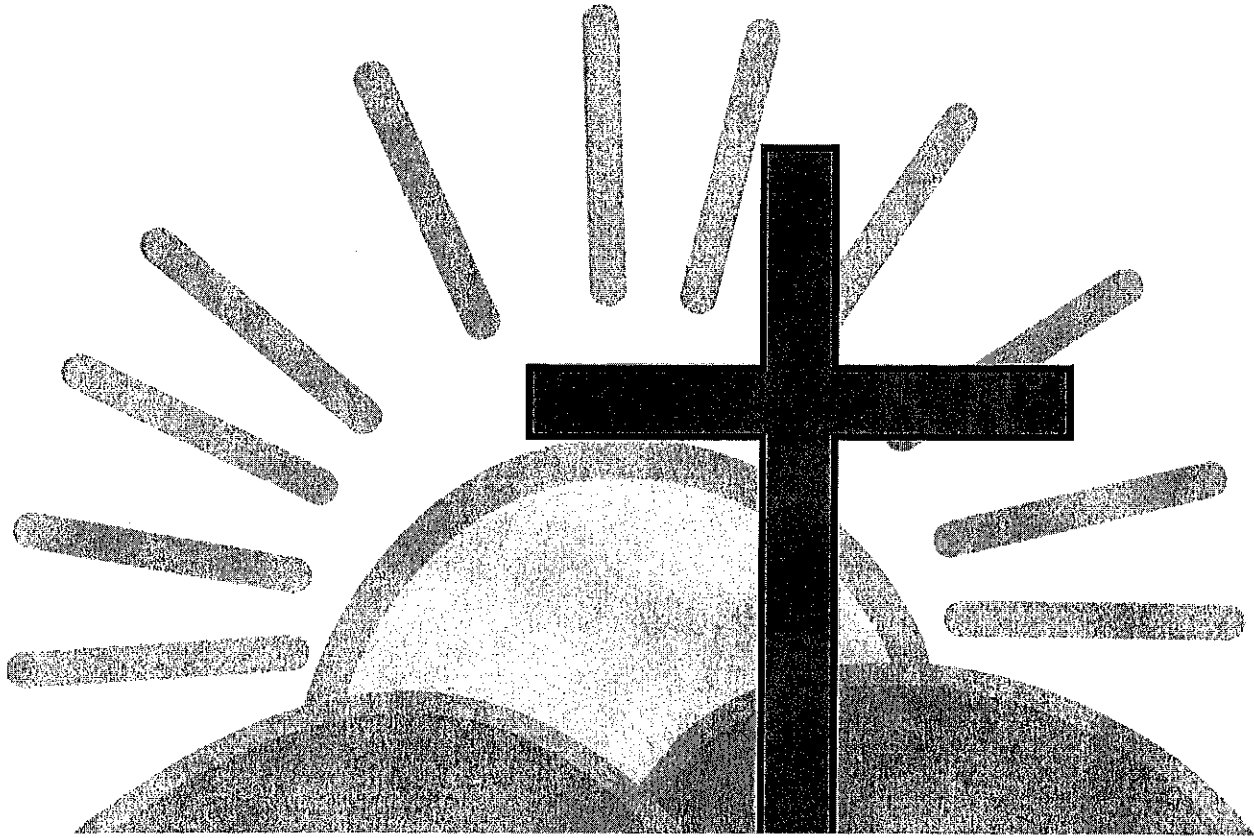


Lenten Devotions 2021



*"How Our Faith Helped
Guide Us Through 2020"*

Morris Memorial United Methodist Church

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Wednesday, February 17, 2021
Ash Wednesday

Scripture reading: Matthew 6:16-18

Key verses: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."
Matthew 6:16-18 - NIV

Devotion:

COVID-19 has brought our entire world—*all of it*—into the practice of new behaviors, the search for new learnings, and the necessity of new relationships. Some of us have transitioned into our pandemic-stricken era fully embracing it—*for what we can learn from it and how we might grow from it*—while others have shouted from the rooftops that they want our lives to go back to a pre-pandemic normal. This perceived majority want a vaccine that will allow us the freedom to forget masks, forget distancing, and forget handwashing, and—*once we have a 100% effective vaccine to protect us*—they want to get China.

Some of you may recognize the three essential elements to bringing about change. We engage these three distinct areas in our lives after we have determined that we have a brighter future in some other realm—*even here on earth*—and we agree that we cannot remain exactly where we are in our lives. I have engaged these processes for bringing about change in the lives of individuals and in congregational settings for many years, and each time we have embarked on a change journey we have done so enthusiastically and voluntarily.

Approximately twelve months ago COVID-19 presented itself in such a way that we were thrust into shelter-in-place, lock-down, survival-mode instantly and without time to prepare. As I encouraged folks in the early days of the pandemic, I remain optimistic and enthusiastic—*not for our plight during COVID-19*—but for the unique—*once in a lifetime*—options we have at our disposal, as well as for the extended time we have been given to explore areas in our lives that have been sorely overlooked and allowed to decay.

One such opportunity, which presented itself with the lockdowns this past spring, is the opportunity for all of us to do the soul searching necessary to ascertain our individual standings with God. If we think we may have missed this opportunity, think again. Now is the time to engage, not to disengage. Now is the time to right your ship that may have been taking on water, not to continue to sink. Now is the time to experience God in ways that you have never experienced him, not to continue to put me first.

Please reread Matthew 6:17. Our world may have been turned upside-down, our lives may have been turned inside-out, and things may never be the same here on earth. But, if we develop new routines, new schedules, and new practices to engage God and each other, we will grow beyond anything we might imagine. We may not go out often. Our daily schedules may be consumed with virtual meetings. Our families may be bored with these past twelve months. But, if we intentionally engage our faith in God, we can meet others with a glow that will have them asking, "Where can we get some of that?" It is amazing what a little oil on your head and washing your face can do!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to take this totally unexpected time we have on our hands and fill it with new ways of experiencing our relationships with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Prayer focus: How are we building new habits through a strengthened relationship with God?

Thought for the day: How might I positively impact someone's life today?

Pastor Bob Kirby

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February 18, 2021

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Key verses: "For I command you today to love the Lord Your God, to walk in obedience to him...choose life, listen to His voice and hold fast to him." Deuteronomy 30: 16, 19.

Devotion:

Reading this selection repeatedly, the words that resonated with me were the verses I listed above. Moses was talking about how the people he was leading could prosper and live.

My former husband, a physician, decided in 1980 we should move to either Knoxville, Tennessee or Seaford, Delaware because of the "drug problem" here in Charleston. (We had lived in Knoxville during our years in graduate school at UT and teaching school.) Our sons were 12, 9 and 7 at that time. After a discussion with a physician who was looking for a person to work with him, it was discovered that the drug problem in Knoxville was worse than Charleston. Nix that idea. So off to Seaford we traversed. As my husband was in conversation with the hospital, I investigated the schools. On Saturday they took the family out on a pontoon boat with the committee from the hospital. They stated they had never lost a physician they interviewed. My sons, in unison, said, "You don't know our mother." An answer was to be given later.

After returning home, I went into my prayer closet for two weeks before I would discuss the issue of moving. The answer I received was we could not move. I explained what God had said, but I do not think my husband believed me. However, within two weeks his mother fell and broke her arm and had to come stay with us. Four weeks later, my father became ill and had to be hospitalized and my mother also became ill. If I had not been OBEDIENT to God's direction, our families would have been in a real mess. The Holy Spirit led me in the right direction,

Fast forward to today: Jerry and I have listened to God and found joy, peace and comfort. We love the Lord our God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We realize it has been a "God thing" for us to have been reunited after all these years. We were high school sweethearts, but parted ways in 1957, each going different directions. We married in 2006 after 49 years and two different lives. Only God could have brought us together again.

During these last months since March 2020 because of COVID, there have been opportunities to worship, be in Bible Study, have meetings and extra classes because of Zoom. These are ways we are being OBEDIENT to God. How sad there are some who are waiting for things to get back to "normal" and missing out on these golden opportunities to Love the Lord Your God, to walk in obedience, to listen to His voice.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please let me be obedient to what you want me to do and let me love You as you have loved me. Let me learn to be silent so my ears will open to hear you speaking to me. Stay close to me. In the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer focus: Obedience.

Thought for the day: Open my ears that I might hear your voice.

Carolyn Ballard

February 19, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 51: 1-10

Key verses: "Wash away all my sin...Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Psalm 51: 2,4,10

Devotion:

Today's scripture reading is one of the most familiar and favored passages of the Old Testament which speaks of heartfelt contrition. King David had used his royal authority and acted on his human weakness to deliberately break many of God's commandments. He is expressing the feelings of guilt because the sin will not go away.

The acts of sin that he has committed were against other people, but were also sins against God, because God is a God of truth. He is expressing the longing of the sin-sick soul for healing. He must be made over, beginning with his heart, and he asks God to create a pure clean heart and a strong spirit.

When we acknowledge that we need a savior because of the guilt of our sin, we must accept the gift of saving faith that is imparted to us when we were made spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit. The gift of redemption is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Prayer: Almighty God, though trials have been a part of our lives this year, thank you that we have the confidence that Christ has shed his blood that I will have eternal life in heaven with you. Amen.

Prayer focus: Those who have trouble with feeling of guilt due to unforgiven sins.

Thought for the day: God's grace is great enough to forgive all our sins.

David Byrd

February 20, 2021

Scripture: Psalm 25: 1-9

Key verse: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." Psalm 25:1

Devotion:

Reading these verses lets us know of David's devout affection towards God. David knew to worship, that we have to lift our souls to Him in prayer and confess our dependence on Him. David had no confidence in his own ability.

In the month of March, I learned how to really put my faith and confidence totally in God. I closed the Day Care down because of the Pandemic and had no idea when we would open. I prayed over several days that my faith in God would not be shaken by something I did not know or understand and not able to depend upon myself. I have always been one to take care of everything if I could, but now this was beyond me. How do you tell 34 employees you do not know when we will open again and that we did not have the funds to continue paying them during a difficult time? My heart was breaking, and I sought out my God as never before. I realized that I could do nothing, and my confidence had to be in God and Him alone.

When I was approached to open as a Critical Care Center, I faced a difficult decision. The weak part of myself realized that to do so would put my life as well as those who would work with me in jeopardy of getting COVID 19. When I wrestled with this decision I felt as if God walked toward me with His mercy and the truth of what was happening. I began to walk toward God and realized His ways are humble and faithful. It has been rough as some of the children we received were very different from those we had before. As we stayed before God and trusted Him, we watched as little lives that had been torn apart by addiction come to realize who Jesus is. Their language became different and they learned that it is good to pray before every meal. God understood that these children needed us, and we needed them. He intervened on our behalf and guided us with a strong hand to the right path and into a calmer faith.

If you asked me if this has been easy, I would say NO. I left the job of being just the director and started cleaning and cooking and entertaining children who had been in foster care for a year or more and watched as God worked miracles around us. Jesus understood how naïve we were during this time and intervened on our behalf to guide us with a strong hand in to a better path, not one where there were no problems but one where we could trust Him, and He resolved the problems. This pandemic is something in my 73 years of living I had never seen or heard of and am now living in it. With no funds and children to feed we learned to go back to the old ways and found with God all things are possible. If I had to do this all over again would I make the same decision, you can be assured I would.

Prayer: Lord Jesus fill me with your peace so that I may in turn share that with others. Help me to seek your will in all things. Hear my prayer in Jesus' name. Amen

Prayer focus: Lift your soul up to God always.

Thought for the day: Let me always depend on you, God.

Georgeanne Leake

February 21, 2021

Scripture reading: Mark 1: 9-15

Key verse: "And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him." Mark 1: 13

Devotion:

I almost decided against writing a devotion this year, especially given this year's theme. But I decided to go ahead and write one. You see I couldn't say that my faith has grown stronger or that I've grown closer to God during the past year. I suffer from depression and anxiety. I didn't realize how much until this pandemic hit and I could no longer be with my family and friends, or receive the hugs I so desperately crave.

Just like Jesus while he was in the wilderness, I was tempted and tried. Many times, I was tempted to give up and curl in ball and stay in bed. I just didn't have the energy or desire to get up and do anything. I didn't want to read anything, much less my Bible. There were times I didn't want to listen to video messages, despite finding out that one of my cousins is a very good preacher - something I would never have known had so many services not gone virtual because of the pandemic. At one point I lost seven friends in fourteen days. That was really hard to accept.

