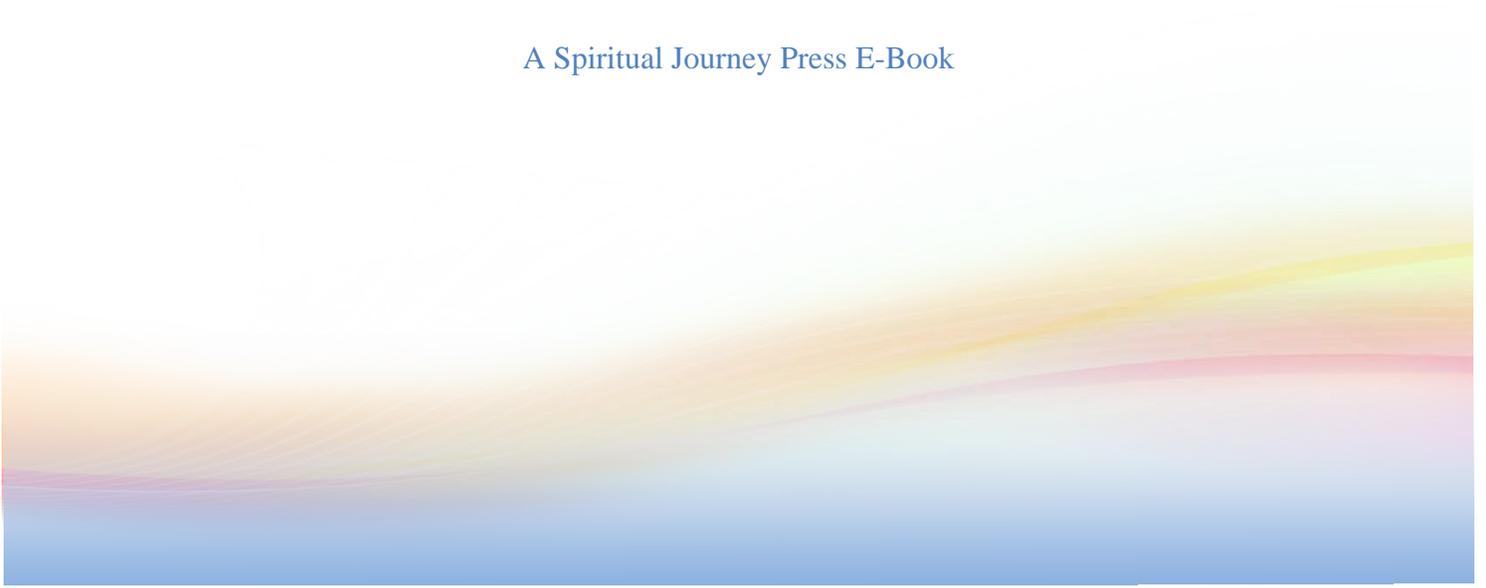




Lenten Devotions 2013

Rev. Dr. Richard E. Rusbuldt

A Spiritual Journey Press E-Book



Lenten Devotions 2013

By Dr. Richard E. Rusbult

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Front Cover Photograph entitled “2012-06-29 WI 140 Shorewood – Atwater State Park Letter Sculpture.” Copyright © 2012 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. Lent is a journey in which we reflect, form thoughts and consider all that God brings into our lives. The sea is full of possibilities!

Back Cover Photograph entitled “2012-06-29 WI 142 Shorewood – Atwater State Park Letter Sculpture.” Copyright © 2012 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. Human beings have the God-given capacity to think, and to consider creative notions and ideas. They pulse throughout our very being.

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February 13 – March 31, 2013

AN INVITATION TO A LENTEN JOURNEY

It matters not whether this is your first, second, or any number of times you've walked to the cross with Jesus – there is always something new to be learned or experienced. If this is your first time, no doubt you will see Jesus in new, almost unbelievable ways as he turns his face to Jerusalem. If you've walked before, you'll not be disappointed in this inexhaustible Jesus.

Lent is that period of time between what is called Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Early church history tells us that one or two days of fasting were to be observed in preparation for Easter. The first reference to 40 days is found in Council of Nicene documents in 325 AD. Scholars believe that the number "forty" was suggested by the forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

In the earliest days, the fast was rigorous. Only one meal a day was allowed, with no meats to be eaten. Gradually the fast was relaxed until eventually it was replaced with other practices. Today, we hear references to "give up something for Lent"; the possibilities are many. In some churches, however, there is a greater emphasis on penitential practices and private devotions.

It is the latter to which you are invited. You don't have to "give up" anything – you are invited to do something, namely a forty-six day walk with Jesus – to the cross and the tomb.

Each year I am indebted to Dr. Lee Spitzer of ABC, New Jersey, who provides the cover pictures, edits all of the material, and provides the technical expertise to make this study booklet available online and without cost to you.

Some of our journey will find us listening to Jesus' teachings to his followers as he prepares to die. Some of the journey will deal with preparations for his death. Stories from long ago as well as "yesterday" will be shared to illustrate truths about Jesus, or experiences of his followers of all ages.

You probably won't agree with everything that's contained herein – and that's quite alright. We're friends of Jesus, traveling together! You may not like some of the suggestions – if not, skip them. Perhaps you will miss a day here and there; that's O.K., too. Each day's journey stands pretty much by itself, and can be missed, or picked up at a later date. We will meet both good and evil people, consider wisdom from "above", ponder the humanity and divinity of Jesus, shudder at the suffering and brutality he endured, confront the "why" questions again and again, pray daily, and even more.

Rest assured that as we journey, God will be with you every step of the way. Over-riding our whole journey will be one universal truth:

GOD LOVED US – AND GOD CAME!!!!

Thought: No doubt there will be plenty of challenge for every person reading these words on the first day of our Lenten Journey. Are you ready to travel with Jesus the next forty-six days as we remember his walk to Jerusalem? Today's reading from Matthew tells us what Jesus felt was necessary for his fellow-travelers to consider as they prepared for that final trip. He told them they better be prepared.

A number of years ago a friend of mine and I made plans to hunt in Newfoundland. For such an adventure, we had much to do to "get ready". Heavy clothing, sleeping bags, hunting equipment, tickets and confirmations were just a few of the details. We lived at opposite ends of the state of Pennsylvania, so our plans were made mostly by phone. When the day to depart finally came, we met on #80 in northeast Pa, moved everything to one vehicle, and away we went.

Getting there proved to be an adventure in itself, since we became involved in a major hurricane with winds that reached 90 miles an hour while crossing to Newfoundland. We were on a huge ferry, loaded with people, automobiles, cargo and even railroad boxcars. The wind showed no mercy, and tossed us about like we were no more than a cork floating on the ocean. We were sure we were going to sink. We stayed down on the floor, since there was no way a person dared to lay on the bunks provided. Upon finally reaching land, we had snow to contend with as we flew inland. At last we were there; the journey was over, so we thought. Then we unloaded our supplies from the plane. But where were our sleeping bags? The plane was searched thoroughly, and they were not found. We finally realized that we were going to have to sleep on the cold, frozen ground inside a make-shift canvass cover, with snow and ice as our beds. Before the week was over, we truly regretted (sore, shivering at times, cold, grimacing, and growling!) not being ready for the journey.

