36-37

Have you been listening to Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan? Perhaps we are now ready to hear on, to follow Jesus as he makes his "landing" with the lawyer.

Once again, Teacher Jesus turns to his student-lawyer. Once again, he asks a question which brings truth and resolution: "Which of these 3 do you think was a neighbor ("fellow human being") to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer knows the answer and cannot turn aside from the response (Is the lawyer entrapped?): "The one who showed him mercy." In Greek, the lawyer's response is ironic: "The one **doing** mercy for him." As awkward as that appears in English, Jesus has returned the lawyer full-circle to the original question, "What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?"

Do what the Law commands: love the Lord your God and love your fellow human beings as you love yourself. And what does it mean to love your fellow human beings? It means to do mercy for them. Doing love, doing mercy—all as response to this God who comes in Jesus Christ.

This word "mercy" only occurs in Luke and expresses the idea of compassion, care or concern one has for someone in need. There are no boundaries, no ethnic, racial or cultural lines. The Law of God for Israel is gathered up into love, compassion, grounded in God's love for Israel for the sake of the whole world.

Jesus shows Israel, shows us God's deep, abiding, unfathomable love for all God's creation, for all human beings. God's love knows no Samaritan or Jew, no insider or outsider, no category. We stand before God's throne, all human beings. We all bear the breath of life God has breathed into us; we are all created by God's hand. But what is more, we are all brought near to God in Christ, forgiven, freed and given the power by the Spirit to go out and to announce to all our neighbors far and wide, "In Christ the Kingdom of God is drawn near." God loves us. Hear, oh hear this Good News!

O God, you made us in your image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us, unite us in love and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth, that in your good time, every nation and people may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #19  
Monday, 15 March 2010

Text: Luke 15:1-2

Would it be “easier” to be a Pharisee (or scribe) in Jesus’ day or a tax collector (or sinner)? On the one hand are the Pharisees and scribes, the religious of Jewish society who daily observe the Mosaic Law faithfully. On the other hand are the tax collectors, who work with “unclean” Gentiles, collecting taxes from their fellow Jewish neighbors, perhaps taking extra for themselves. And, the “sinners,” who either can’t or don’t observe all the Mosaic Law regulations (people such as shepherds and leatherworkers, but perhaps a great number of the populace, like you and me!). The Pharisees and scribes certainly are critical of the tax collectors and sinners. Who knows how the sinners and tax collectors feel about the Pharisees and scribes. Needless to say, Jewish society is internally divided. Into this mix comes Jesus!

We don’t really see or hear from Jesus directly in these opening two verses. All (not just some!) of the tax collectors and sinners are drawing near (a term that implies shy but irresistible attraction: they are not merely “coming” to Jesus!). Why? To hear him.

Once again, we meet a group who listen more than they talk. And, in Scripture, the verb “to listen” is also “to obey.” Are these sinners a sign of obedience which can be understood as repentance? A longing to trust in Jesus’ announcement that the Kingdom of God, God’s favor is present?

The very ones who claim to be obedient aren’t listening. They’re grumbling out loud, accusing Jesus of mixing with unclean folk (and becoming unclean himself). They’re probably mumbling, “If he’s becoming unclean, how can his message have any truth? How can it be a word from a clean God?”

What is Jesus doing that is so unclean? He’s welcoming and eating with sinners.

Jesus will not be restricted. Once again we see that he will freely act as God freely acts. Once again, we are reminded that our grumbling hearts and tongues are called to hear and obey Jesus this day. Today, we hear of a God who longs to be in relationship with each one of us, the loveliest and the most unlovely. The most obedient and the least. God welcomes all, sits down to eat with all and invites us to the table. Do we not long today for this deep intimate caring and welcome?

We thank you, Lord God, for your mercy that reaches out to us, for your patience that waits upon our restlessness and grumbling ways, and for your love that is always ready to welcome sinners. We praise you that in Jesus Christ you come to us with forgiveness and that, by your Spirit, you move us to repent and receive your love, In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #20  
Tuesday, 16 March 2010

Text: Luke 15:3-10

Jesus can hear grumbling! (Ours, too?). In response, he doesn't correct the Pharisees and scribes. He "merely" tells 3 stories. He will let the scribes and Pharisees ponder his "response" for themselves.