While I've had many temptations during this time, just like He did for Jesus, I know God sent his angels to attend to me. When I would be having a particularly hard day at work, someone would compliment me on my mask or something else I was wearing. Sometimes it was just a pair of smiling eyes and nod. One day it was the arrival of two coloring books and colored pencils that someone ordered and had delivered to me. I'm really a simple girl, it doesn't take much to make me smile and to brighten my day.

Music has always been a calming influence in my life. Unable to be in church and hear the music that soothes my soul the most, my life was beginning to feel empty. Then I found YouTube again. It is amazing how much beautiful music is out there. I began to listen to it not only at home, but on my computer at work and days started to look a little better.

When I sat down to finish writing this, I started a music mix on YouTube and the second song that played was "Angels Among Us" by Alabama. Some of the words of the verses are: "There's always been someone to come along and comfort me, a kind word from a stranger to lend a helping hand, a phone call from a friend to say I understand. ~ They wear so many faces, show up in the strangest places, to grace us with their mercy in our time of need." Yes, He still sends his angels to attend to us today.

Prayer: Father, today I thank you for sending your angels to attend to Jesus in the wilderness when he was tempted and tried. And I thank you for the angels you send to attend to me each and every day. Amen

Prayer focus: Gratitude for the angels, seen and unseen, that He sends to cover us every day.

Thought for the day: Remember, even when we are at our lowest, God still loves us and sends his angels, in various forms, to attend to us.

Michelle Stigall

February 22, 2021

Scripture reading: Matthew 25: 31-46

Key verse: "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Matthew 25: 40

Devotion:

To get a better understanding of this scripture, I started researching the difference between sheep and goats. I found out that sheep might look like they have it all together, but the truth is they need a lot of help. They tend to panic and run around wildly when they are stressed out. But the sheep feel very calm when they are with the shepherd. They will follow him anywhere because they have learned to trust him. He will take care of their needs. On the other hand, goats are motivated by their own desires. They do not follow anyone. They are independent and headstrong.

I think we all can have tendencies like the sheep and the goats. Our job is to strive to be more like our Shepherd. When you know how much Jesus loves us and what a sacrifice He made on the cross for us, you cannot help but love others like He loves you. And when you love and serve others, you are loving and serving Jesus. But if you reject the love Jesus offers, you will never be able to see others the way He sees them.

We need to recognize our Shepherd's voice and trust it. There are three ways we can do that: 1) Get in God's word every day, 2) Take time to pray, and 3) Take time to be quiet and listen.

This past year has definitely had its challenges. But there have still been opportunities to show Jesus' love to others. We can make a phone call, send a card, make sure someone can get what they need from the store or pharmacy. Even something as simple as wearing a mask in public will show you care about someone else. These are simple things we all can do to share the love that Jesus gives us every day.

Prayer: Father, help us to grow in empathy, patience and faith, becoming more like Christ by the power of your Spirit that lives in us.

Prayer focus: Show our love for Jesus by loving and serving others.

Thought for the day: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

Kathy White

February 23, 2021

Scripture reading: Matthew 6: 7-15

Key Verse(s): "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'" Matthew 6: 9-13

Devotion:

As I read this Scripture and pray, I instantly think of the importance of praying and taking quality time to spend in prayer. When the Disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He taught them how to pray with "*The Lord's Prayer*" as an example for them and now for us.

As a younger Christian, I was not confident in praying in public, because I was not sure what I might need to say. Once I realized I could let God speak to my heart because he already knows my needs before I ask, that made all the difference in my time of prayer.

During this pandemic, I have found myself in prayer almost constantly. People suffering through Covid-19 alone with no family. They are critically ill with no loved ones with them. We receive prayer requests several times a day and we, as Christians, know our hope is in prayer to our Heavenly Father.

Has prayer become a greater part of your life since the pandemic began? I have begun a prayer journal and a list of prayer requests to help me with my prayer ministry.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for knowing what my needs are before I ask. Thank you for always putting things in my path to teach me that growing spiritually in you will lead to a stronger and more faithful prayer life. Amen.

Prayer focus: Take all your needs to God. He has the true answers.

Thought for the day: Prayer is the key to a strong relationship with Christ.

Judy Reed

February 24, 2021

Scripture reading: Luke 18: 9-14

Key Verse: "He told this to those who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people." Luke 18: 9.

Devotion:

How often intentionally or unintentionally do we feel so much better than someone else? How often do we wash over our lack luster performance before our God? Is God pleased with this thought or my behavior? Be honest, is He? I cannot answer that for you, but I know I am guilty of this unloving behavior. My wishy-washy attitude, pitiful performance at obedience, my lukewarm attitudes or offerings are like the Pharisee thinking I am so much better. And as Revelation.3:16 says, He will spit me out because I am neither hot nor cold. Maybe not all the time, but will that satisfy my Lord?

There are some very direct and serious directions and commands given us by God. Will I take them seriously to heart this Lenten season and soften this heart of stone and obey, becoming more compliant and closer to His perfect nature?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, forgive my ever-wandering heart and mind. Keep me close and clear on your Word and direction and in hot pursuit of your heart.

Prayer focus: Lukewarm behavior.

Thought for the day: Remember those at our Community Dinners.

Chris Kirby

February 25, 2021

Scripture: Matthew 7: 7-12

Key Verse: "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." Matthew 7: 7

Devotion:

It was the summer of 1954 and Susan, a girl scout, went to Camp Giscowheco out in the country for a week. She and fellow scouts, including her cousin, stayed in tents, had outdoor latrines, ate in a mess hall, etc. It was a fun-filled week UNTIL a tornado ripped through our county with a wide swath of damaging winds and torrential rains. As a result there were innumerable downed trees, no electricity, etc. Meanwhile, Susan's parents, back in town, became desperate, not knowing how the people in the camp were. Her father and her uncle took axes and chainsaws clearing the roads so they could get to the camp. It took them a number of hours to get there.

Susan's mother was at home with no communication either with the camp or with her husband. She was "beside herself." She got her Bible, held it up with the book's spine on the table and let the Bible fall open to the verse or verses God wanted her to have for this crisis. The Bible fell open to Matthew 7:7, today's key verse. She read it, re-read it, and began praying as our Heavenly Father was directing her. She prayed without ceasing.

Long story short, the scout leaders had moved all the scouts and staff with them to the mess hall when hearing of the impending tornado and there they were protected from the storm's wrath. The camp needed much repair. God had answered Susan's mother's desperate pleas.

Like then, today, and all during this pandemic, we have been facing crises outside of our individual control. In crises God's people (and even some who don't claim to be His) turn to Him, and God does not disappoint. He hears our prayers and carries us through as He has this past year. He will continue to do so as long as we faithfully ASK, SEEK, and KNOCK.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of prayer which enables us to ASK, SEEK, and KNOCK, not only during times of trial but at all times. Amen.

Prayer focus: Seeking God.

Thought for the day: "Where God finds a praying heart, He will be found (to be) a prayer-hearing God." - Matthew Henry

Bill and Susan Vieweg

February 26, 2021

Scripture reading: Matthew 5: 20-26

Key verse: "But I warn you - unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!" Matthew 5: 20

Devotion:

The requirements for entering most public places these days have changed in the past year since COVID-19 blindsided us all. Our family spent several days at Dollywood this past year, and there were many hoops we were required to jump through before entering the park. Even though we had season tickets, we still were required to make a reservation and have our temperature checked before we were permitted to enter the park. Everyone had to apply hand sanitizer before boarding the shuttle and all rides. And wearing a mask and social distancing was a must. Things had changed from years past.

In this verse of scripture, we are told about righteousness, a requirement for entering Heaven.

God has made the way possible for everyone to enter His Kingdom and have a relationship with Him. It is called the gift of **HIS** righteousness. This gift permits us to draw near to God. It requires that we put God first in our life before anything else and place our faith in Him.

The best thing of all, this gift is not an award we work for or accomplish on our own.

We are not required to have a righteousness of our own, which would be impossible for us to achieve. However, we have been given the most incredible gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ. This righteousness from God comes through faith, not works.

We have plans to spend several days at Dollywood again this year, and we may face the same or even more stringent requirements before entering the park. But when that day comes for me to enter Heaven, I am most grateful for the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross for me. I am confident that it meets God's standards for my entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the Gift of your Righteousness. Help me to keep my eyes on you and to seek your will for my life.

Thought for the day: God provides for all of our needs - including the requirement for our entrance into Heaven.

Nancy Justice

February 27, 2021

Scripture reading: Matthew 11: 28-30

Key verse: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11: 27

Devotion:

This is the eleventh devotion in this year's book, but it was the last one written. I know that because I had to fill in at the last minute when the person who agreed to write it became sick and couldn't do it. So not only have all of the other devotions been written, I have read and edited them all.

This scripture was not picked because it fit in with our theme of looking at how Covid impacted our lives in the last year. It was a reading in this year's lectionary for this week. But it summarizes a familiar theme I have read in this year's devotions: This has been a frustrating, tiring, burdensome year. I have joked with my patients that it's not uncommon for people of my age to wish for things to be the way they used to be. But even young people feel the same way this year! Everyone is living in the "new normal," and nobody particularly likes it.

But if we are feeling weary, Jesus has the answer: Take up his yoke! What? Seriously? I've seen yokes before. They are heavy! And you not only have to carry the weight of the yoke, you have to pull a load if you're part of a typical oxen team that the yokes were attached to in Jesus' day.

However, the yoke Jesus has for us is not that kind of a yoke. I read years ago that, when there was a young ox just learning how to do his job, he would be paired with a strong older ox. The strong ox would shoulder the majority of the load, and the younger one was basically just along for the ride, until he became older and stronger.

Jesus offers to share our burdens, to take most of the load, and not to make us carry any more of a burden than we can handle. We don't have to dread each day, wondering if we can make it our not. Our mighty, strong savior Jesus is there to share the load and to be with us each step of the way. We can lean on him for all of the challenges ahead.

Prayer: Jesus thank you that you love each of us enough to come beside us and share our loads.

Prayer focus: Those feeling overburdened.

Thought for the day: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, and let him share your burden.

Jim Caudill

February 28, 2021

Scripture reading: Mark 8: 31-38

Key verses: "Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, 'Anyone who intends to come with Me has to let Me lead. You're not in the driver's seat, I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow Me and I'll show you how!' Mark 8: 34,35 (The Message)

Devotion:

Several things stand out in this passage. Jesus never called upon us to do or face anything which he was not prepared to do or face Himself. What Jesus asked them to face, He too was ready to face. If we are to follow Christ, we must ever say no to ourselves and yes to Jesus. We must be willing to say no to the constant pursuit of ease & comfort. Why, we ask ourselves? Why would we want to live like this? Because in following the will of Christ in our lives; we find perfect freedom, peace & contentment in this lifetime.

Christ taught us this with the perfect prayer when He said, "Thy will be done." Through the example of His life, He shows us how that can be accomplished. I can witness and tell you from personal experience that when I have constantly prayed for the knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry that out, then have I been most happy and at peace. People frequently ask me about my work in Addiction Medicine. "Isn't it depressing & frustrating?" I usually reply that it can be; but God has given me the gift of witnessing so many miracles in this calling. I am truly blessed to be able to do this at this point in my life.

One of my favorite movie scenes is near the end of A River Runs Through It. The Rev. Maclean is preaching one of his last sermons. His troubled youngest son Paul had been murdered several years before. "Each of us here today will look upon a loved one in need and ask the same question. We are willing to help, Lord, but what if anything is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us—either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them and love completely without complete understanding."

My nephew Luke died from a heroin overdose 2 years ago. My family and I tried so hard to help him and through it all, we continued to "love him completely without complete understanding." Jesus challenges us to love even those NOT close to us without completely understanding them.

Jesus one commandment was to "love one another as I have loved you." Isn't that what following Jesus really means? To love completely, even when it is risky or painful. Many of you know my mother Bonny who died this past September. I was blessed to be able to be with her (in this time of COVID) at Hodges Nursing Home during her final days. She continued to ask about the well being of my other family members and other

people she knew right up until the end, with little concern about herself. She and my father taught me what following Jesus and “loving one another” is all about. I can never be grateful enough for the faith that they handed down to me.

Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Prayer focus: Praying only for God’s will for me and the power to carry them out.

Thought for the day: The will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.

Ed Eskew

March 1, 2021

Scripture reading: Luke 12: 22-31

Key verses: "You cannot add any time to your life by worrying about it. If you cannot do even the little things, then why worry about the big things? Consider how the lilies grow; they don't work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that even Solomon with his riches was not dressed as beautifully as one of these flowers." Luke 12: 25-27
The Every Day Bible

Devotion:

In Verses 25 and 26 Jesus said that you cannot add any time to your life by worrying about it. If you cannot do anything about even the little things, why worry about the big things? Verse 27 says, "Consider how the lilies grow; they don't work or make clothes for themselves but I tell you that even Solomon with his riches was not dressed as beautifully as one of these flowers."

The comfortable life that Bill and I enjoyed was given a huge jolt in January 2019 when it was discovered he needed heart bypass surgery. Without sounding trite, he recovered from this major surgery like a tonsillectomy!!

However, in August of 2019 (7 months later) he began having excruciating pain in his hip and groin during his pulmonary rehab. After many chiropractic visits and physical therapy, he discovered a lump in his groin while showering. Needless to say, we jumped right on it and surgery was scheduled. It was determined he had a NET (Neuro Endocrine Tumor) which was cancerous. It seemed these two illnesses happened so quickly, I wouldn't have much time to worry but trust me, I did!

Bill's faith and trust in God was overwhelming during all this and helped me considerably. He truly never worried or if he did, it didn't show. Some said he did this for me and maybe so, but he got his strength from God regardless.

Thus began our journey of radiation and chemotherapy. I can report today that he is doing just fine and has been for a good while, making it through all this with little or no side effects. For those of you who know him well, you realize he's like his "old self."

There were soooo many times when I had to lean on the above verses for strength, along with prayer and meditation. Our biologic and church family and friends helped both of us tremendously. We know we couldn't have made it without the prayers sent and received.

So many times, I remember saying to myself "consider the lilies" and I still do as we deal with the COVID pandemic and the way it has upset all our lives. I believe God has spoken to us through all this and asked us to rely on our faith to make it through. Zoom

and the internet have been a blessing to us. They have allowed us to remain in touch with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So when life's troubles get you down, just remember to "consider the lilies"

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to feel your peace and not worry and fret over things over which I have no control.

Prayer focus: Please, Lord, give me the strength to deal with what I must.

Thought for the day: Consider the lilies.

Mary Collins

March 2, 2021

Scripture: Matthew 23: 1-12

Key verse: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." Matthew 23: 3

Devotion:

"Follow the science," "follow the leader," "follow your heart," "follow the rational," and my favorite, "follow the money," are many suggestions rampant in today's media for we would-be followers. It is fairly hard to determine our right course and whom to believe from the many voices and recommendations. If you are confused at times – you can join my club. I truly want to do "right," but what is it? There is enough earned skepticism for people in leadership that it is nearly impossible to trust anyone. This makes one want to quote Nicolas Cage's character, Cameron Poe, in the 1997 movie *Con Air*, "There's only two men I trust. One is me. The other is not you..."

Our Scripture for today may include some of the harshest words from our Savior spoken to the teachers and Pharisees of his day. These words set the stage for the Seven "Woe to you...hypocrites" statements in the rest of Chapter 23. In these, Jesus describes the arrogance of the religious leaders of his day. He tells his listeners, because of their authority, you must do what they say, but don't trust what they do. Jesus encourages them, and us, to trust in the divine and perfect Lord and respect the relationship He wishes to have with each of us.

Because I know Jesus, I want to shout, "There is only one I trust. The one is certainly not me. The other is Christ." Remember, where we put our trust is where our heart will be. Jesus has earned my trust and my heart.

Prayer: Oh, Precious Lord, the world calls from my commitment to so many causes and beliefs. Help me stay focused on the truth I have found in you and the trust you have earned by your life, death, resurrection, and continued presence. Amen.

Prayer focus: Staying faithful to the Holy Savior.

Thought for the day: I can trust in Jesus, my Savior, my Lord.

Bruce Reed

March 3, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 31: 9-16

Key verses: "But I trust in you, Lord. I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me. Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love." Psalm 31: 14-16 (NIV)

Devotion: This past year, our world has faced a hidden, deadly enemy. COVID-19 has entered our daily lives. Each person, each family has a relative, a neighbor, a friend, a coworker, or an acquaintance who has suffered and possibly died from this virus. It strikes fear into us, and we worry about those who are older, those who have compromised immune systems, those who suffer from any malady, as to whether they could survive this disease. And now, a third mutant strain has been detected, and it threatens the lives of our children and youth as well.

This Scripture, written by a much older King David, is his lament as he recognized that he is alone, unfriended, and in the way of harm. His son is coming to visit him and would most likely kill him. He, while terrified of what could be, decided to turn over his fate to the Lord. He reaffirmed his faith, "You are my God," and he recognized that his life has always been in the Lord's palm. Like King David, we need to put our fears of the coronavirus and its mutant strains into the hands of God. God gave us personal steps to take: wearing masks that cover our nose and mouths, social distancing, staying away from crowds, and deep, thorough cleaning. God IS LEADING by giving us people who are creating effective vaccines, the one way we have always fought an infectious disease epidemic or pandemic. These creative teams, in different nations, worked tirelessly for 11 months in finding safe, effective medicines to heal. They ran trials to ensure that we are safe. Within a 4-week period, hundreds of people are being administered this shot daily, starting with the ones most vulnerable, our elderly population. I've been very frightened by this disease and how it affects us, not only as individuals but as a community, a state, a nation. We are struggling with our economy and many small businesses have closed. Items are not as easily found now, and prices are higher. It's been months since we have had true visits with family and friends. We are creating a new way of living, which will become our normal. But most importantly, He has given us hope by helping us develop resiliency.

Prayer: I trust in you, Lord. You are my God. You have always helped us. Please give us the foresight to recognize what we should do and to have the courage to take steps You have for us. In Your Name I pray. Amen.

Prayer focus: Help with our journey as we continue the fight against COVID-19.

Thought for the day: By mid-January, approximately 400,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the USA. At that same time, we also hope for a cure through vaccines. Thank you, Lord, for leading those who developed them.

Katy Smith

March 4, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 56

Key verse: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid." Psalm 56: 3-4

Devotion:

For the past few weeks, I have been trying to sort out our COVID-19 vaccination eligibility and the scheduling. After being told by a Kanawha County/Charleston Health Department hard-working employee (God bless each one!), we were told that it would be April or May before David and I would be eligible!

David and I prayed asking God to just take over after we had done all the things that we thought He had led us to do. I "felt" I should try this one final telephone number, and when a real human being answered I was so thrilled that I immediately began to say, "Thank you" to this sister in the Lord for all the people working there for our help and benefit. She explained that that day, Wednesday, January 13, 2021, all the slots were taken but that she would check the list for the possible time of the next clinic. I heard a phone ring and told her just to call me back when and if she got time. I had given her our phone numbers and all pertinent information.

It was less than three minutes and the phone rang. This sweet sister in Jesus said that they had just had a call to cancel two side by side appointments for TODAY and could we get to the Shriners' parking lot in 15-30 minutes. We quickly responded, "YES! Thank you, Jesus!" The drive was safe and in plenty of time. We ran across the parking lot, up the stairs across the blocked off street and into the Charleston Coliseum. It took a little time to find our names at the first stopping point. From then on, all went smoothly. I did not even feel the shot and asked the nurse/technician when I was going to receive the shot. I saw her amazed face, as she said, "Didn't you feel me putting on the bandage?" I could not stop thanking anyone and everyone who was working and asking God to bless them! I do NOT believe in COINCIDENCES! This was not coincidence—it was a MIRACLE from God! We both received the Pfizer vaccine and must return for our second shot after 21 days. We will both have received our vaccinations BEFORE the end of January (instead of April or May).

Prayer: Dearest Father, we are expectantly thankful that You are working in our lives for our good! Every gift is from You! Thank you, Praise You, and Love You, dear Friend! Amen.

Prayer focus: The world's first responders, healthcare workers and all others serving other people!

Thought for the day: Expect miracles, trust, be humble and thankful.

Sharon Byrd

March 5, 2021

Scripture reading: Ephesians 6: 11-18

Key verse: "Put on the full armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (world)." Ephesians 6: 11.

Devotion:

This past year can be summed up using a timeline and a series of songs and clichés: We will get through this, Keep your head up, It's going to be alright, Hang Tough Bay Bee, I'm only a text away, Don't anticipate. Songs: Just a closer walk with thee, I need thee every hour, When the storms of life are raging, Stand by me, and one of my favorites, Storm warning by Bonnie Raiter, "Storm warning...feels like a heavy rain, we may get tossed tonight, storm warning..... nought to do but ride it out."

In March the warning was given and war was on the horizon. There was nothing that I could do but watch, wait, and pray that I would know what I would have to do when the situation presented itself. It was silent, invisible, and deadly, and all I could do was ask God to be merciful and to keep me and my family safe.

I put on the armor...it was battered, dented, and dirty but it still fit. Truth and righteousness would get me through the lies and deception. My Birkenstocks were my sandals of peace...I wore my helmet of salvation and carried the sword of the spirit and tried to live by the word of God.

In the meantime, there was the social distancing, the isolation, the political turmoil and the racial and social unrest, not to mention the hate that was apparently a total disaster and was becoming more prevalent.

The storm was raging...all of our trips were canceled...I drove fewer miles than I had driven in 40 years...there was little or no interaction with my church family. There were many spiritual challenges and the world seemed to be filled with darkness and I was in a terrible state of mind. I was being battered by the storm, but I learned to dance in the rain.

Then in December, the horror struck my family. My brother died of cancer on the 4th and my sister-in-law died of Covid on the 9th. It was devastating to my family and my shield of faith was battered and bent but it was never broken. I had faith that God would get my family through the hurt, sadness and sorrow, I had faith that a change would happen in the world, I had faith to believe that when I sang to myself, "I need thee every hour" that God was with me and would never leave me, I had faith that God sent his son Jesus to save us, and I Had faith because I had put on my armor so that I could stand.

I will be stronger when this war is over because It caused me to take an inner look at myself, it strengthened my relationship with my loving wife and, it brought me closer to God.

Thanks be to God!

Prayer and prayer focus: When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.

Thought for the day: Stand tall, be faithful, and put on the armor!

Jerome Hairston

March 6, 2021

Scripture reading: Luke 15: 11-32

Key verse: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." Luke 15: 24

Devotion:

The Parable of the Lost Son is a very familiar parable. Jesus shares about a son, who asks for his inheritance, and then squanders it away on wild living. When he returns to ask for a job as his father's servant, he is welcomed with open arms. This is a beautiful story about God's love. It's a story about sin, repentance, forgiveness, and ultimately God's love. The word "love" is mentioned 551 times in the NIV edition of the Bible. When teaching my children, I ask them if you could sum up the Bible in one word what would it be. And we answer, love. The greatest two commandments, Jesus tells us, are about LOVE.

This past year has been a tough, crazy year. The pandemic of COVID-19 has truly tested our Christian faith. The son in the beginning of the story, shows a sense of entitlement. He wanted what he wanted...now. As a people, we have struggled with a change in our conveniences. We have, at times, focused on what we can't have, what we can't do, and what we have to do. We put rights and wants ahead of love. I have seen division more than I ever have in my lifetime. It is time for the church to step up in a way that shows radical love...love like Jesus...love that doesn't make sense to most. Billy Graham had a quote that I love. He said, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge and my job to love."

In this technological age, social media can be a great tool to spread love. As Christians, we need to be careful about how we portray ourselves to unbelievers. Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Let's use this great tool to be a beacon of hope to the world. Let's share light in the darkness. Let's give hope in what feels like a hopeless situation. We can be the church even when not meeting in a physical building!

If you are a music lover like me, check out the song "Revolutionary" by Josh Wilson. The whole song has great lyrics. The chorus says this: "Why does kindness seem revolutionary? When did we let hate get so ordinary? Let's turn it around, flip the script. Judge slow, love quick. God help us get revolutionary."

God is standing with arms wide open to any and all of his children. He will help us to repent, accept forgiveness, and share His love to the world. We love because he first loved us. Let's have the courage to love.