Jesus didn't pull any punches with his disciples, either, about what it takes to get ready to follow him on his journey to the cross; or, for that matter, for any disciple on her/his earthly journey;

1. *deny yourself* – be willing to set aside your own agendas, desires, plans, possessions and decision-making;
2. *take up your cross* – this was the horizontal crossbeam that needed to be carried by the one being executed to the upright post already in the ground;
3. *follow me* – get in line, and be ready to go where I go.

Let's be honest with each other. Most of our cultures today make no suggestions about denying ourselves anything. Instead, we are besieged in print, TV, and social networking to do the opposite of denial – to go after and get absolutely everything we can get. We are told that such actions are the way to a happy life. We are assured that we cannot be happy or satisfied in this life unless we follow the culture. Who is right?

"Taking up a cross" is humiliating, dirty, ugly, painful, and has no future. Jesus suggested to his followers that they, too, needed to "take up a cross". In their culture, taking up a cross meant to get ready to die. Not many people then, or now, find that an attractive mandate.

Lastly, "Follow me – wherever I go", Jesus said. Two thousand years later, it's this same Jesus saying to us to "follow" – wherever I will lead you. Do you have enough faith and commitment to do that for 46 days? That's what this journey to Easter is about – through both the good and bad, try to hang in there with Jesus as he lays the foundation for redeeming the world.

Prayer: Jesus, following you has never been easy; only you can help me be faithful to the end of my journey.
Amen.

Questions: 1. As a follower of Jesus, describe a "cross" that's part of your life.
2. What have you ever denied yourself because you are a follower of Jesus?

Thought: Can you put into a few words just why Jesus was walking to Jerusalem? And, why are you?

We live in a universe that is so far beyond the ability of human minds to comprehend either its composition and size, that one can't help but wonder "why did God choose to come here?" Why would God, who exists outside of our days, hours and calendars, choose to be limited to flesh and blood, to days and nights, to the good and bad of human existence? I'd like to suggest there is one word that provides an answer to these questions, and it's found only four times in the Gospels --- three of them in Luke 10. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. First, he says the Samaritan "took care of him", the fellow who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Next, he says the Samaritan told the keeper of the inn to "take care of him". That's the heart of the parable.

Do you suppose it's the very heart of the walk-to-Jerusalem story, too??? I think so. I like to think that God looked at one of the greatest creations in the universe, Planet Earth, and saw what an impossible mess humans were making of what was once a beautiful life. A caring God could only respond one way: come and bring redemption for all God has created. As you and I walk to Jerusalem with Jesus, notice how much he cares – for the earth, itself – for the children – for the poor – for those hurt and maimed for life by injustice – for the sick – for the hungry – for the rich who may not have a clue to life – for those who haven't figured God out.

In all of the years of your life, can you find anything more satisfying than those times when you were cared for? Have you ever "felt like" Jesus when you were reaching out to someone in need, and caring for them in whatever way you could?

Last winter, just down the road on which we live, a deer was hit by a car and died. Within a matter of hours, the vultures came to feast on the carcass, and in only a few days, it was stripped clean of anything edible or that could be found to be nourishing to any form of life. Our daughter told us of driving by the carcass on a cold, wintry day, and spotting some kind of movement within the carcass. Being curious, she stopped along the road, and got out to see what it was. There, amidst the stark bones she saw a tiny, sickly kitten. Obviously malnourished, the kitten was desperately trying to find something to eat, to live a little longer. She made an attempt to move towards the kitten, hoping to catch it and help it with food and safety. But the kitten quickly ran into the brush, away from human help. At that point, another car stopped, and a woman got out and told how she had stopped several times, wanting to help the tiny kitten that was so visibly desperate for food. But she couldn't get near it, either. And so they had to get in their cars and drive away, unable to help as they had hoped.

Thus ends the story, you say? Not necessarily. It is true that this was not a happy scene, nor one with a happy ending. No doubt the kitten had little longer to live without food and treatment. Yet the story was filled with one of life's most meaningful words – care!!! Two women cared enough to stop their cars in wintry weather, and tried to reach out to a tiny part of God's creation that was in trouble. Obviously, they didn't solve the kitten's problems. But the God of the Universe saw something that brought great pleasure – two people cared – and that's what life is about.

So it was with Jesus. He was walking to Jerusalem because he cared for the host of people on every side of him who faced human problems beyond their own ability to solve. This included the poor of the land, the so-called middle class folks of that day, those with more than they should have had, the Roman soldiers, the Temple priests and guards, and on and on. Two thousand years later, even people who are not believers in Jesus, recognize that he was/is the most unique person who ever walked the face of this earth – and exhibited caring like no other person has ever done. Ponder the "God who cares" as we walk towards Jerusalem.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for caring for us so much, you were even willing to die for us. Amen.

Questions: 1. What is the most satisfying or meaningful caring you have ever experienced?
2. How do you explain in simple terms how God could care so much for us to die for us?

Thought: Let's pretend you've worked all day, it's finally quitting time, and you can't wait to get out of there and get home. Your mind is going in circles as you remember at least a dozen things that need to get done this afternoon and evening. You rush to the parking lot where your car waits, and you discover a co-worker standing next to her car with a dismayed look on her face – as she stares at a flat tire. You groan inwardly – “Oh no, now what am I going to do?” She looks at you and half-smiles, although you sense she is close to tears. Your mind quickly moves into high gear while pondering what is the easiest way to get out of there, without being unkind or not helpful. While considering the options open to you, deep inside there are a couple of gnawing questions lurking: “How much do I care about helping her in this situation?” “Do I care more about my own agenda than I do this person's problems?”

Jesus was trying to communicate with his listeners in an agricultural context several thousands of years ago. He used sheep as an illustration for the point he was trying to make. Taking care of a hundred sheep was not an easy task. They have poor eyesight, they wander wherever their noses lead them in search of something to eat, which includes over hillsides, into ravines and thickets they can't escape from, and on and on. Dumb animals, they were/are often called.

Taking care of sheep, for the shepherds, was a job. Some were good at it; some were mediocre; and some were careless or foolish shepherds. After watching the sheep during the daylight hours, before darkness fell, a good shepherd would begin the tedious process of gathering them into a more-or-less protected area to care for and protect them overnight. By this time of day, shepherds would welcome the opportunity to make a campfire, eat whatever they could prepare, and relax as darkness covered everything.

One important task was to account for every sheep in the shepherd's flock. How long does it take you to count to one hundred? How long might it take to count to one hundred if each number must belong to a sheep? Needless to say, it was a time consuming process. And how would you feel if you counted to ninety-nine, and couldn't find the one hundredth sheep? Shepherds said the same thing that the worker said upon finding the woman with a flat tire in the parking lot – “Oh, no!”

Next came securing the sheep and leaving them under the care of other shepherds working with you, and setting off in one direction or another, as darkness begins to fall, looking for signs of the lost sheep, calling the sheep by name (they all had names), and listening for a distress call. So much for your evening meal; so much for some needed rest and relaxation; so much for a full night of sleep – the search had to go on, if you cared for the sheep, and/or wanted to keep your job.

In John 10:11, Jesus said “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.” Not only were wild animals a danger at night, the rocky hillsides and treacherous footing where sheep could get entangled could cause broken bones, or even loss of life for the shepherd. In this passage, Jesus was talking about himself. In today's reading, Matthew is talking about God. Matthew says that just as the shepherd cares enough to chase after a lost sheep whether it's day or night, so God cares for the people of God.