Jesus tells the same story twice. In the first parable, a shepherd with 100 sheep loses one, so he leaves the 99 in the desert and looks for the lost one until he finds it. He then shoulders it and brings it back to the 99 (an endearing yet arduous task to carry it in the desert). All the way he rejoices, and when he gets home, he calls his male friends and neighbors to rejoice even more! The found formerly-lost sheep is a big deal!

The second parable follows the same pattern. A woman with 10 Greek silver coins can't find one (the value of one sheep!), so she uses valuable oil and lights a lamp, sweeping out the earthen floor, looking carefully for the valued coin. Upon finding it, she calls her female friends and neighbors to rejoice with her in her great joy.

A fellow knocking on his male friends' doors in excitement over a found lost sheep. A woman running down the street, calling out her girlfriends to celebrate with her. What a picture!

Intriguingly these stories are questions. Wouldn't a shepherd do this? Wouldn't a woman do this? Jesus knows that his listeners will respond: Yes!

And it's upon this "yes" that Jesus springs: If we in our daily life rejoice over found sheep and coins, then does heaven not rejoice wildly over one sinner who repents? As with the shepherds at the birth of Jesus, heaven and the angels can go wild over what happens on earth. Whether at the birth of the Savior or the repentance of human beings and their coming back to God, heaven is reunited with earth and heaven is overjoyed.

When Jesus welcomes and sits down to eat with us, when Jesus bids us draw near and listen to him, when the Spirit brings us to him, all heaven rejoices. God is pleased. God lights the lamp for each one of us. God carries us back to God's other sheep on God's shoulders. Earth is not left alone: heaven is watching and participating—and rejoicing this day.

Of the Father's love begotten  
Ere the worlds began to be,  
He is Alpha and Omega,  
He the source, the ending he,  
Of the things that are, that have been,  
And that future years shall see  
Evermore and evermore.

Let the heights of heav'n adore him;  
Angel hosts, his praises sing;  
Pow'rs, dominions bow before him  
And extol our God and King;  
Let no tongue on earth be silent,  
Every voice in concert ring  
Evermore and evermore.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen

Lenten Devotion #21

Wednesday, 17 March 2010

Text: Luke 15:11-19

In Scripture, when things are said or done in sets of three, there is completeness or wholeness. Just so in Luke 15. In two quick parables, Jesus says to the Pharisees and scribes that as we human beings search for lost sheep and lost coins, so much more does God in heaven search for sinners. And in finding them, God greatly rejoices.

Now Jesus tells a third and extended parable.

A man has two sons. For some reason, the younger son wants his inheritance right away, before his father dies. In commanding language (Do children command their parents?), he orders his father to give him his share. (At least he politely begins by saying, “Father.”) We hear no word from his dad—the father does what his son asks without comment.

With this, the son goes abroad to a distant country. (He really has to get away from his own land and people!). In this far-off place, beyond Israel, this fellow wastes away his inheritance in reckless, extravagant spending. And he ends up broke. Then a famine hits. (Famines are often symbolic of deep disaster in the Bible!) The foolish guy can’t make it on his own, so he hires himself to a foreigner. (The Greek reads something like “sticks himself to another”—as if he is imposing himself and can’t be shaken off.) How shameful for an Israelite! Then, horror of horrors, his job is to feed the unclean pigs. And the ultimate shame is not to be able to even eat what the pigs eat! A Jewish fellow in a distant land, stuck to a foreigner, hungry, tending pigs and not even able to eat pig food? How low can one go?

So, the fellow wakes up: “How many hired workers of my father have enough bread and to spare, but I am dying of hunger!” Even his father’s workers have bread for life. So the son determines to go home and he prepares a “crawling home” speech.

This parable is not a contrived fiction. It’s poignant because it is so true to life. We break so many dear relationships in our lives, as we seek what we think will give us “life.” We turn away from God and chase after vain desires and fantasies that captivate our hearts, mind and strength. We go straying on distant strands. Life knocks us about. Yet, what is amazing is that God, like the father, quietly divides, gives us our inheritance and lets us go on our journeys to distant places, far from God. But, as the son comes to realize, the true bread of life is with God.