Prayer: Father God, we praise your name. We praise you for you are worthy. We are grateful for your love and mercy. We pray today for your healing over this world. We pray that you give us courage to love boldly. We pray for guidance in all of our actions, in person and online. We pray for opportunities to share your love with others in real, tangible ways. And God help us to remember always, that all good things come from you. In the precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Prayer focus: Courage to love.

Thought for the day: "God help us get revolutionary."

Candice Anderson

March 7, 2021

Scripture reading: I Samuel 7: 5-13

Key verse: "Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, 'Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.'" I Samuel 7: 12 KJV

Devotion:

2020 began much like 2012, optimistic and hopeful. The opposite was to be played out. In 2012 I told my then employer things would look up. For him they did. But early in 2012 my mother was diagnosed with brain cancer, a ministry door was closed, and my job was gone for care of my mother who died 6 months later in the aftermath of a derecho.

2020 started with my mother-in-law diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and she died 5 months later, my wife lost her job, and there were numerous problems not related to Covid-19, which put its whole grappling stranglehold on the world. Many made quip remarks of 2020 being able to see in 20/20 vision and the like, yet no one could have imagined what our world has turned into unto the present hour as you read this. All I can say as in 2012, as Samuel said, *Hitherto (or, up to this point in time) the Lord has provided for us.* Despite the pandemic I was able to keep my position with the company I work for although I saw, as many others did, a huge loss of income. Yet we saw the Lord provide in countless ways.

This is not to brag on myself in anyway, for it is all of the Lord. My wife and I never lacked a meal, we are trying to adjust without her mother being in our lives and we have seen many encouragements through the Scripture as we have had the opportunity to watch more Pastors on Social Media and television. I found myself working from home, and I have enjoyed that actually. The Lord provided me a used but nice desk to set up my home office. I had the technology to do virtual conferences for business and it led our class to lead the way for Morris Memorial to offer Sunday School over social platforms. In a way, the pandemic has been God's way to show us what may be our future in ministering to others and prepping us to go forward. Before Covid, the only time I wore a mask was in the wood shop for dust, now it's a constant companion. It shows me how the Lord is our constant companion protecting us from spiritual unseen evils. My eyesight took a plunge in 2020 and I was able to have new glasses to help me see close to that 20/20 everyone talked about. This reminded me that the Lord sees clearly ahead for us.

2020 has had many bizarre problems from unlikely sources, but in all of this, we try to be thankful for what is left. Don't get me wrong, 2020 has been despairing, and I believe it isn't over yet, and like many of you there have been folks who I knew who stepped somewhere into eternity as a result of the virus. I agonize for them and their families, and have had the opportunity to help them with financial matters as pertains to my vocation. I praise God, for every breath and the things we take for granted. Every day is a gift.

Dr. David Jeremiah reminded our Sunday school class recently we need to move forward and that starts with dreaming what God can do with us. I pray, and ask you to pray, the Lord will allow me and

all of us to do more for him in some small or large way for the building of the kingdom in 2021. I am guilty of not looking for more miracles in our day by day walk. In the midst of 2020 when so much was taken away from us in the way of family, jobs, places to shop and eat, entertainment, travel, church attendance, etc., God's people have persevered to have online church, drive in church, virtual classes and have managed to care for the saints in ways not thought of before. I sure want to see things return back to normal, but most likely the new normal won't be like the old, even though it could be perhaps if the Lord wills. We have a new year of uncertainty politically, socially, morally and even spiritually. What will our Christian sphere of influence look like by this time next year? I cannot answer, but as Samuel said, "Up to this point, the Lord has provided."

2020's greatest lesson may have been that God is performing a "reset" on our world in an attempt to have us draw closer to Him. Like Israel in the wilderness, He provides day by day. In that thought, make sure you are providing your devotion and adoration to Him day by day. Spurgeon once said, "We will stand before God as Christ, because Christ stood before God as us." We owe Him everything in years of plenty or in want. Look for ways He will provide for us as a church and individuals. He is faithful even if we remain faithless.

Prayer: Rest us, O Lord our Strength, in your merciful provision and strength. Provide for our needs and help us to do the same for others. Our hope is secure because You secured it for us. The everlasting name of Jesus be praised, forever. Amen

Prayer focus: That we would see the hand of God provide.

Thought for the day: The love of God has no limits for you.

Jon Browning

March 8, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 42: 1-7

Key verse: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” Psalm 42: 5-6a

Devotion: On May 27, I went into the OR at Thomas hospital thinking I was simply getting a calcification shaved off my heel caused by arthritis. No big deal, except for I felt sorry for myself because Mark could not accompany me because of Covid restrictions. When I woke up from the operation, the doctor explained to me that the operation was more extensive than what he had initially thought. My physician had to detach my Achilles tendon, repair it and then reattach it. When I educated myself, I found out the rehab for this operation could take up to a whole year. I felt sorry for myself.

I went home and I could not put weight on my foot for four long weeks. I needed help to do anything and everything. Every task was cumbersome and hard. I felt sorry for myself.

Do you get the drift? I felt sorry for myself – that is until a devotion I read reminded me to look at the blessings of my situation and praise God. I sat down (well technically I was already sitting down because that is all I was capable of doing!) and made a mental list that looked something like this:

1. I have a husband who loves me and takes good care of me.
2. Katie McNulty, my niece, is a wonderful nurse who takes great care of me everyday until Mark comes home. I love our alone time together and our time of sharing with each other.
3. Since my down time is during Covid quarantine, I can't be visiting other people anyway.
4. I can use this downtime to get closer to God and study his Word more.
5. I can send cards and letters to friends to let them know that God and I care about them.

Did I totally enjoy my downtime? Of course not, but my soul praised God instead of being downcast. My hope was in God. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, God's Holy Spirit turned me around emotionally even when I couldn't turn myself around physically .

Prayer: Thank you God for the downtime during the Covid virus. This has helped us to put our focus back on you, our Savior and our God. We thank you for all our blessings you have given us. Amen

Prayer focus: Help us to keep our eyes on you God and remembering our blessings.

Thought for the day: Put your hope in God even during the darkest times.

Monica Hatfield

March 9, 2021

Scripture reading: Isaiah 40: 27-31

Key verse: "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."
Isaiah 40: 31

Devotion:

During this pandemic we hear of friends who are sick, see news stories of larger cities and are reminded that we are only human and are vulnerable not only to this virus, but to many assaults on our physical/emotional/spiritual health. What we can truly count as constant are the promises of God.

I have placed my hope and trust in Him. I know that God keeps His promises. I know that I am His through the grace and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am growing older. I watch my hand and my knuckles starting to swell and become just a little twisted and crooked. I know that as I continue to age, my earthly body will continue to change, perhaps due simple aging, arthritis, illness or accidents. Healing can and does happen here, but it also happens when we go home to Heaven.

One thing I know for sure, beyond the shadow of any doubt, is that my hope is in the Lord, and when I die, I will be ushered into His presence. The body that I have here will be replaced with a new body and I will run and not be weary, I will walk and not faint and that God will renew my strength.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I am thankful that, whether or not healing comes on this earth, in Heaven we will be given a new body and we will never be sick or weary again.

Prayer focus: Those who are suffering with Covid and other diseases and families who have lost loved ones.

Thought for the day: Thank you Lord that our hope is in you.

Ann Kautz

March 10, 2021

Scripture reading: Philippians 4: 11-13

Key verse: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."
Philippians 4: 11b

Devotion:

2020, a year of loss! To paraphrase the old BBC early 1960's satirical comedy program, "That Was the Year That Was!" Governments, societies, employers, schools, and families were decimated by the corona virus. Helplessness, paralysis, isolation, desperation, hopelessness. Not enough PPE, hospital beds, ventilators, doctors, nurses, staff – a shocking lack of preparation on ALL levels! Financial markets experienced wild swings, U.S. stocks suffered their fastest decline in history and the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 3,000 points in ONE DAY, a greater percentage drop than Black Monday 1929, the start of the Great Depression. Calamity, crisis, fear, frustration, unease, shortages, disruptions, remote teaching and learning, cancelled sports seasons, and a seemingly endless downward spiral, became a part of everyday life in 2020. In the face of all this, all things past, and all things to come, how is it possible to learn to be content?

The scripture lesson above comes from the Epistle Paul wrote to the Christian church in the Macedonian city of Philippi, a church founded by a woman and led by 3 women at the time. Previously, as a devout Jew, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) had been a persecutor of Christians until he met Jesus Christ on his trip to Damascus, was struck blind, converted to Christianity, and eventually became one of God's greatest preachers/teachers/evangelists. For these efforts Paul had at different times been cast in prison and severely flogged; exposed to death again and again; whipped multiple times, stoned, beaten with rods and shipwrecked multiple times; constantly on the move; in danger from the open sea, rivers, bandits, his own countrymen, the Gentiles, and false brothers. He had been in danger in the country and in the cities; had labored and toiled without sleep; had known hunger and thirst; had been cold and naked; and every day faced the pressure of his concern for all the new Christian churches! (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-29) And as a result does Paul complain, blame God, give up? NO! Rather he boasts—boasts of the things that show his weakness, for in his weakness the power of God is made perfect in him.

At times Paul had plenty, at other times very little, but at all times he was content because he depended upon God to provide his needs day to day. This is a very special act of God's grace, to accommodate ourselves to every circumstance of God's calling. Every day we need to rely on Christ's strength to learn to be content in every condition. It is by the constant and renewing strength from Jesus that we will be able to face the crisis, calamities, fears, failures, losses, challenges, etc., that sometimes enter our lives.

Though at times it may seem our lives have little, for a heavenly Christian it will be enough. Contentment does not come from what we eat, do, have, or where we live. Rather, we are to, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and then all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33-34) Bad and good are part of ALL lives, but the contentment in our hearts comes from solely focusing on God, because only He can satisfy all our needs. It is from God that we receive the patience, wisdom, perseverance, and power to deal with all things. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7) This is how the apostle Paul could be content in all things.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray we learn that our real, permanent, life contentment comes solely from You and no other person or thing. I pray those in our lives who are going through the fire right now will have peace and contentment knowing You are with them every single step of the way. In Jesus' name we pray and thank You. Amen

Thought for the day: Are you there yet? Are you content in all things in your life?

Barney W. Frazier

March 11, 2021

Scripture reading: Luke 11: 14-28

Key verse: "But some of them said, 'By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.'" Luke 11: 15

Devotion:

I read this scripture several times trying to figure out what direction to go with the devotion. The easy narrative to see is one of division amongst the people. It is certainly easy to take a narrative of division and apply it to the world today. Then again, the narrative of division is always applicable to this world. The Devil has and continues to seek to divide us. He is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10) and he aims to divide us with deception just as he did with Adam and Eve.

In this story I see a group of people who are actually in the presence of Jesus, witnessing firsthand this miracle, and hearing Him teach. Yet rather than being united in the Truth, the words from His mouth, in Jesus Himself, they are divided by trying to come up with their own explanation of the events. It seems this is what usually divides us. Different opinions, preferences, etc.... when we try to lean on our own understanding. In this devotion, rather than focus on what divides us, I would like to focus on what unites us.

In the Morris Youth Group, we talk a lot about distinguishing Truth from Lies in the world. What is the truth about who we are, our value, our purpose? How do we identify the truth when it comes to making decisions? How do we know what is true in a world full of so many lies? With a deceptive Devil trying to divide us. We stress to the Youth the importance of spending time in the Word of God and knowing the word of God as the ultimate measuring tool of truth. If it doesn't align with the word of God, it isn't true. Even if it is what we think should be true, what we wish were true, or what we think is best for us. It has to align with the Word or it isn't truth. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3: 5).

In Luke 11: 28 Jesus responds to the crowd by saying, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." A family divided on the Truth will fall but the family united by the one Truth, the Word of God, will stand.

Prayer: Lord, grant me wisdom and discernment to understand Your Word. Help me to apply Your Word to life. Help me to see the world and the people in it through your eyes. Help me to know Truth.

Prayer focus: Truth

Thought for the day: I have often wrestled with certain scripture passages, that may not make sense to me, as truth. It doesn't make sense to me because it goes against my human nature. We have to remember to lean not on our own understanding. If our own understanding does not align with the word of God, then it is not truth and we will be divided. The only thing that unites us as Christians is the one truth in the word of God.