Do you find it comforting to know that both Jesus and Eternal God reflect the label: “caring shepherds”? As we walk towards Jerusalem, don't lose sight of our God who cares amidst the dust of Palestine, amidst the evil that pervades all of the lands of the earth, amidst the injustices that permeated all civilizations, amidst the pomp and power of the Roman Empire. Yes, God cared for each disciple on that journey, and cares for each who walks to Jerusalem today. It is God's very nature – God HAD to come and walk this walk – because God is a caring God, willing to come to redeem what God has created.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for showing us how to care for a lost sheep, and for someone with a flat tire. Amen.

Questions: 1. What would you have done for the woman with the flat tire?
2. In what ways have you experienced God's care in your life?

Thought: For those who walked the dusty roads of Palestine, there was a price tag attached to any kind of caring that might get done. If you have any doubts, ask Jesus. Nothing has changed about the cost of caring over the last two thousand years, either.

If you had lived in Poland when the Nazi war machine took over the country in the late '30's, you would have lived a life of fear no matter who you were, or where you lived. If you were Jewish, there was even greater fear as those early months rolled by. Irena Sendler (Krzyzanowska) was a 29 year old Polish Catholic social worker at that time. Her father, Stanislaw, had been a physician. Sendler sympathized with Jews from her childhood. Her father died in 1917 of typhus contracted while treating patients, mostly Jews, whom his colleagues refused to treat.

As soon as the Germans invaded Poland, she began aiding Jews. First, she was an employee of the Social Welfare Department, which gave her some credibility with the Germans. Second, she joined the Zegota resistance movement (the Council to Aid Jews), and gave her time to the children's division. Helping Jews in any way was extremely risky – in German occupied Poland, all household members risked death if they were found to be hiding Jews, a more severe punishment than in other occupied European countries.

She had a special permit to enter the Warsaw Ghetto to check for signs of typhus, something the Nazis feared would spread beyond the Ghetto. During these visits, she wore a Star of David as a sign of solidarity with the Jewish people and so as not to call attention to herself.

She and her partners organized the smuggling of Jewish children out of the Ghetto. Under the pretext of conducting inspections of sanitary conditions during a typhus outbreak, Sendler and her co-workers visited the Ghetto and smuggled out babies and small children in ambulances and trams, usually disguising them as packages. They soon began to bring dogs with them in the vehicles, so that when stopped at check-points the dog's barking covered up the whimpers and cries of babies and small children who were scared to death. The German sentries wanted nothing to do with the dogs, so they left them alone.

Once the babies and children were free from the Ghetto, they were secretly moved and placed with Polish families, a Catholic convent, a Warsaw orphanage, and in some cases, even out of the country. Irena and her co-workers buried lists of the hidden children in jars in order to keep track of their original and as well, their new identities.

Her caring, however, eventually caught up with her. In 1943, she was arrested by the Gestapo, severely tortured, and sentenced to death. But Zegota members saved her life by bribing German guards on the way to her execution. She was listed on the public bulletin boards as among those executed. For the remainder of the war, she lived in hiding, but continued her work for the Jewish children. After the war, she and her helpers gathered together all of their records with the names and locations of the hidden Jewish children and gave them to the Central Committee of Polish Jews. However, almost all of the parents had been killed at the Treblinka extermination camp, or had otherwise disappeared in the maze of life at that point.

Irena died in May, 2008, at the age of 98. Over the years, many honors were bestowed on her for her caring actions in saving 2,500 Jewish children.

Irena's strong belief in a God who cares gave her an unusual ability to deal with human bestiality and ugliness. She felt at every moment she was doing just what God would have her to do, as a faithful follower of the Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for those who have cared over the centuries; help me to join their ranks. Amen.

Questions: 1. Make a list of people for whom you could show care, in Jesus' name.
2. What are some deterrents that prevent us from providing more care for those in need?

Thought: Earlier in Jesus' ministry, with crowds following him everywhere he went, he climbed a mountain and gave his disciples and anyone else who could hear the Sermon on the Mount. Try to think yourself back to what Jesus was talking about in chapters five, six and seven of the Gospel of Matthew. The vast majority of those who listened had little beyond the basic necessities – food, clothing and shelter – and getting them was a significant challenge and burden, as well!

In Palestine, growing food for family consumption was almost solely dependent on seasonal rains. If they came, there might be food; if they were erratic, or didn't come at all, they faced months of hunger. When the Jews were in Egypt, their food supply was always dependent on the flooding of the Nile River – sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't.

In order to fully understand what Jesus was saying in today's verses, we need to remove from our thinking such things as grocery and department stores, bank accounts, pay checks, retirement income, television ads enticing us to buy things we don't need, and a societal mindset that shows no guilt about the tremendous waste of time and material in today's world.

Add to this the matter of what their church, through the temple priests and their laws, expected from them. Americans give to their churches and other philanthropy less than 3% of their total income. For each person who tithes, there are nine who give less than 1%. In Jesus' day, the church demanded over 30% of one's income. It isn't difficult to understand why most of those who listened to Jesus knew nothing about a "caring church", or a "caring God". Is it any wonder they "were astonished" at his teachings (Matthew 7:28)? And besides the church's demands, there was also Roman taxation to deal with, at the threat of death.

As I was reading and thinking about today's text and what Jesus was really saying to those sitting on the mountain-side, I received an email from a friend. Among other things, this person said "...I am really tired of the saying that God has a plan and we need to trust it. I really don't know what plan includes the pain I have had for ¾ of my life...most of the time, I don't think God cares for me at all". My first thought was that at least I have one friend who is totally honest about life. However, reflecting on this person's situation, what they wish for is a God who would care for them by giving them a break once in awhile.

Eugene Patterson, in today's reading in *The Message*, does a superb job of translating for today's mind what Jesus was saying two thousand years ago:

- "There is far more to your life than food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. *Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. AND YOU COUNT FAR MORE TO HIM THAN BIRDS!*
- All this time and money wasted on fashion – do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. *If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers – most of which are never even seen – don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?*
- Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. *You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met."*

Jesus' message then, and God's message for us today is "I am God, who cares for you". Trust me, believe in me, live for me while I care for you every step of the way.

Prayer: Jesus, when the journey is rough, put your arms around me, and give me a hug. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways have you experienced what Jesus was teaching -- that God is a caring God?
2. Name some new ways you wish God would express care to you on your daily journey.

Day Six

Monday, February 18, 2013

Matthew 10: 7-10

Thought: Jesus was walking the dusty roads of Palestine for one basic reason: he was God, who cared. He also knew that in just a few short years, he would no longer be walking those dusty roads. If he wasn't there to give evidence of a God who cared, who would do the job? Jesus' answer was found in today's verses, of which I particularly like vs 9, 10: "...Don't think you need to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You don't need a lot of equipment. YOU are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light..." (The Message)

Have you ever thought of *yourself* as God's caring presence in your world? Is it possible that to someone, you are the *only* way God has to give care and love? Caterina Benincasa was born in Siena, Italy, in 1347. At this time, the black death raged throughout Europe, and Siena was badly ravaged. Lapa, her mother, was forty years old when she prematurely gave birth to twin daughters, Catherine and Giovanna. The twins were children # 23 and #24. Giovanna was given to a wet nurse, and soon died. Catherine was nursed by her mother, and developed into a healthy child,.