Lord Jesus, we are tempted all around. We are so easily overcome by our own desires to get away from you, to be free to do what we want and to have what we crave. Help us to repent

and turn to you. Bring us back, Lord Jesus, to the real freedom of life that is in you. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #22

Thursday, 18 March 2010

Text: Luke 15:20-24

The son puts his plan into action. He gets up and goes back to his father.

We haven't heard the story from the father's viewpoint. How does the father feel when the younger son asks for his inheritance? When the son goes abroad? What has the father been doing while the son is gone?

Verse 20 turns to the father: "While the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion ; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." How is it the father sees him so far off? He must be looking! Looking every day, every minute, with binoculars no less, to see his son so distantly! This is absolutely stunning.

Even though the son treats the father terribly, the father still watches, watches, watches. The father believes and hopes for the son.

Then what does the father do? Verse 20 is filled with actions. The father has compassion, runs out to meet the son in the fields (ancient landowners would never be caught running into their fields), puts his arms around his son and he kisses him. This is so poignant.

The son then begins his prepared speech. It's delightfully comical that the father cuts him off (as if to say, "Yes, yes," impatiently) and exuberantly orders, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him." A ring and sandals, too! The father has his son back! No hired worker for the father! And the order is given to celebrate with a special meal. (Didn't this whole thing begin with eating?) The one lost is found (as we heard in the first two stories). Even more, the one dead is now alive. The fatted calf on offer at the father's table outstrips the distant country's offering of no pig food. There is life in the father's house, at the father's table.

What a stunning image of God Jesus tell! Whether we know it or not, far from God or close at hand, God yearns and longs for us. God watches and looks out for us. God is the one who runs out to meet our poor, beggarly, empty selves.

And how do we know this? Because Jesus tell us so. And because Jesus walks the path to the cross, that in his death and resurrection, we might live.

Our Father, we have wandered and hidden from your face;  
In foolishness have squandered your legacy of grace.  
But now, in exile dwelling, we rise with fear and shame,  
As, distant but compelling, we hear you call our name.

And now at length discerning the evil that we do,  
Behold us, Lord, returning with hope and trust to you.  
In haste you come to meet us and home rejoicing bring,  
In gladness there to greet us with calf and robe and ring.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #23  
Friday, 19 March 2010

Text: Luke 15:25-32

We think we have come to the end of the parable. The younger son has returned to the extravagant love of his father

But Jesus pushes the story on. We haven't heard from one last character: the older son.

The older son comes in from a long, hard day in the father's fields. Upon hearing dancing and music (Why did he not know about this?), he finds out his brother is home. Instead of being happy, he's angry and balks, not wanting to join the celebration.

Once again, the father comes out to the older son. Peevishly, the son whines that all these years his father has never even given him a goat for a party. In essence, the older son is accusing the father of favoring the younger son. (Have any of us heard this before?) The older son goes further and disconnects himself from his father and brother: "When **this son of yours** came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (We are never told the younger one hangs out with prostitutes. The older son is getting his jabs in!)

The father listens to his older son's complaints and then speaks. His words bring this parable to an end. Indeed, the father has the last word to the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus is moving in for the punchline.

The father meets the grumbling with the opening word, "Child." No matter the disagreement, the father insists upon relationship; he will not let the older son redefine who the family is. He also assures the older one that he recognizes his loyalty and steadfastness. But rejoicing is in order because "**this brother of yours**" is returned, alive not dead. The father will not allow brother to be torn from brother, just as the father reaches out to bring both sons to himself. In restoring the sons to himself, the father restores the brothers to each other.

God insists upon reaching out to both the Pharisees and the scribes, and in so doing both are restored to each other as siblings. Everyone can eat together.

Through the Spirit, we are restored to God in Christ, and as we are so restored, we are restored to one another. How is this so in our lives today?

In Christ there is no east or west,  
In him no south or north,  
but one community of love throughout the whole wide earth.

In Christ now meet both east and west,  
In him meet south and north;  
All Christly souls are one in him throughout the whole wide earth.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Join hands, disciples of the faith, whate'er your race may be.  
All children of the living God are surely kin to me.

Lenten Devotion #24  
Monday, 22 March 2010

Text: Luke 19:28-29

Jesus is walking around the countryside of Galilee, visiting from village to village. He is constantly on the move, much like the wandering Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years after they left Egypt.