Ryan Anderson

March 12, 2021

Scripture reading: Mark 12: 28-34

Key verse: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these.” Mark 12: 31

Devotion:

Have you ever been literally “tied up?” Sure you have. Remember when we were children (I know it’s been a while, but try anyway!), and we played cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers. In varying degrees, we were “tied up” when we got caught or captured. And sometimes our siblings (or the ‘good guys’) did a pretty good job of rendering us immobile. More recently, I had eye surgery and was required to lie on my back for three consecutive days – no tv, no reading, completely immobile; seventy-two hours of literally lying on my back. This experience brought back that feeling of confinement, of being “locked down.” While the COVID 19 restrictions have not been that tightly confining, it has been the duration of our sheltering and restrictions that, to me, has been the most burdensome. “Will this ever end?” we plead.

But in the midst of our “aloneness” we have witnessed countless acts of kindness and goodness all over the world; neighbors helping neighbors and strangers committing acts of compassion and kindness to others. Near to home and far away, all ages and races, neighbors and strangers, family and anonymous, each occurrence has lifted our gloom and soothed our psyche even if temporarily. Each story as heartening and encouraging as the next; each reminding us of the revealing truth of our key verse. We read these delightful stories in the newspaper or online or see them on tv and we are buoyed by sheer beauty of what humanity was ordained to do from the beginning.

And I believe that is what these acts are. When we show ‘His kind of love’ to others, we are acting in the image of what God and nature intended us to do for each other, our neighbors and even strangers. I have hope that we will emerge from COVID 19 stronger and more compassionate. For COVID, too, shall pass. But the sweet memory of your kindness will remain.

Prayer: Gracious God, even in the midst of our struggle and uncertainty, help us to reach out to you and, like the biblical scribe, seek to know what is most important in our daily life. Thank you for the perfect example of your love and how He teaches us to act toward others. Amen.

Prayer focus: Seeing beyond our own concerns and seeking ways to love our neighbors wherever they may be.

Thought for the day: Making the world a better place from my own neighborhood.

Tim Basford

March 13, 2021

Scripture reading: 3 John 1: 13-14

Key verse: "I hope to see you soon and talk face to face." 3 John 1: 14

Devotion:

I have lived alone for a good part of my adult life. My children have been grown and gone for a long time. I never minded being alone because I was always free to come and go as I pleased. I sang in the choir and a trio. I worked at the food pantry and served at the community dinners. The last two activities were on my to-do list for after retirement. All of these activities helped me to relate to people. As a nurse for fifty years that was what I felt I was called to do—be in relationship with people. Then Covid 19 invaded our lives and all of the above went away. I felt very lonely for one of the few times in my life.

It has been wonderful having Zoom Bible study every week and interacting with people by phone. My siblings and I have done Zoom gatherings once a month so we could see each other. It has helped some but I miss being face to face. I miss giving and receiving hugs. I have learned I am a very visual and tactile person. The other thing I have been reminded of is Jesus never leaves us or forsakes us. I know I am loved and cared for. When I had surgery in October it felt as if the Holy Spirit was right there beside me. That was your prayers being answered. This led me to join the Prayer Team of the church. What a wonderful way to relate to people by lifting them up in prayer. I still hope to see you soon and talk face to face. I will love to be able to give hugs again however, I have learned a new way to be in relationship with you and that is prayer.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you promised to never leave us or forsake us. You gave us the Holy Spirit to be here with us always. Forgive me for the times I have felt like I was all alone in this world. Nothing I have felt compares to the loneliness you felt on the cross. Thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. May I always be aware of your presence in my life and know that I can be in relationship with you and other people through prayer. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

Prayer focus: We are never alone with Jesus.

Thought for the day: How can you continue to be in relationship with people during this pandemic?

Pam Higgs

March 14, 2021

Scripture reading: John 3: 14-21

Key verse: “God so loved the world that he gave his only son so whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” John 3: 16

Devotion:

I think John 3:16 is the most popular verse in the Bible. My focus today is on eternal life. We all want a vacation away from these times, right? Well, we can't just go to the beach right now and hang out with family and friends because there is still a pandemic. Being stuck at home is really boring, trust me, I know. I want to go to the beach myself. Maybe this wait to do what WE want, isn't about going to the beach, camping, or even sleepovers. Maybe God has bigger plans than that. There is light at the end of this dark tunnel, but we need to search for what God wants to teach us now.

All I know is that one day there is an eternal vacation, where you don't have to worry about buying the perfect clothes before you go back to school or work. John 3:16 says “God so loved the world that he gave his only son so whosoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” That eternal life is in heaven. The forever vacation with no fee or cost to us. Some vacations have a risk of getting hurt or getting dirty. But heaven is perfect, not even a square inch of pain or doubt, no chance of ANYTHING to go wrong. All you must do is accept His gift and you have booked an eternal vacation.

If the time has not come to have eternal vacation, what do we do? Well, our job is to develop a relationship with Christ. (...whosoever believes in him) It is probably hard to believe in a God who loves if you don't know Him. Well then let us get to know Him together! We are still on the key verse, right? John 3:16. Well why did He “send his only son” to save us? Why would He send HIS SON to die so we could live? I mean He is God. He is a God who LOVES, and a God who loves will do whatever it takes for the ones He loves. So now that we know that God loves you and everyone around you, I hope you are inspired to learn more about Him and His ways.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for being a God who loves, and I have an eternal vacation waiting for me with you. Please help me learn more about you and your ways so I can share the word with others today. Amen.

Prayer focus: Inspire yourself and others to learn more about God and Heaven.

Thought for the day: There is a light at the end of the long and dark tunnel.

Kendall Anderson (7th grade)

March 15, 2021

Scripture reading: 1 John 5: 11-13

Key verse: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know you have eternal life." 1 John 5:13

Devotion:

This past year has been a year of beautiful sunsets. I never cease to be amazed at how each one is different, how God arranges the clouds and arrays the colors which then move and change with breathtaking majesty. As the hymn says, this is my Father's world and God ceaselessly displays his handiwork (Psalm 19:1-2).

This past year has also been one of uncertainty, of events that changed our expectations and familiar patterns in ways we could never have imagined. These events have been and continue to be quite unsettling and have been more serious for some than others. Who can forget the empty grocery shelves and the great toilet paper shortage that seemed to happen overnight?

Uncertainty! It suddenly assailed Jesus' disciples during a storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus was asleep in the stern. The disciples had forgotten that Jesus had already said, "Let us go over to the other side." When Jesus says it, it is so.

The disciples asked, "Who is this?" We know Him to be Emmanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23). Scripture tells us that, "In the beginning was the Word" and "the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1). God, who spoke the world into being (Genesis 1) is speaking to us through His Son. Of that we can be certain and what He says is so. Certainty!

We need that certainty now more than ever. Jesus (the truth) (John 14:6) spoke truth to Nicodemus, the cornerstone verse of the Gospel (John 3:16). Jesus affirmed it again (John 5:24) and again (John 6:40).

There was a time in my life that I needed that affirmation and God provided it beginning with a friend, who asked me, an "I hope so" kind of Christian, "If you died today, would you go to heaven?" When I answered, he replied, "Well, you ought to know and you can be sure." I thought, why does he know and I don't? He proceeded to take me through scripture such as those above and especially in Romans showing me that eternal life is a gift. We receive it by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is being sure of what we hope for (Hebrews 11:1) all culminating in Romans 10:9. I believed it; I had confirmed it; I had just gotten sidetracked; but that did not sidetrack God. He was right there all along in His grace holding on to me! Wow!! This was not the end. It was the beginning of a renewed, energized, invigorating relationship with Christ Jesus.

Life here is brief; the Bible tells us so. Eternal life is...well...eternal. Jesus is the Way (we go with Him), the Truth (we know in Him), and the Life (we live in Him). The truth sets us free to serve joyfully, not in anxiety over where we stand with the One about whom I can say, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day (2 Timothy 1:12).

Prayer: Thank you, Heavenly Father, that we are saved by your grace through faith and not by works, for we would fail. Thank you for the One who never fails, our Savior, Christ Jesus. In His name I pray. Amen

Prayer focus: Brothers and sisters who need assurance or reassurance in Christ.

Thought for the day: Living and growing in Christ.

Jim Kautz

March 16, 2021

Scripture reading: Isaiah 43: 1-7

Key verses: "But now, this is what the Lord says—He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel; 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.'" Isaiah 43: 1-2

Devotion:

Covid-19 has brought many changes in our household. Personally, we have eaten home more, we have slowed down, we have gotten projects completed that have been on hold, we have been praying before meals at the dinner table (instead of grabbing fast food), and yes.... we have "quarantined." It has been difficult not being able to see, hug, or be with family and friends and attend social meetings (church, school, sports, etc.). But at the end of the day, I can honestly say I haven't "suffered." Now.....we did end up going through Covid and I will say it was not easy for our family. We had some hard symptoms and some rough days but thankfully we made it through.

We've been fearful and uncertain. During this time, I watched "The Chosen." If you haven't seen it, I strongly suggest it. My favorite episode was the first one with Mary Magdalene. Isaiah 43 tells us, "I have called you by your name; You are mine." Can you imagine what it would be like for Jesus to audibly call you by name? Yet he does daily. There is no doubt in this chapter that we are His and knowing that we belong to Him helps us every day not to walk in fear. We know that He protects us, He cares for us, He is looking out for us.... yet do we believe it? I have to say depending on the day, it's a concept that is sometimes hard to grasp. It's hard not to worry.

I hope that during this time of trial that you come to the place where each day you can believe that He holds you in the palm of His hand. I told David while I was going through Covid, that I kept a pillow beside me for Jesus (because no one could be with me physically). I felt Him with me. I was not afraid. Now I will be honest and tell you that I did have some talks with Him telling Him I wasn't sure if I was ready to go. But I could almost "hear" Him smile because He already knows our doubts, He knows our faults, He knows our fears, and yet He loves us and chose us anyway. I could not even begin to imagine how I would get through these current times without Him.

Prayer: Father, thank you for calling me yours. I definitely do not deserve it. But you chose me anyway. Please be with those who do not know you. Open their hearts and minds to your salvation and show them that You are the only way. Don't let fear or their past blind them to the fact that You choose us. We just need to choose You. Amen.

Prayer focus: Unsaved souls trying to get through this life without God.

Thought for the day: Trials in this life are certain. But "when you pass through the waters, I will be with you." You may not deserve it, but He chose you. We don't have to panic because He is there to give us strength, comfort, and peace. He is ours and we are His. Praise God!

Jeannie Henson Morris

March 17, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 91: 9-13

Key verses: "Then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways." Psalm 91: 10-11

Devotion:

During the Covid- pandemic, teaching remotely and doing Zoom meetings was tiring and overwhelming. Then staying locked up was hard; it was scary times. Not going to church, Sunday School and other activities was becoming difficult. I had to start thinking about others and not just myself. But something was missing...

Being close to some of my neighbors and helping each other was a plus. We all were sharing, especially when things were hard to find, or could not be found at all.

I would see some of my church friends drive by and we would smile and wave. My Sunday School class and the church were praying for me, calling and checking on me, and I felt blessed. But something was missing...

I was trying to help those in need, cooking especially for those alone. I sent cards and messages every week to my two elderly friends, which was helping them, as well as myself. But something was missing...

I found a new appreciation for sunny days, birds singing, fresh air with no mask. But something was missing...

I was reading devotions, I was praying, but something was missing...

After returning to school in August, I was really scared and emotional because of all of the rules, and regulations. New things we had to do online, lots of added work, and being afraid a student would give me the covid. I would not see retirement after 36 years was in the forethought of my mind. I knew I needed something else.

I felt overwhelmed and desperate. Then, God whispered HIS desire. I had always wanted to read the Bible cover to cover in a year, not just pieces here and there. I never did it because I always found excuses. So from August to December, Christmas Day, I read The New Testament. What a glorious Christmas Day, alone, but felt the Holy Spirit!! I felt God smiling down on me. WE had gotten closer. I was no longer afraid. I felt angels protecting me. I made HIM a promise. I look forward every morning to reading with HIM, learning from HIM daily. I find myself talking to others more about the Bible. I am now in The Old Testament looking forward to completing the Bible in a year. I know now what was missing.....

Prayer: Lord Jesus, continue to protect all of us from this dreadful pandemic.

Prayer focus: With your strength, Lord Jesus we will be stronger, and better witness of your word.