Catherine had her first vision of Christ when she was age six, saying that Jesus smiled at her, blessed her, and left her in ecstasy. Her older sister, Bonaventura died in childbirth. Within a year, a younger sister, also named Giovanna, died. Catherine was tormented with sorrow. As well, her parents insisted that she marry Bonaventura's widower. Being absolutely opposed to such a marriage at age 16, she started a massive fast. Then she cut off her long hair, and took a vow of chastity.

She was concerned about the poor, the sick, the helpless. She convinced her parents that she should join the local association of Dominican Sisters, while still able to live at home with them. At this time, she learned to read, but at home lived in almost total silence and solitude. She believed God was calling her to help others. As a result, she gave away both family food and clothing, without asking anyone's permission. Her caring actions cost her family significantly, but she demanded not a thing for herself. During this time, she came to believe she was mystically married to Christ. She must be and do what Christ would do if he was alive in her neighborhood.

Fused to the living presence of Christ, she entered into the brokenness of her people. One profound encounter was coming alongside a young man named Niccolo di Toldo. One could say he was a young man in the wrong place, and at the wrong time. While traveling through Siena, Niccolo became caught up in an Italian rebellion, a city-state war that was commonplace in those days when the rule of law changed hands with every confrontation. His execution date was set, and his lament was laden with cynicism; his hope in the God of mercy was nonexistent.

Catherine went to prison to visit him, to let him know she cared, as did her Christ. As she shared her faith in a living, loving Christ, his feelings began to change, and he became a believer. He begged Catherine to be with him to the end. She promised, and received his head into her hands when he was executed. She said, "Then I saw the God-man as one sees the light of the sun. His side was open to receive into his own the blood that had just been shed, a fire of holy desire, which his grace had poured into and concealed in that soul, was now received into the fire of his own divine love..."

A rather "gory" story, you say??? Perhaps, to today's minds. Yet, how thrilling to read of one who took her love for Jesus so seriously that she could care in such a manner -- indeed, she was God's "hands and feet" to Niccolo in that prison cell, as he waited to die. Sitting in a sanctuary on a Sunday morning, if not followed on Monday (or some other day) with a reaching out to someone who is poor, hurting, defeated, helpless, imprisoned, destitute, homeless, unloved, is a significant waste of time. It was Jesus himself who said "YOU are the equipment..." -- you are Me, when you take my place by caring and loving in my name.

Prayer: Jesus, challenge me anew with who you really are, and how I can be an authentic follower. Amen.

Questions: 1. Identify your most authentic act or moment of reflecting the living Christ to someone in need.
2. In the next five weeks, can you reach out to a "Niccolo" in your life?

Thought: Our walk with Jesus to the cross is now one week old. A day ago, we talked briefly about his first public message, almost three years back, the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with the Beatitudes, which rather neatly tell how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven as opposed to the kingdom of this world.

J. B. Philips re-wrote the Beatitudes so that they apply to the kingdom of this world:

- “Happy are the ‘pushers’, for they get on in the world.**
- Happy are the hard-boiled; for they never let life hurt them.**
- Happy are they who complain; for they get their own way in the end.**
- Happy are the blasé; for they never worry over their sins.**
- Happy are the slave-drivers; for they get results.**
- Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world; for they know their way around.**
- Happy are the trouble-makers; for they make people take notice of them.”**

So-called “modern society” lives by the rule of “survival of the fittest”. You’ve surely seen the bumper sticker that reads “The one who dies with the most toys wins”. The nation with the best weapons system will win; or, is it the nation with the largest gross national product? When Michael Jordan, famous basketball player, retired (the first time, that is), the owner of the Chicago Bulls, Jerry Reinsdorf, gave a concise description of what success is in our modern world: “He’s living the American Dream, where you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, and can do everything you want to do.”

In Jesus’ point of view, as expressed in the Beatitudes, the widow who put two pennies in the offering plate was far more important than the political leaders of the day, the wealthy citizens, the temple priests, or the powerful Roman army. You can easily guess who is still talked about two thousand years later, while all the rest are nameless and forgotten. A dishonest tax collector, disenchanted with his lucrative but corrupt lifestyle, climbed a tree so he could get a possible glimpse of someone who might be able to change him. Jesus recognized him for his frailty, as well as his honest pursuit of hope and redemption.

A nameless, nondescript child got to sit on his lap. A blind beggar caught both his attention and time, as well as his healing touch. Some lepers, shunned by all of society including their own families, and banished to living outside the village “walls”, found him actually walking towards them, rather than running away. Healing was soon to follow. In both the Old and New Testaments, God’s partiality towards the poor and the disadvantaged is on display. Why do you suppose God would single out the poor for such special attention? A write named Monika Hellwig composed a list of the “advantages” to being poor:

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.
2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people, but also their interdependence with one another.
3. The poor rest their security not on things, but on people.
4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and no exaggerated need of privacy.
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience.
8. When the poor have the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news, not like scolding.
9. The poor can respond to the Gospel with a certain abandonment because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

As you contemplate Jesus’ view of the “kingdom of heaven”, go back through Hellwig’s list, and substitute the word “rich” for “poor”, and change each sentence to its opposite. To make it even more personal, go back over the list and substitute the word “I”.

Prayer: Jesus, teach me more about your “kingdom”, as I walk with you to the cross. Amen,.

- Questions:**
1. What bothers you most about society’s obsession with things, power, position?
 2. What do you like best about the Beatitudes Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount?

Thought: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” So said Jesus in Luke 21: 25-28!!!!

This same Jesus said : “Do not be anxious...” in today’s reading. After the above terrifying scenario, how can we not be anxious? What on earth does God expect from us?

Do we really need to wait for a cosmic judgment day to be anxious, or to get a good case of the “worries”? Where can we go to really be safe today? Terrorists attack, or threaten to do so. The polar ice caps are melting. Severe storms, too much water or not enough, tornadoes in ever increasing numbers, and forest fires increase. An economic recession holds countless millions in its grips, in spite of national and international efforts to change course. A dear friend told me he will no longer continue the treatments he has been taking for cancer. Another friend has closed his business, and filed for bankruptcy. Many are nearing the age of retirement, totally unprepared for their financial welfare in the future. The list could go on to the end of this page.

What are you anxious about today? Jot down some of the things that disturb you, either in your daily living, or in your mind regarding what lies ahead:

Feel good about the fact that Jesus fully understood, and understands everything on your above list. He was no stranger to the personal anxieties of his day. He saw those who were impoverished, those who were sick with no one to care for them, those who were alone in their journeys. He saw clearly the political games played by people on all sides, with the ultimate aim of all to “get our way, and as much as we can”. Rome taxed them mercilessly, and regularly threatened them with destruction. Enraged zealots worked in whatever way possible to strike back at Rome, or whomever they perceived to be the enemy. Even the several religious communities were at “war” with each other. “End-times” warnings were widespread.

But Jesus didn’t stop with the warning of anxieties and risks faced on a daily basis. He took them into a new place: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28) The moment of our greatest fear, that moment when the ground shakes beneath our feet, *is the very moment of God’s deepest presence and power within us.*” God has not left us – God is right here with us!!!!