If you've ever been on a flight backed up for landing, you know how the plane can circle and circle. Finally, the pilot is given the go-ahead, the plane shifts into landing mode and you feel the descent begin. The engines flair and hum, an "imperceptible brake" is released and down the plane goes.

Just so with Jesus: "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up he set his face to go to Jerusalem." In Luke 19, Jesus is going ahead in obedience to his mission, to bring the Good News of God's favor to the very religious heart of Israel.

He comes first to the Mt. Of Olives, a high hill east of Jerusalem. (230 feet above the Temple, it directly looks down upon Jerusalem and the Temple.) On the far side of the Mount are the villages, Bethpage and Bethany. Jesus visits Bethany several times and seems to have good friends there. Now he sends two disciples out; it's obvious he's getting ready to enter Jerusalem.

So we will pause with Jesus as he overnights in Bethany. It's common for travelers to come to the city from the Mount of Olives to the east. Yet, as common as it is, for Jesus it is also auspicious.

It is by way of the Mt. of Olives that Israel is led into exile in 586 BCE. It is to the Mt. of Olives that David escapes when his son Absalom usurps the throne briefly. Defeat is connected with the Mount. But, hope is also connected with this Mount. In Ezekiel and Isaiah, the Lord will return to Jerusalem by rising up over the Mt. of Olives. People are buried on the Mount's western side, facing the Temple, so that when the Messiah comes, they will rise to behold the Temple. Both defeat and hopes for Messianic restoration are connected with the Mt. of Olives.

To the Mt. of Olives Jesus comes, ready to make his descent into the Holy City. Jesus comes to reverse the pathway of defeat. He comes bringing hope. He comes to us this day, on the road to Jerusalem and the Cross. It is the way of hope and life for us all.

Almighty God, Your son Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and in obedience did not turn from the cross. Rescue us from disobedient hearts and prepare us to take up our cross and to follow in the way of Jesus Christ our Lord. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #25

Tuesday, 23 March 2010

Text: Luke 19:29-31

When the US President travels to a city, the city knows it. Plans are laid long in advance. What route the President's car will follow is calculated and cleared. Secret Service take up their positions everywhere. Helicopters fly overhead as spotters. Guests and dignitaries are briefed. Hopefully nothing is left to chance; all is carefully orchestrated. The President himself, though, has no hand in this preparation.

In the Ancient World, much the same is true when the Roman Caesar makes an imperial visit. Ancient royals love great processions to demonstrate with all pomp and ceremony their lordship.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he has to make his own arrangements. He himself sends two of his disciples to a nearby village to locate a young donkey that has never been ridden. (Unridden donkeys are the special prerogative of kings!). Obviously, Jesus has already arranged for this donkey, since he knows its whereabouts. He even gives his men a code phrase for the safe release of the animal. To the owner's question, "Why do you untie it?" they are to respond, "The Lord has need of it." (This Lord is not Caesar!) Can it be that this possible "code" is due to Jesus' fear of action against him?

Jesus is his own procession-planner: a royal figure who is so un-royal that he has to initiate his own processional entry into Jerusalem. Quietly, the true Lord prepares the way. As quietly as he makes his royal appearance at his birth amongst shepherds. Who knows that Jesus declares himself Lord? His disciples—at least the two who are sent. The owner of the donkey.

And we know. We marvel at Jesus' humility. We wonder at his true Lordship in the face of worldly claims to kingship and power. We are amazed how he displays his royalty. Jesus comes to our world, to us, in the least expected ways. He faithfully comes.

He comes to u as one unknown, a breath unseen, unheard;  
As though within a heart of stone, or shriveled seed in darkness sown,  
A pulse of being stirred, a pulse of being stirred.  
He comes in love as once he came by flesh and blood and birth;  
To bear within our mortal frame a life, a death a saving name,  
For every child of earth, for ev'ry child of earth.