Thought for the day: What grade would God give you for your prayer, devotional, Bible reading time today?

Cathie Brown

March 18, 2021

Scripture reading: Mathew 19: 13-15

Key verse: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" Matthew 19: 14

Devotion: I will never forget the day of March 11, 2020. I was watching the nightly news while lying on my bed in St. Maarten. The newscaster was announcing that Europe was to be closed to travel starting in the near future. Since St. Maarten is a Dutch island, I decided to go back home before I wasn't allowed to leave. When I left March 13, I have to admit I was not very happy about doing that. God provided, though, because 10 days later the island did indeed close its borders.

When I returned home, I prayed that God would somehow use me during this awful chaotic and unclear time. Be careful what you pray for. After a week had passed, I got a call from our daughter Meghan's mother-in-law, Claudia. She wanted to know if she could bring our grandchildren to the lake house for a week so that we could teach them virtually. I had not planned to see my grandchildren until at least May so I was very excited.

The week visit turned into approximately 3 months. Daughter Mary also brought her three kids to stay for an extended time. The adults held "Virtual School" during the week. We conducted Sunday School every Sunday using a program from Mary's church. My heart was overjoyed as the children continued to learn about Jesus and God's Word. We always sang a praise song called "Living Hope" by Phil Wickham. The kids sang to the top of their voices with such joy and exuberance. If one were to be honest, I believe the adults got as much out of it as the children did, or maybe more.

When I was on the plane coming home in March, I was not looking forward to the ensuing weeks, but it turned out God blessed me immeasurably. We studied with kids, we danced with the kids, we read with the kids, we walked with the kids, we fished with the kids, we boated with the kids, we cried and laughed with the kids, and, most importantly, we just loved with the kids. God was faithful through it all. He changed what could be a lonely time into a time of almost never alone time. Right before the children went home, one of them asked if she could be baptized. We discussed baptism and how she had been baptized as an infant. I had tears of joy in my eyes.

God delivered us all through a difficult time. There were days I went to bed exhausted, but always thanking God that I was able to do this for our grandchildren. At the end of the day, I am not sure who God blessed most: my grandchildren or me. I **am sure** God was in the midst and very faithful. The memories we made will always be precious to us all.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for all the blessings we received during the pandemic of 2020. We thank you for your faithfulness during the darkest times. We also thank you for the children who remind us to love you with all our hearts.

Prayer focus: God's children and the lonely.

Thought for the day: God is faithful and will take care of us.

Monica Hatfield

March 19, 2021

Scripture reading: 2 Corinthians 1: 3-7

Key verses: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Devotion:

When I began thinking about writing this devotion, I was, at first, overcome with my normal – procrastination, frustration with myself, but I also felt challenged and engaged. So I started examining my thoughts and feelings about how Covid19 has affected not only my life, but also my community, country, world, and most importantly, God's hand in all of this.

There have been so many emotions and feelings that we all have experienced. I started listing my emotions, both positive and negative. Some include **fear, anxiety, frustration, confusion, sadness, compassion, safety in my little world, uncertainty, isolation, annoyance, dependance, helplessness, uplifted, lucky, grateful, comforted, connected, loved and saved.** I could go on and on, but I bet many can relate to the above list and probably add both positive and negative emotions of their own.

This pandemic has hit me, just like so many, with sudden disbelief that this could happen, and then the sobering reality of the overwhelming effects to individuals, families, communities, cities, states and countries all over the world. There will be long-term effects and lifelong effects, both positive and negative. Some of the positives for me have included increased focus on God and my increased awareness of my need to draw closer to my Lord for comfort, direction, help, security and love. God is always near and ready to supply us our needs and He inspires us to become hands and feet, heart and compassion, and responders to opportunities to do His calling. Some examples have been food distributions, purchasing Christmas presents for a needy family due to the outpouring of generosity of our Sunday School Class members, helping neighbors, praying for our friends, neighbors, the sick, and families dealing with Covid19 illnesses. We have utilized technology to stay connected to family, friends, Bible Study Groups, Sunday School Classes, Church Services, meetings, doctor appointments, ordering and receiving food and other goods we need, just to mention a few. I am so grateful for the UPS, FedEx, post office delivery persons, grocery store workers and medical personnel, including doctors, nurses, all hospital workers, all first responders, and many more that have been vital in keeping all of us supplied with our needs and, yes, our wants.

I am grateful for media coverage of uplifting stories and coverage of family and friends getting creative in sharing with each other and the media then sharing these events with many, many others in our communities, cities, states and world. There have been many, many sad stories passed along with every newscast, but there have also been

shared many great things that have made us laugh, cry, and be inspired. Our access to all of these have been so amazing through TV, the Web, our phones, computers and tablets.

Speaking of the web, I have accessed it for many things but decided to access it to obtain encouraging Bible verses to read and share. I was able to enter my search and instantly had 25 Encouraging Bible Verses related to the Covid19 Pandemic. How incredible to have such instant access! (These can be seen at the end of the devotion book.) Additionally, I was able to access information about some of the environmental effects of the pandemic. Did you know that our air quality has improved worldwide due to reduced pollution from closure of many factories, businesses, and power plants, etc. Obviously, these are both positive and negative situations that have occurred. Water pollution has decreased in water canals, rivers, and even our oceans around the world. I read where the water in the canals around Venice, Italy, are so clear from the water not being churned up by the gondolas that fish can now be seen in the canals that have not been seen before. Mountain views are clearer and nature is able to be seen more clearly. Our skies at night are so clear and stars seem so much brighter and more numerous than I can ever remember.

There have been so many creative people and families that have discovered each other in new and innovative ways due to stay at home orders. These have been inspiring to those that have seen them being shared. Barney and I have reached out to friends, some old and some new, through media that previously we had taken for granted.

To conclude, I am so sorry for the worldwide loss of life and especially for loss of family members of friends, both in and outside of our church, through this pandemic and the incredible suffering and hardship people have had to endure. There is one thing for us to hold on to as the pandemic continues: **Our God continues to be an awesome God and continues to love and cherish us, and provide for His children!**

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for loving us in all circumstances of life. Help us to realize Your Hand of love and forgiveness every day. Help us to reach out to others and be sensitive to the needs of those around us and respond to those needs as You would have us to respond. Please forgive us when we fall short or fail miserably. Help us to pick ourselves up and go about doing Your Will. In Christ Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Thought for the day: Our God is an Awesome God in all circumstances of life.

Jackie Frazier

March 20, 2021

Scripture reading: John 7: 37-52

Key verses: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” John 7: 37b-38

Devotion:

This has been a difficult year not having in-person church. Jesus has been with me through all of this. I have learned that church is not just brick and mortar. The church is the people that love and serve the Lord. I am reminded of words to a song: “I am the Church, you are the church, and we are the church together.” When we serve the Savior of the world, whom do we fear? Through online zoom meetings, church services, and Bible study, Jesus always finds a way.

John 7:37 says, anyone who is thirsty (and he meant anyone) come to me and drink. He is telling us if we believe what the scriptures say, rivers of living water will flow from within us. He is talking about the Holy Spirit that he sends later in the upper room after his death and ascension. When we are saved, Jesus fills us with His Holy Spirit. We have His Comforter living in us and when we give all to Jesus’ he fills us with his love and our cups overflow.

During this season of lent, let us remember Jesus’ death and resurrection and pray for those who are hurting.

Prayer: Our Father, in the middle of our storms you come to calm the waves and bring us peace. Your love conquers all and we just want to thank you for sending your Son to die for our sins. Please give us opportunities to add to your Kingdom. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Prayer focus: All who are thirsty, come to Jesus and he will give you drink.

Thought for the day: Jesus loves us, and if we believe in Him, He will fill us with His Holy Spirit.

Larry White

March 21, 2021

Scripture reading: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 5-9

Key verses: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering... Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding..." Deuteronomy 4: 5-6a

Devotion:

When I read this scripture, I at first found it hard to relate it to the Covid pandemic and other events of the past year. Then I remembered a comment of a person I know who had lived overseas. She felt the country she lived in handled the pandemic and prevented the virus spread much better than the USA, because the people there were more willing to submit to authority. If they were told to stay home and wear masks when out in public, they would comply. It is part of their culture to be obedient to authority.

That's what is at the heart of today's scripture: being willing to submit to an authority, in this case the ultimate authority figure, the God of Heaven and earth. How ironic it is that we in the US, with our heritage of being a Christian country, seem to have so much trouble obeying authority. Today's scripture is from a speech Moses made to the people of Israel, where he told them that God had a set of decrees and laws for them to follow, and that if they did so, other countries would recognize them as a great and wise people. Of course, we know the Israelites did not always keep up their end of the bargain, and they suffered a lot as a result. But it seems that those of us who believe the word of God and study it might learn from it. And one thing we might learn is that life will go smoother if we follow the law of the land (as well as God's law).

When our population was asked to stay at home, stay apart from people when out, and wear masks when in public, many reacted as if their basic freedoms had been taken away. But Jesus has taught us that our focus should not be on ourselves, but on loving others. If we really love our neighbors, we should voluntarily, without even being told we have to, wear masks and take other precautions to reduce the chance that we will pass on the virus to them. This mindset hit me recently during a Sunday School lesson with David Jeremiah where he made the statement, "Loving your neighbor is not something you feel. Loving your neighbor is something you do."

May we as the church look at our motivations and try to put others needs ahead of ours.

Prayer: Dear Lord, forgive us for our stubbornness and our lack of compassion for our fellow men and women. We pray that you will give us wisdom in all that we do in our daily lives.

Prayer focus: That we may look for ways to love our neighbors better.

Thought for the day: Do I love my neighbor enough to voluntarily do what I can to decrease the spread of this virus?

Jim Caudill

March 22, 2021

Scripture reading: John 8: 1-11

Key verses: "When 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.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin'" John 8: 7-11

Devotion:

As I prepared to reflect on today's scriptures, I was thankful to know that when I fall short the Lord forgives me and tells me to "go and sin no more." I am sure there have been numerous times in my life that I have been discouraged because I have failed in some areas. When those times come, I remind myself to not be afraid to go to God and confess my mistakes to Him.

The Bible talks about many people who mess up, but, with God, they get another chance, such as the woman taken in adultery in this scripture. I am wondering if anyone that is reading this devotion has ever faced a seemingly hopeless situation, and the Lord said to you, "Go and sin no more."

Prayer: Lord, I come to you knowing that I don't need to be afraid to confess my mistakes before you. Thank you for your forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Amen

Prayer focus: God and God alone can wipe away the old and bring in the new.

Thought for the day: The same God that restored David, that restored Paul, and that restored Peter gave them another chance. The same God wants to restore you today and give you another chance.

Judy Reed

March 23, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 40:5-11

Key verse: "Sacrifice and offerings you did not desire, but my ears have you opened, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require." Psalms 40:6 NIV

Devotion: Google: "How many verses in the KJV Bible?" 30,201 verses. It would be good if I had a personal story about more verses in the Bible, but I do not.

This psalm was written by David, but we do not know when. David had gone through many trials and tribulations before he became king. As soon as King Saul found out that David was more popular, he tried to kill him, even though David and his son, Jonathon, were best of friends. David was about 17 when he killed Goliath and 30 years old when he became King. So, this continued for 13 years.

As you read on through the Old Testament, the kings that were descended from David were compared with David. God said about Solomon, "...his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been." (1 Kings 11:4 NIV)

I had a man call me one time and the name that showed up on the phone was King David. His name was David King. I noted the name similarity to King David, and he said, "I don't want to have anything to do with that man." We did not discuss it any further, but I knew what he was speaking about. He was speaking about the adultery and murder concerning King David, Bathsheba, Uriah and Nathan. If you do not know the story read it in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12.

This story made me think of Psalm 51, David's song of repentance. "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Surely, I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit with in me." (Psalm 51:2,3,5,10)

Then David was able to write in Psalm 51:14-16 (NIV): "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I will bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. This was the tone that was set forth in Psalm 40. See today's key verse, Psalm 40:6.

Prayer: Not my will but thy will be done. Lead me and guide me in paths of righteousness.

Prayer focus: Draw an imaginary 3-foot diameter circle on the floor. Get in the circle and pray for the one in the circle.