An old quote is as true today as when it was first written: “And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.’” (Minnie Haskins –“The Gate of the Year” – 1908)

As you look at your list of anxieties above, why not slip your hand into the hand of God, and face each one of them together?

Prayer: Jesus, take my hand, and lead me through today’s mine-field of life. Amen.

- Questions: 1. Of those you face, which anxiety gives you the greatest fear or worry?
2. What steps can you take to do what Jesus said “Be anxious about nothing...”?

Thought: Do you suppose any of the disciples ever felt so worried, so confused, so puzzled, so frustrated that they wanted to have some time with Jesus – alone? Nothing is recorded that it ever happened. In our wildly busy lives today, do you ever wish that you could be with Jesus – alone??? Thomas a Kempis, a German monk of the 1400's, spent much of his life exploring the mysteries of "time alone with Jesus". In a prayer poem titled *Together*, he said:

"Most sweet and loving Jesus, grant me to rest in You;
 above any other creature,
 above all honor and glory,
 above all power and dignity,
 above all knowledge and wisdom,
 above all wealth and talent,
 above all joy and gladness,
 above all fame and praise,
 above all sweetness and consolation,
 above all hope and promise,
 above all merit and desire,
 above all the gifts and favors You shower on me,
 above all happiness and joy,
 above all angels and archangels,
 above all things visible and invisible,
 above all that is not You, my God.
 Amen.

As we walk with Jesus towards Jerusalem, we cannot escape the reality of our vertical relationship -- with God. Oh, God, where are you? Oh God, why can't I hear you? Oh God, there's too much to carry on this journey – I need your help.

And as we walk with Jesus towards Jerusalem, there are many "horizontal" relationships – which include our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, church family, and casual acquaintances. On some days, we probably feel as if there isn't a stable relationship among them; on other days, thank goodness, we feel good about some of them! Anne Murrow Lindbergh, wife of aviator Charles Lindbergh, was a profoundly spiritual Christian woman. At one point, she took a month of her life to experience complete solitude on a Pacific island, during which time she wrote a book about marriage and relationships called *A Gift from the Sea*. As you read this excerpt, think of those for whom you care, be it a spouse, or parent, or child, or relative, or neighbor, or friend:

"When you love someone, you do not love them all the time; in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. That is an impossibility. It is a lie even to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, or love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity – in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern.

The only real security is not in owning or possessing, not in demanding or expecting, not in hoping, even. Security in a relationship lies neither in looking back to what it was in nostalgia, nor forward to what it might be in dread or anticipation, but living in the present relationship and accepting it as it is now. For relationships, too, must be like islands. One must accept them for what they are here and now – within their limits – islands, surrounded and interrupted by the sea..."

Prayer: Jesus, help me find you in the light and in the dark, on the good days, as well as the bad days. Amen.

Questions: 1. How would you describe your ability to go "one on one" with God?
 2. As one human being, among billions, how does God express care to you?

Day Ten

Friday, February 22, 2013

Matthew 14: 23(a)

Thought: Jesus was following the words of the Psalmist in 46: 10: “Be still, and know that I am God.” In spite of the crush of people around him and his heavy daily agendas, Jesus knew he had to be still, and to find time to be alone with God. Self-examination is a good thing, but where does one find the energy and time to pursue such a discipline? You are invited to give it a try today, as you walk to Jerusalem. Using the words from this Psalm, see where you “end up”.

Be...

Being is more important than doing.

Who am I? In my own eyes? My family? The church? The world? In the eyes of God?

Who called me into being? Who calls me into “being” today? What will I “be” tomorrow?

How much am I worth? And by what standard do I answer that question? How does God?

Be Still...

Shut up! Sit down! Stop running! Stop thinking! Turn off that phone!

Turn off the engines...one at a time. Why am I afraid of silence? Why am I afraid of God’s silence?

How can I be still, in a world that is not?

Is “being still” a waste of time? Why does God want me to be still? Besides, I don’t like being still!

Be Still and...

“and” suggests another subject – that there IS something other than stillness, silence.

Does God have something else in mind that I should know about my life journey?

What would my life be like if I took the time to be still, and to listen to God -- first, not later?

What would I have to “give up” in order to learn what God would like to communicate to me?

Be Still, and Know...

Knowing, not wondering, doubting, fussing, complaining, worrying, being frustrated and powerless.

“Know me as a person”, says God.

“I want to be your friend, not your judge”, says God.

“Know that I dwell within you, when you allow me to be your guest”, says God.

“Know that I have already forgiven you more than seventy times seven”, says God.

“Know that I would do far more for you than you have dared to ask me to do.”

“Know that I am alive and well today, in spite of the sad conditions of my creation.”

Be still, and Know that I Am God...

“I am who I am...” “Only by listening will you learn who I am.”

“I am the creator of the universe – I created you.”

“I have loved you since I created you.”

“I am the creating, owning and sustaining God.”

“I often smile at you – have you seen any of my smiles?”

“I want so much to talk with you, to be with you – will you let me?”

“I am eternal love – or nothing”

“I am God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit – One God.”

“Yes, I forgive you – before you have sinned.”

“No one has ever loved you like I do.”

“I am the One who will greet you when you take your last breath.”

“I am the God – who waits – alone.”

Prayer: Jesus, help me to follow your example of taking time alone to talk to, and listen to God. Amen.

Questions: 1. On an average, how much time each day do you invest in somehow being in God’s presence?

2. What would it take to increase your “alone” time with God?

Thought: Who was Jesus talking about when he said “Give *us* this day our daily bread”? Most of us tend to think he was referring to “my” own table – and food for my family. That’s probably true. But no doubt he meant far more than that, too. Nowhere in this model prayer do you find the pray-er pleading a case for self. It’s all about “our” and “us”. Jesus was showing us how to look beyond ourselves, to include the whole human family in the word “us”. “Us” includes our neighbors, those living in other neighborhoods, other towns and cities, and in other countries around the world.

Apparently he thought they didn’t get the message right from his model prayer. Later on his journey, in Luke’s gospel, he talked about a rich fellow whose ground produced an abundant crop. Obviously, he didn’t give any of it away. Instead, he thought to himself “What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.” So he built more and bigger barns.

Isn’t he much like us today? We don’t buy one car, but two or three. We don’t own one TV, but three or four. Some of us live in homes with more space than whole villages of people have in some parts of the world. I heard of one fellow who was asked to help a church-related school, but who said he couldn’t give any more away because his bank balance had dwindled from eight million to only five million dollars!

Jesus was concerned about all of God’s family, those who believe there is a God, and those who don’t; those who are found in worship every Sunday, and those who never worship; those who pray to God, and those who never say a prayer; those who are faithful to Jesus’ two new commandments, and those who are not. Does it bother you that I include in “God’s family” everyone on the face of the earth? In case you’ve forgotten, it was this same Jesus who cried for all of the people, not just a select group.

Unfortunately, the secular, non-believing world has seen little evidence that Christians are as compassionate about others as is their God, who came in the person of Jesus to walk the dusty roads of Palestine – and to walk all the way to his cross. In his book “Praying for Jesus”, James Mulholland wrote: “I was watching a television program in which a Christian from Sudan was being interviewed.” He asked, “How can our rich Christian brothers and sisters in America ignore the fact that we in Sudan are starving to death?” If you pray “us” in the Lord’s Prayer, how do you answer that question? Praying for “us” to have daily bread is a prayer of equality. God is interested in more than just *my* needs. God wants everyone to have enough.