He comes in truth when faith is grown, believed, obeyed, adored;  
The Christ in all the scriptures shown, as yet unseen, but not unknown,  
Our Savior and our Lord, our Savior and our Lord.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #26  
Wednesday, 24 March 2010

Text: Luke 19:32-34

There is something deeply poignant and stirring about these simple words. We have already read that Jesus has to launch his own processional entry into Jerusalem, his own “triumphal” entry, as we sometimes call this. He’s preparing to come to Jerusalem via the Mt. of Olives, a route the Messiah is expected to follow. Yet he has to make his own transportation arrangements and he has to give his two disciples the clearance pass to take the donkey away. What is touching and comforting about these verses is that what Jesus describes to his disciples is what occurs. The men go to the village and find the young colt as Jesus describes. When they untie it, they are questioned as Jesus says, and they respond as he tells them.

As simple as this scene is, it is enormously reassuring. Jesus explains what is to happen and it does. His arrangements are true and they come to pass as he says. His word is true.

It is so hard to live our daily lives trusting with our hearts, minds and strength that Jesus’ words are true. We struggle in our attentive obedience. We fear that our days are not in God’s hands. Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem and his own death, orders the preparations for the disciples and his words are true.

Jesus orders our days; he bids us trust our days are in God’s hands. His word is true. It is so true that he goes to Jerusalem, a king to slaughter, to bring this Good News to us. In Christ Jesus, the King, by the power of the Spirit, we can live our days knowing they are in God’s hands. God is acting. God is true to God’s Word and promises.

If you but trust in God to guide you with gentle hand through all your ways,  
You’ll find that God is there beside you when crosses come, in trying days.  
Trust then in God’s unchanging love; build on the rock that will not move.

What gain is there in anxious weeping, in helpless anger and distress?  
If you are in your Savior’s keeping, in sorrow will he love you less?  
For Christ who took for you a cross will bring you safe through ev’ry loss.

The Lord our restless hearts is holding, in peace and quietness content.  
We rest in God’s good will unfolding, what wisdom from on high has sent.  
God, who has chosen us by grace, knows very well the fears we face.

Sing, pray, and keep God’s ways unswerving, offer your service faithfully.  
Trust heaven’s word; though undeserving, you’ll find god’s promise true to be.  
This is our confidence indeed: God never fails in time of need.  
In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #27  
Thursday, 25 March 2010

Text: Luke 19:35-38

The disciples take over the processional entry. Procuring the needed donkey, they put their clothing on it and set Jesus on top. (Can't Jesus get on himself?) People popping out of nowhere begin spreading their clothing on the ground for the colt to tread upon. Since clothing is valuable and not abundant, this is a great sacrifice—but a ritual of deep reverence for a king. King Jesus is coming!

The disciples, having witnessed the mighty acts of Jesus, realize that he might be God's long-awaited Messianic King. Finally Israel's hope that God is sending a king to rescue them seems to be coming true! Their words reveal this expectation: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

These are almost the very words of Psalm 118:26, a processional song celebrating the annual enthronement of the king: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The disciples make one tiny, tell-tale change, "Blessed is the **king**" they cry—not "Blessed is the **one**." They feel confident Jesus is The King.

So, what are their expectations of how King Jesus will rule? They surely have an earlier Jewish hero in mind, who also comes to Jerusalem and descends via the Mt. of Olives: Simon Maccabee. Simon's story is fresh in the people's minds. Two hundred years earlier, the Maccabean family defeat the Greek rulers over the Israelites. When Simon finally brutally, violently wipes out the Greeks and establishes himself as an independent, free king, it looks like God's Messiah has finally come. I Maccabees 13:51 states, "The Jews entered it [Jerusalem] with praise and palm branches,..., because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel."

So a military revolution and killing the Roman rulers may be the expectation of King Jesus. But Jesus seems to be following the words of a different prophet: Zechariah. In Zechariah 4:9 we read, "...Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey,..., He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations."

Jesus isn't the King that Israel expected. If he doesn't live up to Maccabean expectations, can his way of rule be true? The Romans understand war. Israel knows violence brings freedom. Is peace in heaven and goodwill towards earth achieved in any other way?

Almighty God, we thank you for your son Jesus, King of the universe, who entered the city of Jerusalem to lay his life down for us and for all people. We praise you that he enters our world as Savior and King and calls us to obey him. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #28  
Friday, 26 March 2010

Text: Luke 19: 39-40

What is a story about Jesus without the good old Pharisees lurking in the corner? Here they are, at Jesus' royal procession. We have a feeling they are still wearing their coats, unlike the rest of the crowd! Interestingly, they always seem to have elbow access to Jesus, and here, they're able to pass on a little word.