Thought for the day: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

Dave Cole

March 24, 2021

Scripture reading: 1 Peter 5: 3-9

Key verses: "Control yourselves and be careful. The devil, your enemy, goes around like a roaring lion looking for someone to eat... your Christian family all over the world is having the same kinds of suffering." 1 Peter 5: 8-9 *The Everyday Bible*

Devotion:

My neighbor was a 93-year-old woman who never left her home; however, people came to see her. The helpful neighbor who picked up groceries for her and delivered them came in from time to time. A few of her old laundry customers who over the years had become good friends would come by to check on her and visit a while. At Thanksgiving her sons, who lived in another state, wanted to come with their families to celebrate Thanksgiving with her. Disregarding warnings from officials that there should be no family gatherings for the holiday they did not want their elderly mother to be alone on Thanksgiving. After all, no one was sick or had any symptoms of oncoming Covid or was aware that anyone had been exposed to the virus. They came to visit, and everyone had a wonderful time. By Sunday all had returned to their own homes. On arrival to his home one of the sons became ill, testing positive for the Covid virus. He called his mother to warn her, but she too had become ill. The son's case was mild, and he recovered quickly however his mother's case was much worse and proved to be fatal for her. They had quit being vigilant, stopped being careful for one weekend and paid a terrible price. Stories like this from across the world fill the news daily. This virus, like the devil, was going around like a roaring lion looking for whom it could devour.

I learned two things from this unfortunate event: 1) We can do harm to those around us without intention or desire to do so; and 2) Covid is only one evil in this world. There are other challenges before us that may not physically kill us but may destroy others' souls. How do we hurt others without intention or desire to do so? We do it by word and/or deed. Our tongue can be the sharpest knife penetrating someone's heart and soul. We speak before we carefully think of what effect our words may have on others. Our actions may be as innocent as the sons who did not want their mother to spend a holiday alone and one of them brought an uninvited guest who was an unseen stowaway and proved to be the mother's demise.

All actions aren't fatal, but they may become stumbling blocks to those coming to the Lord initially and to those weak in their faith. Thus, that action may destroy their souls. We need to do what the Scriptures say: control ourselves and be careful, ever vigilant in what we see, say, and do, watching always for the roaring lion of our lives that prowls hoping to devour someone. To adapt a children's song, we need to be careful eyes

what you see; be careful mouth what you say and be careful hands what you do. For the Father is above and is looking down below so be careful what you see, say, and do.

Prayer: Dear Lord you were our perfect example of how to have relationship one with another. You responded with love to all. Forgive us when we drop our guard and let the lions of our lives affect our words and deeds to others. Thank you for being ever-present in our lives through the Holy Spirit who can guide us. Help us Lord to be self-controlled, careful, vigilant servants of you so that we may not become stumbling blocks to any one in our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

Prayer focus: Relating to others as Jesus did, always in love.

Thought for the day: What lions do you have in your life that could cause harm to yourself or others?

Pam Higgs

March 25, 2021

Scripture reading: Romans 8: 31-39

Key verses: "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8: 38-39

Devotion:

This has been a year of challenges for all of us. It has been hardest to be separated from my siblings and their families. When the pandemic rules went into effect in March, I was allowed to visit Mom outside through the spring and summer. When the facility initially went into outbreak status, no one was allowed to visit. However, after Mom had a few issues, it was clear that she would improve if she could see her children. We were told that one of her children could be with Mom as a compassionate caregiver. Since I am retired, my siblings agreed for me to serve as her compassionate caregiver.

While I am allowed to be with Mom, I must wear a mask and remain six feet away from her. I have not been able to touch, hug or kiss her since March 2020, but joyfully we can be together! The Lord provided a way for me to be with Mom when others cannot be with their loved ones in assisted living/nursing homes and for that I am truly thankful. My being with her allows us to do devotionals together and to FaceTime with my siblings and their families so that they can not only talk with Mom, but they can also see each other. She has improved with these visits.

Jim and I enjoy every moment together and being together has been a blessing, not a hardship. I must say that in terms of things, I may not have always been able to find what I wanted, but the Lord has always provided what I needed when I needed it. How wonderful it is to have such Grace and to share in Christ, not only with Mom, but with the employees. How merciful it is for me to know that when her time comes Mom will be ushered into the presence of our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. How wonderful it is to know that neither this pandemic nor anything else can tear me away from Jesus. To paraphrase the song, I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against this day and against any day.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I am thankful that nothing can separate me from your loving arms.

Prayer focus: Those who do not know that nothing can separate them from our Lord.

Thought for the day: Give thanks for our security in Christ!

Ann Kautz

March 26, 2021

Scripture: Luke 16: 9-31

Key verse: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Luke 16: 9

Devotion:

Since the early part of 2020, we have been making changes in our everyday lives, from family work, work schedules, and church activities. We seem to be planning daily, wearing masks, social distancing, standing in lines at grocery stores or ordering our groceries with curbside pick-up, COVID 19 testing, and now finally getting the COVID 19 vaccine shots. We wonder, "What will be the new normal?" That remains to be determined.

We do have some certainties in our lives that we can share with others...we are never alone, for God is with us. All this uncertainty should not stop us from looking for opportunities to share the many blessings of our life in Christ, such as donating items, time, and prayers for food and clothing drives and kind, encouraging, supporting, and edifying words and actions to anyone we meet.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, make us aware of ways that we can share You and Your many blessings to others to glorify You! Amen.

Prayer focus and thought for the day: Less of me, more of Thee

Sharon Tabor Byrd

March 27, 2021

Scripture reading: Psalm 46: 1-10

Key verse: "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." Psalm 46: 10

Devotion: **WOW** if 2020 didn't give some of us time to "Be Still" I'm not sure what will. This verse has played over and over in my mind since March 2020 when we first began our journey of "quarantining" from Covid-19. I'm sure most of you know what I'm talking about. In the beginning of the journey, our family chose to stay in our home as much as possible. There were a lot of "be still" moments in our house.... moments where we searched for things to do, things to talk about, anything to get accustomed to being away from the way our life went from running to and from so many daily events to totally living at our house with no where to go. Are you with me?? And yet I felt that my spiritual journey thrived. I had more time for God. I had more time to read. I had more time to color bible verse cards and mail out to whoever I thought might need a word of encouragement. I sent them to a nursing home to be distributed out to those who may not have family (which I would have never been able to do if God had not provided me with some "be still" time in my life). I re-connected with friends I haven't talked to in years.

It was really hard for me to "be still" when the past 20 years have been spent chasing the day to day scheduled events of my family's life. Can you relate? Yet I look back and I can truly say that they were some of the most treasured times in my life. How can this be in a pandemic?? Because I took time to talk to my family, we cooked at home (or had meals delivered), we ate at the table and prayed before meals, we slowed down, and at the end of the day I started to understand that HE will be exalted among nations; He will be exalted in the earth.

We may not know or understand His plan; but let me assure you there is one. I believe that with my entire being. God provides us with lessons, and He provides us with direction. The world would like us to think that stillness is a weakness and that if we are not constantly busy that we are not doing what we should. But being still is a strength. It is a strength we need in order for us to recognize God in our day to day. He tells us to "be still" sometimes so that He can move in our lives. All we need to do is trust and obey. Covid-19 didn't end in 2020 and it still continues to be a "waiting season." Take this time to not live with fear or frustration, but to grow stronger in your daily walk with our creator.

Prayer: Our most precious heavenly Father, we ask that you help us to "be still". Renew in us a quiet spirit. Help us to lean on you through the difficult days. Help us to seek you daily and to understand that it is your will that must be done and not ours. Not our thoughts, our opinions, our wise words, but yours. Help us to be the people you need us to be in a sinful world. Create in us a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Help us to "be still" and to lean on YOU to help us during this time of trial. This we pray for all your people. Amen.

Prayer focus: To look at the "be still" moments as a blessing.

Thought for the day: In the coming days don't be afraid of the "be still" moments. Cherish each one, pray diligently, and trust that His plan is so much better than ours.

Jeannie Henson Morris

March 28, 2021 Palm Sunday

Scripture reading: Mark 11: 1-11

Key verse: "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'" Mark 11: 3a

Devotion:

I'm sure we have all read or heard this Scripture preached many times, especially this time of year. We understand that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem on a colt instead of a mighty war-horse because Jesus was coming as a man of peace, not a conquering general.

However, as I read this Scripture before starting to write my devotion, four words stood out to me like a beacon: **"The Lord needs it."** Jesus instructs His disciples if they were questioned as to why they were taking the colt simply to say, **"The Lord needs it,"** and sure enough some people were standing there and asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them, and the people let them go. Had Jesus pre-arranged this with the owner of the colt? We're not sure. My point is this, the owner knew **"The Lord needed it,"** and was willing to let it go.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12:1 "in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." We are to be servants of God, when **"The Lord needs it,"** we let it go.

Are we guilty of not sharing the love that God placed in our hearts? Not forgiving as we have been forgiven? Not sharing our life-changing testimony with others, the story that no one can tell but us, of how God graciously forgave our sins, changing our direction, never to be the same again?

For most of His ministry, Jesus did everything He could to discourage people from publicly celebrating Him as the Messiah. Here Jesus went out of His way to invite public praise and adoration as the Messiah. How could Jesus come riding into Jerusalem that day with hundreds of adoring followers praising Him and not get distracted by it all? How could he stay on course to the task ahead, which was The Cross? Because he was passionate about doing the Father's will!

Listen to this quote from Patricia Heaton of Everybody Loves Raymond fame, *"If you're a common-sense person, you probably don't feel you have a home in this world right now. If you're a Christian, you know you were never meant to."* In these last days, our passion for serving Christ needs to reach its most critical point. If ever there was a time to love, forgive, share our hope story with others, it's today. **"The Lord needs it."**

Prayer: Father, forgive my careless response to Your urgent needs. Ignite a passion within me for doing Your will.

Thought for the day: Every day we are given opportunities to serve.

Richard Justice

March 29, 2021

Scripture reading: John 12:1-11

Key verse: “Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the the fragrance of the perfume.” John 12:3

Devotion:

During this year of dealing with the personal and group limitations, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, we have been able to carry on with our regular church activities with the help of worship services on the internet and Bible studies on Zoom. In addition, on a personal level we are able to maintain an active spiritual life by regular personal devotions.

In the scripture reading for today, Mary made a remarkable act of devotion and worship toward Jesus. She realized that Jesus was the Savior, the Messiah, the resurrection and the Way to God. She was prepared to worship Jesus and her life was transformed by over-spilling in praise in the presence of Jesus.

To prepare for my devotional time, to prepare my heart to receive the Lord's blessing, I quietly turn to a hymn such as *I Am Thine, O Lord*: “Consecrate me now to thy service, Lord, by the power of grace divine, let my soul look up with a steadfast hope, and my will be lost in Thine.”

This leads me to realize and apply Christ's purpose and will for my life. This private devotion leads to public expression in my walk of faith.

Prayer: Help us to grow in your Holy Spirit, Lord, and enable us to share Your divine faith with others. Amen.

Prayer focus: Having a more meaningful devotional and prayer life.

Thought for the day: What can I do to have a closer walk with God?

David Byrd

March 30, 2021

Scripture reading: I Corinthians 1: 18-31

Key verse: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." I Corinthians 1: 25

Devotion:

The past year has certainly been difficult, strange, long, and scary. Everyone has faced some level of hardship since last March. Some have been worried and inconvenienced, but others have really suffered. I praise God that my family has stayed healthy and blessed through the pandemic. Ashley and I have been able to continue to work and adjust to our new routines, but I know not everyone has been so blessed. Some have suffered through loss of jobs, loss of health, or even loss of loved ones. I continue to pray for those hardest hurt by the pandemic.

One thing that I think most everyone has experienced and can relate to over the last year is the sheer uncertainty of it all. I'll admit that I don't handle change as well as I could, and I definitely worry too much when I'm not sure how things are going to turn out. With so much uncertainty, it seemed there were a lot of questions with not enough answers. While some were asking questions, others seemed to be more than willing to share their "human wisdom." What the scripture for today reminds me is that, although we may be blessed with people in our lives who are intelligent, wise, and want what's best for us, it should be God's wisdom and strength that we seek above all.

One thing that 2020 didn't change for us is the fact that God is still on the throne and still holds the world in his hands. Knowing that his foolishness is wiser than our wisdom and his weakness is stronger than our strength makes the uncertainty a little easier to face and the questions a little easier to answer.