Peter Arnett was a CNN television commentator and reporter. At one point he was in Israel, in a small town on the West Bank, when an explosion went off. Bodies were blown through the air. Everywhere he looked there were signs of death and destruction. A man came running up to Peter holding a bloodied little girl in his arms. He pleaded with Peter, “Mister, I can’t get her to a hospital! The Israeli troops have sealed off the area. No one can get in or out, but you’re with the press. You can get through. Please, Mister! Help me get her to a hospital. If you don’t help, she’s going to die!” Peter put them in his car, got through the sealed area, and rushed to the hospital in Jerusalem. The whole time he was hurtling down the road to the city, the man was pleading from the back seat, “Can you go faster, Mister? Can you go faster? I’m losing her.” When they finally got to the hospital, the girl was rushed to the operating room. The two men retreated to a waiting room. They just sat there in silence, too exhausted to even talk. After a short while, the doctor came out and said to them solemnly, “I’m sorry, she’s dead.” The man collapsed in tears, and as Peter put his arms around the man to comfort him, he said “I don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I’ve never lost a child.” The man looked at Peter in a startled manner and said, “Oh, Mister! That Palestinian girl was not my daughter. I’m an Israeli settler. The Palestinian is not my child. But, Mister, there comes a time when each of us must realize that every child, regardless of that child’s background, is a daughter or a son. There must come a time when we realize we are all family!” Whom do you say is “us”?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to see, and to love all of your family just like you do. Amen.

Questions: 1. In an average week, how many “other” lives do you touch in the name of Jesus?
2. What do you mean when you pray “Give *us* this day our daily bread?”

Thought: How often do you think the disciples talked about the last of the Beatitudes as those first few months became a year of walking with Jesus? Then two years became three years – when you and I joined in the walk. After all, it was no secret that Jesus had riled the leaders of the Jewish synagogue. As well, when he was surrounded by huge crowds, Roman soldiers kept a wary eye on them. At the same time, Jesus was the most caring fellow any of them had ever seen – who on earth would want to persecute him or his followers? Persecution for being a follower of Jesus today became reality to me several years back when I received an urgent note from a person in another country telling me how their very life could be jeopardized by what was said in the Lenten Devotions – their online life was monitored daily by those who were in opposition to Christianity, and persecution could follow.

Several decades after Jesus ascended, on July 19, A.D. 64, a great fire engulfed much of the city of Rome. Only four of the fourteen quarters of the city escaped damage. Suspicion immediately fell on Emperor Nero. Was this his madcap way of clearing part of the city to make room for new, magnificent streets and buildings, all named in his honor? Nero, however, managed to deflect blame -- first, apparently on the Jews who had a reputation for large-scale arson but who were also his friends at court; and then, onto the Christians.

Roman historian Tacitus gave this account: “But all the endeavors of men, all the emperor’s largesse and the propitiations of the gods, did not suffice to allay the scandal or banish the belief that the fire (the great fire of Rome, summer 64) had been ordered. And so, to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians.

Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for the moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe, which there finds a following. Accordingly, arrest was first made of those who confessed (to being Christians); then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of hatred of the human race. Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement. They were clad in the hides of beasts, and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified; others were set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment, for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual.” (Annales, XV.44)

But even Tacitus, except for the manner of the Christians’ deaths which he thought was excessively cruel, showed no sympathy for the Christians. He described them as a “class hated for their abominations”, and guilty of “hatred of the human race”. This same accusation was also made against the Jews. Theirs was not a “religion”, but a “deadly superstition,” and hence worthy of repression. In reality, both Christians and Jews were considered to be atheists. As believers in one God, we find such an accusation a bit unreal. But in the Roman minds of that day, atheism was the denial and existence and power of the gods – of whom there were many. To believe in one God was absolutely ridiculous. They took this thinking so seriously that a Roman army officer was killed because he was carrying a memento given him by a Druid priest.

As you walk with Jesus towards Jerusalem, how much thinking do you give to “persecution”, or being punished because of your faith in Jesus Christ? For most readers, the answer is probably “none”. For most of us, there is no price tag attached to our faith in the Christ. Might this be one of the reasons why we are not taken as a “serious threat” by the un-churched, perhaps by the principalities and powers of evil themselves?

Prayer: Jesus, I pray that my salt has not lost its saltiness. Amen.

Questions: 1. What have you experienced on your journey with Christ that might be considered persecution?
2. Are you willing to be a prayer supporter for people who are suffering for their faith in Christ?

Thought: As we walk with Jesus towards the cross, I believe we can readily agree that it wasn't hard for Jesus to get attention. In reality, he was the center of attention everywhere he went. It became so demanding that he actually had to plan some "escapes" from time to time – to recharge his batteries with some conversation with God. (He didn't want to lose his saltiness!)

Now leave the dusty roads of Palestine, and move your thinking to the paved roads of today. Your church sits on a "paved road" somewhere. Is it the center of attention for the whole community in which it resides? Is *everybody* talking about your church? Or, is *anybody* talking about your church? Do people think of Jesus when they drive by your church? Or have contemporary values and culture re-cast your church so that it has become an ingrown manifestation of religion, rather than a dynamic group of confronters with the Good News? (How salty is your church?)

Jeffrey MacDonald has written a new book titled *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul*, and it's worth your time to read. The book begins by telling the story of a so-called highly successful church, The Community Church of Joy, in Glendale, AZ. By current standards, it was successful. It had 187 acres, and 12,000 members. It had a Disney designed campus, an incredible parking lot system, an elaborate food court, and throngs of happy worshippers. (Was their salt salty?)

But the pastor of the church, Walter Kallestad, couldn't sleep at night. Why? Because members of the congregation were totally oblivious to the social problems of the greater Phoenix area – crime, addiction, unwanted pregnancy, broken homes, hopelessness. Pastor Kallestad wondered if the larger community would miss his congregation or even notice if it disappeared. (Saltiness is needed.)

He assessed his congregation and concluded: "They didn't want to engage with God. They wanted relief and inspiration." He then went before the congregation and with tears repented that The Church of Joy had become a "dispenser of religious goods and services". Then he purged many of the frills that made his congregation stand out – talented professional musicians, square dancing classes, groups dedicated to visiting restaurants, card-playing evenings. It didn't take long for one third of the members and half of the staff to leave the church. (Becoming salty again is not an easy business.)

Six years later, the congregation had regained less than a quarter of those who left. But it had gained a sense that there was more to being a Christian congregation than being entertained spectators and satisfied consumers. As Kallestad put it: "It's time you grow up." (Salt can sting, too.)

Did you know that today there is a new "competitive missions market" on the American scene? It has spawned a growing industry of "outfitters" who seek to meet demand for short-term mission trips to places like Honduras, Nicaragua or Tijuana, Mexico. Those who are market participants are sometimes called "vacationaries". Mark Oestreicher, formerly a trainer of youth ministry leaders for Youth Specialties in El Cajon, CA, discovered that "Each of these groups will come in, do a vacation Bible school, and lead the same kids to Christ over and over again." (What will it cost to be salty in America today?)