Except, it's not a friendly suggestion. It's an order: "Rebuke your disciples." In other words, "Reel them in. Their actions and words are over the top, inciting hopes of Messianic activity." The Pharisees are not joking: they recognize the Messianic nature of what's happening and it's not in their control. (God would not disregard the religious authorities and work outside their camp, would God?) Granted the Pharisees do give Jesus a bit of a nod: "Teacher" they call him. But this is actually a back-hand slap: "You think you're a king, the Messiah? Well, let us remind you that you're merely a Teacher."

Jesus plays no games in response. His answer is direct, honest and lays out the reality before them, "If I ordered my disciples to shut up, then creation itself—these stones without mouths--would scream out the truth."

The story now reaches the point of no return: God's activity in Jesus cannot be stopped. Jesus is the King. He is the Lord, the Messiah. There is no stopping this proclamation. All creation participates in this. The disciples as the new Israel. Even the rock! Most certainly, the sun, moon, stars, trees and animals! Creation is brimming. Heaven is ecstatic! The juggernaut of God's love and favor cannot be stopped!

Jesus' words are stunning. The Pharisees must have been stunned, too. How breathless these words make us feel! God cannot be stopped. Yet ironically, this triumph is a triumph unto death: God cannot be stopped in this, too. King Jesus is obedient unto death.

What have we done to crucify this King Jesus, whom heaven and earth proclaim? Whom the very stones under our feet scream out about?

Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die.  
O Christ, your triumphs now begin o'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! The hosts of angels in the sky  
Look down with sad and wond'ring eyes to see the approaching sacrifice.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die,  
Bow your meek head to mortal pain, then take, O Christ, your power and reign.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #29  
Holy Monday, 29 March 2010

Text: Luke 22:53

I woke up on the Mt of Olives to the sound of roosters crowing (how ironic!), church bells tolling and the sun slipping across my bed through the window slats. I could sense across the valley that Jerusalem was starting its day. A distant muezzin told me this was so. My first thoughts were Jesus' words to Jerusalem: "You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

Jesus' first act as King is to weep over Jerusalem. Jesus' critique is simple, "If only you had recognized on this day the things that make for peace." Israel's understanding of peace was the Maccabean model: fight the conquerors to the death and drive them out. This is how God would usher in the conquering Messiah King.

But Jesus follows an unexpected way. Trust and obedience are Jesus' understanding of Kingship. Jesus trusts that God is working out God's call to all creation, loving and bringing back all broken creation to God's own self. God is putting heaven and earth back together again.

This is peace, God's acting, God's ultimate reconciliation. And Christ is obedient to God's activity, activity which cannot be accepted by the world, by the very Israel who knows God most intimately. Death is not God's desire for Jesus, but it is creation's fierce idolatrous determination to tell God how we are in charge. We are children of death. What else can we do to God's son, who is life, who is the light of the world, but to snuff him out?

And Jesus, trusting and obeying this God who is the God of life, goes all the way, to the point of death, even death on a cross. He does this that in him, through the Spirit, we might be brought into his obedience, his life, his light.

Jerusalem will pay the consequences of its failure to recognize God's visitation. The price will be destruction, as what happens when the Romans, angered by Jewish violence and revolt, obliterate the city in 70 CE.

Children of death can only bring death. Through the Spirit, God calls us to repent, turn and believe in Jesus. And to walk in new life of trust, obedience and love.

Lead on, O King eternal! Till sin's fierce war shall cease,  
And holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace;  
For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums,  
But deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes.

Lead on, O King eternal: we follow, not with fears,  
For gladness breaks like morning where'er your face  
appears.  
Your cross is lifted o'er us; we journey in its light;  
The crown awaits the conquest; lead on, O God of might!  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #30  
Holy Tuesday, 30 March 2010

Text: Luke 19:45-48

Jesus cannot enter Jerusalem and not go to the Temple. The Temple is the physical, spiritual heart of Israel. Sometimes Israel calls the Temple the “navel” of the earth, that which connects heaven and earth. It is the address of God in Israel. Here Israel comes to worship and offer sacrifices and prayers. These sacrifices and prayers are how Israel understands it is connected to the Lord. Forgiveness and relationship with God are bound to the repentant who come, buy animals and through the priests offer these to God. The prayers and smoke of the Temple fill the area continually. The Presence of God is here.