Prayer: Almighty God, we know our human nature makes us afraid of the unknown and uncertainties in our lives. When we have questions and fears, help us to remember to turn to you before all others for wisdom and strength. Keep us safe and help us draw closer to you until we can once again worship and fellowship with each other. Amen.

Prayer focus: Those that have truly suffered over the last year.

Thought for the day: Am I more full of fear or full of faith?

Matt Skiles

March 31, 2021

Scripture reading: John 14: 1-27

Key Verses: "Let not your heart be troubled...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." John 14: 1a, 27b

Devotion:

I woke up one morning recently and felt a great deal of anxiety. As I picked up my Bible, I wanted to find verses that would encourage my spirit. I thought of John 14, which I had learned as a child. I found encouragement.

These are definitely troubling/anxious times for many of us. Who would have thought in 2021 the world would lose millions of people to a new virus that could not easily be contained? In the richest country in the world (ours), we are predicted to lose half a million lives by the end of February 2021. People have lost jobs, loved ones, homes, have food shortages or no food, and are scared. Those who abide by the guidelines put in place for our safety, feel isolated and lonely. These are definitely anxiety-producing times.

I frequently think of the song I learned as a toddler that goes like this:

“Why worry when you can pray;
Trust Jesus, he'll be your stay.
Don't be a doubting Thomas,
Rest fully on his promise;
Why worry, worry, worry, worry, when you can pray.”

Instead of singing, “Why worry when you can pray,” my Mom told me I sang, “Why hurry when you can pray.” That aside, the song is important today. I think that one of the positive things that have come out of the situation we find ourselves in at this time, is that instead of worrying about today or tomorrow, we can pray. And we do pray. Now, more than before, we have a lot of time to pray.

I have always had difficulty not worrying and being impatient. It is difficult for me to let go and let God be in control. This last year I have had plenty of opportunity to work on that!

For those of us who are impatient and anxiety-prone, perhaps there is a lesson for us to learn at this time. God is wanting to teach us patience and reliance on Him. As I try to recover from illness, my impatience seeks to annoy me further. In difficult times, God wants to be our teacher. He is trying to teach us to be still and listen, not to worry, but to trust him completely. One good thing that happens in difficult times is that people step forward to show love, kindness, a giving spirit, emotional support and most importantly, to pray. In our Sunday School class and in our church, we have many people who need our prayers and spiritual support. With modern technology, we can

know within minutes when there is a need to be on our knees (literally) praying for our church family, as well as people we have never met. We are bonded through our worship on Sunday mornings (Sunday School and worship service), as well as Wednesday Bible study. We are connected. We are the church.

As we continue to face the hardships of health issues, loneliness and worry, Jesus tells us in John 14:27: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid."

Prayer: Lord, help us to trust in you for all things.

Prayer focus: Pray to let go of worry and anxiety.

Thought for the day: Life is so much more beautiful when we don't let our lives be overcome with worry and anxiety, but instead, turn those issues over to God.

Judy Darr

April 1, 2021

Scripture reading: John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

Key verses: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...” John 13: 34-35.

Devotion: In many ways, I have been one of the lucky ones this last year. As of the writing of this, none of my family has contracted COVID, and we are part way through vaccination. My job in a clinic meant that I never missed a day coming into the office. I was able to be in a live theatrical production last summer, albeit outside. By a quirk of scheduling, I have even been able to attend a number of the live church services that are recorded for remote viewing on Sundays. So I have had the tremendous fortune to be able to continue many of the activities that provide meaning in my life, even if they are somewhat diminished. I always try to open my personal prayers with a statement of gratitude, but that “Thank you, Lord” has been much more fervent this year.

But that is not to say I am unaffected by the turmoil of the last year. Like most of you, I have had a front row seat, seeing the effects of furloughs, lay-offs, and unemployment, of school closings and shutdowns. I know many who are forced to be potentially exposed to a deadly disease on a daily basis, just to earn enough to get by. I know some who have fallen ill, sometimes quite seriously. No one can be blamed for feeling a sense of despair this last year.

But I have also been blessed to witness the actions of many who demonstrate what Jesus called us to do in these verses. I have seen many volunteering to help others in many ways. And, on a daily basis, I watch my healthcare colleagues care about patients, not just provide care for patients. They sacrificially accept the risk of being with patients, even those patients who have been nonchalant about the extent of the problem facing us. While we do our best in our clinic and in the hospital to minimize risk of exposure, every one of them knows that the risk is not zero, and they choose to be there for the patient anyway.

This world seems to call us to serve ourselves, rather than serve others. While it often glorifies love, it emphasizes a transactional love: “I love what this thing does,” or “I love that this person agrees with me.” Anything that doesn’t validate what one thinks or feels is discarded or repudiated. But Christ calls us to something different. We are to serve others with humility, with sacrifice if needed, and without regard to their opinions or status. For those who follow this example of Christ instead of the ways of the world, the difference in behavior is so striking, it is obvious. Everyone does know they are his disciples, especially in this last year. Knowing several of these disciples has been the greatest blessing I received in these troubled times.

Prayer: Lord, help us to recognize the humanity in everyone, so that we may love them as true brothers and sisters, as Christ loved us.

Prayer focus: Sacrificial love.

Lyric for the day: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Chris Terpening

April 2, 2021 Good Friday

Scripture: John 18:1 – 19:42

Key verse: “It is finished.” John 19: 24

Devotion:

We have been watching many more religious and news programs during our Covid lock-in. Recently, I noticed a greater abundance of disconcerting negative news stories--if that were possible. These include repeated videos of the Capitol events, massive troop movements, South American “caravans” coming toward U.S. borders, Covid deaths and hospitalization, and incidents in multiple other countries. In our house, 7:00 P.M. (after the news) could be the most depressing and anxious time of our day. Yet, we remember others have weathered even greater fears - ***with God’s help.***

John’s Chapters 18 & 19 give details of Jesus’ final hours of “Good” Friday. These are not the “mushy” human interest stories of that day. They describe Jesus’ arrest, trial, beating, and crucifixion. They also document “The Rock” Peter’s denials succumbing to his justifiable fears. Oh, if he could have read a few chapters later in John – he might have stood stronger through his fears. He would have read about God’s presence through overwhelming doubts and peace beyond understanding because of Jesus’ suffering that night and his crucifixion the day to follow. Yes, he would know of the glorious resurrection!

In our home, 7:00 P.M. could be a terrifying time – unlike Peter, we have read the last chapters of The Word. Items on the news are brief interruptions. Christ is resurrected, Christ is everpresent, and today’s news stories are part of Christ’s eternal plan and purpose. The Scripture promises us the Spirit of Power not the Spirit of Fear. The angels proclaimed to the Christmas Shepherds, “Fear not,” and they meant it for the Shepherds and us.

Prayer: Precious Lord, may your counseling and comforting Spirit be with us in these days of fearful transition and our journey with you into eternity. In Christ Name, Amen.

Prayer focus: Strength and assurance through difficult times

Thought for the day: Do not contemplate the negative – Bask in the positives of Jesus Christ.

Bruce Reed

April 3, 2021

Scripture reading: John 18:12 – 19:16

Key verse: “You are a King, then!” John 18:37.

Devotion:

There is a communication game that occurs in today's passage. It starts after Jesus is arrested and is taken to Annas. It is called, “passing the buck,” which means passing the responsibility to someone else. Did you notice it among the Jewish leaders as Jesus was passed from Annas to Caiaphas? Did you also notice it among the Jewish leaders and Pilate? The game occurs several times with Pilate and the Jewish leaders.

Actually, there were a “slew” of communication games that were being “run down” on Jesus by the Jewish leaders and Pilate. Some of those games we can name. There is projection, evasion, deception, distortion, and sarcasm mixed with lies. Meanwhile, what does Jesus do? He speaks truth! However, Caiaphas' and Pilate's perception of what they thought was “The Big Lie” led to His being charged, convicted and executed. Lies can lead to somebody getting hurt and even dying.

This reminds me of many things that have happened in our country during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lies were told about the virus that have led citizens to ignore precautions such as not wearing masks and big crowd events. What has been the result of these lies? Massive death. It also reminds me of lies told about us living and working together within this country and the 2020 election during the pandemic. I witnessed “Big Lies” radicalizing domestic terrorists which led to deaths and massive destruction.

So, this is what reading today's scripture has caused me to discern. Telling lies can lead to people being hurt spiritually, emotionally, mentally and sometimes lying will lead to death.

Prayer: God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, help us to not fall victim to deception. Help us to be able to discern what is a lie. Help us to recognize truth. Most importantly, help us to recognize national leaders who work to bring about Your Truth for our national well-being.

Prayer focus: God's Truth at work in our republic.

Thought for the day: “What is truth?” (John 18:38)

Leahgreatta “Gretta” Chiles Hairston

April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday

Scripture reading: John 20: 16-18

Key verses: “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.” John 20: 16-18 (NIV)

Devotion:

COVID-19 has kept Christian congregations around the world from hearing the live cantata choir music at Easter. What has historically been one of the high points of the Christian calendar has become hollow and empty. We miss the choirs and the other special music leading up to and including Easter Day. It is in this emptiness that we suffer together, and it is in this emptiness that we celebrate together!

Several years ago, I had the pleasure of pastoring a congregation in an idyllic country setting. Along about Easter I told the congregation the story of my growing up in a family with four children in a small town in West Virginia. While we were not wealthy, and we were not among the poor in our community, my parents had never seen fit to purchase a large, chocolate Easter bunny for each of our baskets. Easter morning, once we had found all the well-hidden eggs around the house, I would settle down with my basket to examine its contents. Inevitably, there were lots of decorated eggs and plastic eggs filled with jellybeans.

However, one Easter morning something was different. Tucked inside my Easter basket was the most beautiful, chocolate bunny I had ever seen. I waited until after church. I waited until after Easter dinner that afternoon. Finally, I decided it was time. I very carefully opened the top of the colorful box, and I slid my precious, chocolate Easter bunny out of the cellophane wrapper. Knowing exactly where I wanted to begin, I broke off the giant ears, only to find that this chocolate Easter bunny—*the one I had expected for so long*—was hollow!

Returning to my appointment in the farmland of Sussex County and my preaching that Easter, I recounted the story of my hollow Easter bunny. I asked them how they could experience Easter without feeling hollow. I explained to them that we ought to be bursting with Good News and sharing the risen Christ with everyone. On Easter morning the hollowness we may have experienced must be filled with the resurrected Jesus.

That same Easter morning immediately after worship a family in the congregation asked to meet with me for a few minutes. Not knowing what this mother, father, and five children had in mind, I agreed to meet with them in my study there at the church.

Entering the office, I sensed they were up to something. The youngest presented me with a beautifully wrapped package, and they invited me to open it right there. If you have already guessed that it was a solid, chocolate Easter bunny, you are correct. It was my first one, and I will never forget it.

Mary Magdalene experienced the emptiness of the tomb, and she expressed her fear and disappointment, until she experienced the risen Christ. Then, with all the fullness of Christ in her heart she went to tell the others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to know you on a much deeper level because of our focus in our time with you leading up to Easter. Help us to have full hearts because of the empty tomb. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer focus: How has God grown a fullness in our hearts because of our intentional time spent with him?

Thought for the day: How might I positively impact someone's life today?

Pastor Bob Kirby

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25 Encouraging Bible Verses to Read and Share During the Coronavirus Pandemic

25 "I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."
Psalm 91: 2

24 "And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.'" Exodus 14: 13

23 "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by." Isaiah 26: 20

22 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." 2 Corinthians 1: 3-4

21 "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so at that the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." 1 Peter 5:6-7

20 "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Psalms 147: 3

19 "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8: 38-39

18 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11: 28-30

17 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Romans 8: 18

16 "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Psalms 27: 1

15 "Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually." 1 Chronicles 16: 11

14 "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." Psalms 103: 13

13 "So we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Hebrews 13: 6

12 "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them" Psalms 34: 6-7

11 "But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" 2 Timothy 4: 17

10 "Peace I leave you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14: 27

9 "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." 2 Timothy 1: 7

8 "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you." Isaiah 41: 13

7 "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all." Psalm 34: 18

6 "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" Psalm 91: 1-2

5 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God." Phillippians 4: 6

4 "Come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11: 26

3 "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41: 10

2 "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Phillippians 4: 13

1 "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1: 9