The American lifestyle and culture values can overwhelm our churches, associations of churches, and individual Christians. Jesus said we are to be salt – the real thing. Real salt makes a difference; real salt can't go unnoticed; real salt affects anyone it touches; real salt can sting; real salt is transformational – ah, that's what Jesus meant about being real salt! The ability to transform, to make changes, to make better, to heal – these are Jesus' expectations of his church. (Can your saltiness be renewed?)

Prayer: Jesus, transform me, and my church, from being a "comfortable" box of salt, to a box of transforming salt. Amen.

Questions:

1. In what transformation ministries is your church engaged in your community?
2. With "10" being salt at its maximum, rate your church's saltiness on a scale of 1 – 10.
3. Rate yourself the same way.

Thought: You probably know this story very well. It's a fantastic illustration of what forgiveness is all about. But have you ever wondered what happened to the woman the next day? According to Jewish law, this woman should never have seen the light of the next day. The law demanded the execution of this woman, but Rome had removed capital jurisdiction from Jewish courts, except for temple violations. They were testing Jesus to see if he would reject the law, thus compromising his Jewish following, or reject Roman rule, which would allow them to accuse him to the Romans.

He wrote in the dirt, asked for the first stone to be thrown, and then wrote some more. Soon they were alone. She was told he did not condemn her, for she was forgiven. She was also told to go free, and not to sin again.

When she got up the next morning, how do you think she felt? Since what happened yesterday was a public event, every person in the village knew what had happened. All of the temple leaders knew the whole story. If she lived with family members, that's where she had to begin. Did they welcome her with open arms, glad her life was spared, and ready to help her begin her life again? When she went to draw water from the well outside of town, would the other women doing the same task speak to her, congratulate her on being alive, and offer to include her in the next kitchen conversation? If she chose to give thanks to God in the synagogue, would the temple priests allow her inside the door?

When someone has done wrong, and has been exonerated from the wrong-doing, and has turned over the proverbial "new leaf", can you forgive such a person, and be friendly, understanding and supportive? How do you think the neighbors of the bent woman whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath treated her the next day? (Luke 13: 10-17) If you had seen a person bent almost double for years on end, what would you say when you saw him/her walking as straight as you were? Do you suppose people were so mystified they didn't know what to say? Obviously she was changed, even if they didn't know what happened. Would you put your arms around her and shout "Praise God"? Would you congratulate her? Would you be-friend her?

Demon possession was a "disease" which led to shunning, distance, and removal from society. What do you suppose happened to the man possessed by demons after he was healed by Jesus and sent back to his community? (Mark 5: 1-20) No one had had anything to do with this man for years. He was viewed as being a "crazy" man, one with whom you wanted no contact. Yet, he came home. Did his family welcome him back into their home? Would the neighbors talk to him? Was his life in danger? How long did it take for him to ease back into a life with some degree of normalcy?

Of course, one of the biggest puzzles is about Lazarus after he was raised from the dead (John 11: 38-44). Do you suppose he was able to live a normal life in Bethany after returning from his death experience? If you met him on the street, what would you talk about? Would you ask him what he remembered from being dead? Or would you sort of meander to the other side of the street as he approached?

We know there were many rejoicing, welcoming friends in these stories; but we also know there must have been others who found the healed ones uncomfortable to live with, who felt threatened by what they represented, who felt envy because the healed were shown such favor, who felt too many rules were being broken by this man from Galilee, who felt unneeded and wished the healed one was back where he or she used to be, who felt left out, suspicious, scared, hostile.

Of one thing we can be certain: when Jesus touches a life, it will never be the same again – and neither will be the lives of all of those who touch that person's life. Think back to that moment, or that time when you opened your mind and heart to Jesus, and invited him in. What happened the next day? The next week? The next month? Remember – and celebrate the changes.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for being with us today, and as well, tomorrow. Amen.

Questions: 1. How easy is it for you to offer forgiveness to someone who has committed wrong-doing?
2. If you had been one of the forgiven persons above, how might you have felt the next day?

Thought: Jesus said to the disciples then, and to us today: “I have a gift for you...it’s called *peace*.” As you read these thoughts today, how much peace is present in your life? As well, how do you define peace? What did Jesus mean by “leaving peace with us”?

I climb Beaver Hill as my exercise hill whenever I get the chance. It’s a winding dirt road in a “peaceful” rural setting, with a steep climb that brings sweat in hot weather, and warm and pleasant feelings in cold. For many years, I’d see a fellow named Bob as I climbed. He drove an old, beat up pick-up truck that I could hear before I would see it. Once in awhile, he’d stop, and we’d chat a bit. One day he stopped to talk, and he told me he had been diagnosed with cancer, and it was incurable.

Months later he stopped again, and his facial features told me what was happening. He assured me he was O.K., he was ready to die, and he was at peace with both his family and with God. Three months later, he stopped once again, this time to tell me he had been talked into taking more chemo treatments, something he didn’t want to do, but his family had prevailed on him to do so. I didn’t see him for another six months, when once again, he stopped to talk. He said, “This is the worst thing I could have done – every day is hell itself – I have no hope for healing – I’ve lost the peace I once had.”

Another six months went by, and he stopped to talk once more. It had now been over a year since the chemo treatment had begun. He had a bit of a smile on his face when he said “It’s over – I’ve stopped the treatments – this has been over a year of hell for me – I can’t take it anymore – I’m at peace with life, and at peace with death – I’m ready to go – I’m relieved – I’m at peace with myself.” I never saw him again.

What is this thing called peace that Jesus left with us? The late Archbishop Oscar Romero said “Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamic. Peace is generosity.” For him, peace was merely doing what Jesus would do if he was here today.

Indian Christian missionary Sadhu Sundar Singh said: “It is easy to die for Christ. It is hard to live for him. Dying takes only an hour or two, but to live for Christ means to die daily. Only during the few years of this life am I given the privilege of serving both humanity and Christ.” For him, being a servant brought peace into his life.

First, what did Jesus mean? Then what do these different descriptions of peace say to you today? For a hungry child on any continent today, what is the meaning of peace? For the many who have reached the age of retirement without adequate resources to meet daily needs, how is peace to be described? Is it possible to know peace in such circumstances? For parents watching offspring become addicted with one of life’s temptations today, incapable of bringing about meaningful changes in the lives of their children, where can they find peace? For those in slavery, in bondage of all forms around the world today, how can those who are powerless and hopeless find peace? In a world society that is basically possessed with the accumulation of “things”, whether few or many, how is it possible to know peace such as Jesus described? Surely he wasn’t talking about attaining peace as long as we have many possessions, more than adequate financial resources, or good health.

This is one time on our journey where each of us needs to slip away alone, and ponder our inner soul. The other disciples on this journey don’t have answers for you. Each of us, alone, must ponder what we value in life, what are our hopes and dreams for now, and for the future. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would be available to help us in moments like this. Take some moments now, alone, and listen to what the Spirit of God would say to you about peace today.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the promise of peace; help me find it on my journey. Amen.

Questions: 1. What brings feelings of peace to you more than anything else?
2. In what ways are you and God’s Spirit on “talking terms”?

Thought: In all of Jesus' parables, only one character is named: the beggar Lazarus. The name means "God has helped". Do you find a bit of irony in the name? As you read the first part of the story, it would take a stretch of imagination to presume that this eyesore of a man was in any way helped by God. On the other hand, take a peek inside the rich man's house and you'll find countless indicators of what people think are God's blessings today: purple fabric from Tyre; Egyptian linen; tables spilling over with delicious foods; servants to do all of the preparation and clean up afterwards. Outside the house, most who saw Lazarus saw oozing sores that indicated he was ill, unfit, and un-blessed by a God of health, wealth and happiness.