Jesus goes to the Temple and drives out the sellers who are needed to sell the unblemished animals that the traveling pilgrims alone can sacrifice. This is a huge business in the complex around the Temple sanctuary, and it is necessary, although subject to questionable practices.

Jesus drives out the sellers, quoting the prophet Jeremiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a hideout of robbers.” Long ago, the prophet Jeremiah stood in front of the Temple and preached this same message. Even though the Babylonian army was outside the walls, Jerusalem felt that as long as the Temple was standing, God would protect the city from its enemies (because God wouldn’t destroy God’s own home!). Jeremiah critiqued this false notion: the city was taking God’s presence for granted while chasing disobediently after other gods. Jerusalem couldn’t have it both ways. What happened? The Babylonians overran the city and destroyed the Temple.

Now Jesus takes on Jeremiah’s mantle and speaks the same words. (The audience would have recognized Jeremiah’s words and would have guessed Jesus was implying the destruction of the Temple again.) Jesus calls the Temple a hideout for robbers. Who were the religious authorities? Faithful attendants to God and Israel? No, says Jesus, they are thieves, stealing from God and the people what Israel and the people should be. What is more, when Jesus drives out the sellers, he stops the Temple’s business. Animals can’t be bought. Sacrifices stop. For one moment, the Temple no longer connects the people to God. The Temple is now a hideout—it must be raided and its occupants arrested.

No wonder the chief priests, scribes and leaders of the people seek to kill Jesus. Jesus threatens the very ones who believe they know God most intimately. Jesus is the heretic. Kill him.

If we were living in Jerusalem, would we, too, declare Jesus a heretic?

Jesus, I will ponder now on your holy passion;  
Let your Spirit now endow me for meditation.  
Grant that I in love and faith may the image cherish  
Of your suff’ring, pain, and death, that I may not perish.

Yet, O Lord, not thus alone make me see your passion,  
But its cause to me make known and its termination.  
For I also and my sin wrought your deep affliction;  
This the shameful cause has been of your crucifixion.  
In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #31

Holy Wednesday, 31 March 2010

Text: Luke 22:7-13

The day of Unleavened Bread arrives, commemorating Israel's hurried meal of unleavened bread on the night the angel of death passed over Egypt, killing the first-born Egyptians. The Passover lamb is prepared to celebrate God's great rescue of Israel from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, the great liberating moment of God for Israel.

Usually the Passover lamb is prepared and eaten in the family circle. Here Jesus sends Peter and John to make the preparations. Are these disciples Jesus' new family? As when Jesus enters Jerusalem, Jesus again makes prior arrangements. Again, there seems to be a code: the disciples are to follow a man carrying a jar of water. (Did men carry water? Is this the oddity that tips off the disciples whom to follow?)

Coming to a house, the disciples are to give the pass phrase: "The Teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" This is the key to being shown the upper room, probably a guest room on the flat roof. (When Jesus was born, the guest room was busy—but at his death, it's free!). There the disciples are to prepare the meal. So, once again, Jesus' word is true: the men go and find all as Jesus says. Jesus is in control: he does not go into this Passover as one taken by surprise.

In the midst of Jesus' critique of the Temple and the religious authorities, Jesus is obedient to the Jewish faith. He does not overturn Passover but lifts it up. God's mighty liberating act, the Exodus, is foundational to Jesus' understanding of his own mission. In Nazareth at the synagogue, when he closes the scroll of Isaiah and declares, "Today in your hearing these words are fulfilled," he announces that God's rescuing activity, experienced in the life of Israel at the Red Sea in Egypt, is God's rescuing activity brought to fulfillment in him. To prepare the Passover meal and to eat it with his disciples is his ultimate moment to pull together all he has taught, all he has said and done, into his final re-presentation of what God's favor and love in him is all about.

When Peter and John prepare the room and the meal, are they ready for the astounding night to come? Are we?

Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Lenten Devotion #32

Maundy Thursday, 1 April 2010

Text: Luke 22:14-23

Long ago, in Egypt, it is night. The Egyptians are wailing for their dead first-born children. The air is filled with the devastating sobbing and wailing of thousands of parents and families. The Pharaoh, too, is stricken, his royal heir dead in his arms.

“Let Israel go,” the Pharaoh desperately gives the order. Israel’s God cannot be defeated. The children of Israel hurriedly eat a meal of roast lamb and quickly-prepared unleavened bread to mark the night and then they desperately leave to go back home from this distant, far-off country.

But, Pharaoh goes back on his giving. His kingly pride drives him to second thoughts and soon his vast chariot brigades are speeding to re-capture the Israelites.

When Israel comes to the Red Sea before them, they look back. There come the Pharaoh’s squadrons. In fear, they angrily cry out to God. God hears and responds through Moses, their leader: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today (Ex. 14:13).”

On Jesus’ final night, at another Passover meal he so longs to eat with his 12 disciples, his new Israel, he takes bread and wine, and gives them to his disciples. “This is my body, which is given for you,” he says. “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood,” he pronounces. And then he adds: “But, see the one who betrays me is with me.”

In Greek, “betray” is a form of the verb “to give” (meaning “give over”). How deeply ironic on this night of celebrating God’s great deliverance of Israel, this mighty act of God which forever seals Israel as God’s special people and God as Israel’s liberating God—how ironic Jesus speaks of God’s great giving of bread and wine, of body and blood in the same breath that he speaks of Judas giving over or betraying him.

The juxtaposition of the two forms of giving is at the core of the Biblical story. God’s giving, all the way to the giving of God’s son on the cross for the sake of all humankind, submits to the giving over activity of us human beings. This very Judas, one of Jesus’ intimate friends, should understand Jesus but he does not. He will give Jesus over for his own human reasons.

God’s giving is never like human giving. It’s extravagantly selfless even unto death. How can the Source of Life give unto death? How can the Son given over to death be our deliverance into life by God?

O Lord God, Help us to be still and wait upon your deliverance. We look to Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Lenten Devotion #33  
Good Friday, 2 April 2010

Text: Luke 22: 47-48 and 52-53

This Gospel story begins at night. A lone angel with stunning Good News. Shepherds in their fields, afraid and dumbstruck. A heavenly chorus out of control with praise to God. Heaven and earth reunited.

Jesus has obediently done his work: “We must work the works of God while it is day; night comes when no one is able to work (John 9: 4).” Jesus has unfailingly toiled all his days, living out in Word and deed the Good News that God is running out from God’s heavenly dwelling to the fields of our earthly lives to embrace us all, to kiss us and tell us we are God’s children. Our sins in our distant living are forgiven and we are adorned with rings, coats and sandals. We are invited to God’s table where the Lamb of God is offered to us and we are told, “Eat.” We are invited to this grand global table set for all our fellow human beings, for brothers and sisters whom we now recognize in Christ are our siblings. And Jesus sits at the head of the table.

But, the very ones tonight, the very ones who most should understand and welcome this Good News cannot, will not. The religious authorities cannot hear and reject this King Jesus. Judas, one of Jesus’ own, betrays with the same kiss the Prodigal’s father bestowed as the most intimate sign of welcome and love. We human beings are determined to reject this One given for us. It is our way. It is our distance from this God who comes running out to us.

So Jesus re-walks the path he walked in his Triumphal Entry only days before. Back to the Mt. of Olives, to the Garden of Gethsemane at its foot, he goes. The story is rewinding itself; the entry into Jerusalem is to be replayed.

Yet, this time, Jesus does not plan his own royal procession. This time, no code phrases, no secrecy. No coats cast on the ground. No unriden donkey. No words of Messianic praise. The Triumphal Entry was a rehearsal. This is King Jesus’ true triumphal march, his true Messiah’s welcome. Betrayed by a kiss. Bound. On foot. Guarded by weapons.

And once again, it’s night. “This is your hour, and the power of darkness!” Jesus tells his captors. He says this to us. There is nothing more to be said. Jesus has said and done what God has sent him to say and do. Except for one last thing. We stop and look at the Cross. Darkness.