The stage is set. They both die. The rich man was buried with great pomp. Lazarus didn't even have the dignity of a decent burial. Angels had to invisibly gather him into Abraham's bosom where his name suddenly fit! As you ponder this scenario, which of the two characters in the parable best resembles Jesus? Is Jesus telling this story? Or, is Jesus actually in the story?

I find it interesting that Mother Teresa framed her whole life around the notion that we see Christ "in the distressing disguise of the poor." Her Sisters of charity actually believe they touch the body of Christ when they help the poor. They pray while working, believing they are doing it *for* Jesus, and doing it *to* Jesus!

So, what is the real story? Is it about life today? Or is it about the afterlife? Although some would wish otherwise, there is no doubt the parable is about how we live today. This story is all about this life, and what we do or don't do with our wealth. The story clearly implies that if you ignore the poor, you will go to hell. You probably haven't heard it said so bluntly before, but that's exactly the point Jesus was making. To follow Christ, we are forbidden to indulge ourselves behind closed doors. To follow Christ, we have to get excited about the redistribution of wealth. In a world that is totally committed to getting, and getting more, it is probably repugnant enough for some to stop walking with this same Jesus to Jerusalem!!!

Are you able to stretch your theological imagination around the poor beggar at your door and see behind his eyes and beneath his wounds the storyteller himself, Jesus, in the disguise of the poor? The adventure of life with God is not a smooth path, with God automatically blessing our endeavors. The challenge of life with God is not merely being charitable, a little giving to help here and there, volunteering a few minutes in a spasm of generosity. According to Jesus, when the kingdom of God dawns, the rich will be bereft of all goods, and the poor will live in palaces. Do you suppose we could actually have life's meaning upside down?

What could the rich fellow have done? Would tossing some bills out the window now and then have saved him? Could he have made a little "to go" plate and had someone take it to the beggar now and then? Would God then have said "Well done, good and faithful servant?" Hardly. Jurgen Moltmann got it right when he said "The opposite of poverty is not property. Rather, the opposite of both is community." In 1942, Clarence Jordan attempted a shocking attempt in living the gospel by founding Koinonia Farm outside Americus, Ga. Among the many impacted by Jordan was Millard Fuller. He actually came to Koinonia by accident, trying to save his marriage. Wryly, Jordan suggested that "a million dollars can weigh awfully burdensome on a man." He suggested that Fuller was a "money-ac," that he was addicted to money.

Fuller got the message. He suddenly realized he was living his life completely in the wrong. He then founded the ministry called Habitat for Humanity which has engaged thousands of volunteers in building more than 200,000 homes in America and other places around the world. It is the opposite of poverty and the opposite of wealth – it is community. I think you know what Jesus would have you do with your life, time, possessions, and heart. Will you do it?

Prayer: Jesus, challenge us to take even a small step towards modeling more effectively whom you want your followers to be in today's world. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways could the rich man have addressed some of Lazarus' problems?
2. How can Christ's followers today live out the message of this parable?

Thought: The need for healing was as real throughout all of history as it is for us today. All we have to do today is call our doctor, or rush to the closest ER if there is an emergency. Not so in Jesus' day. There was a Pool of Bethesda, or Beth-zatha, or Bethsaida (choose whichever you like!) in Jerusalem. It was considered by locals and travelers to have medicinal or healing qualities.

In ancient Greece and Rome, an *asclepeion* was a healing temple, sacred to the god Asclepius. Starting around 350 BC, the cult of Asclepius became increasingly popular. Pilgrims flocked to asclepieia to be healed. They slept overnight ("incubation") and reported any dreams they had to a priest the following day. He described a cure, often a visit to the baths or a gymnasium. Since snakes were sacred to Asclepius, they were often used in healing rituals. Non-venomous snakes were left to crawl on the floor in dormitories where the sick and injured slept. (The next time you complain about your ER or hospital visit, remember what it used to be like!!!)

These healing places provided carefully controlled spaces conducive to healing and fulfilled several of the requirements of institutions created for healing. In an Asclepeion at Epidaurus, three large marble boards dated to 350 BC preserve the names, case histories, complaints and cures of 70 patients who came to the temple with a problem, and were healed there. Some of the surgical cures listed included such things as opening an abdominal abscess, removing traumatic foreign material from the body, and other cures. Patients were put into a dream-like state of induced sleep, not unlike anesthesia, induced in most cases with the use of substances such as opium.

The name of the Pool at Bethesda is derived from Hebrew and Aramaic languages. It can mean *house of mercy*, or *house of grace*. In both Hebrew and Aramaic, however, the word could also mean "shame, disgrace". This dual meaning may have been thought appropriate since the location was seen as a place of disgrace due to the presence of sick people, and a place of grace, due to the granting of healing.

The history of this particular pool began in the 8th century BC, when a dam was built across the short Beth Zeta valley, turning it into a reservoir for rain water. A sluice-gate in the dam allowed the height to be controlled, and a rock-cut channel brought a steady stream of water into Jerusalem. A century before Jesus arrived at the pool, natural caves to the east of the original pool were turned into small baths, as part of an asclepeion.

When Jesus arrived that day, the man had been sick longer than many people in antiquity lived; or about as many years as Israel had wandered in the wilderness. Ancient reports of healings often specified how long the person had been sick to emphasize the greatness of the healer's cure. It's rather obvious that nothing else, including this pool, had succeeded in restoring the man's health.

There was a prevailing superstition about these particular waters that promised the stirring of the waters brought special healing to those who could make their way in. But the man was alone, and in a cruel twist of irony, the race for a spot in the pool went to the able-bodied first. Of all the hopeless cases in the sanitarium, none rivaled his. How many nights did the man pray for a visit from Asclepius in his dreams? How many days did he lay there in the shadow of the temple, helplessly watching for the stirring of superstitious waters?

Jesus came. Jesus spoke. Jesus healed. Where Jesus is, there can be complete transformation!!! Can you imagine the amazement of those in the temple when, later in the day, this man who had not walked for over 40 years, walked easily among them? In one quick act, Jesus gave evidence that he was, indeed, greater than the Roman and Greek Gods, especially the god of healing, Asclepius. Rejoice in your own healing, whatever it may have been!!! Jesus is God!!!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for reaching out to the desperate, the hopeless, the hurting – through us! Amen.

Questions: 1. What evidence can you give that Jesus does, indeed, help and heal people today?
2. In what ways do you see Jesus/God impacting and touching lives today?

Thought: One day, when Jesus' band of followers were tired out, worried, bewildered and fearful of where everything was headed, he said to them: "Fear not, little flock, it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." What does one do when hope is in short supply, or doesn't exist at all? Yesterday, we read of a man who had for over forty years maintained a measure of hope that he could somehow get into those "healing" waters at just the right moment – and be healed. Yet it never happened.

Tell me, my fellow travelers to Jerusalem, how many of you would have clung to his thread of hope for fifteen thousand, six hundred ninety five days (and that doesn't count leap years!!!) Here are the numbers – 15,695 days!!! When would you and I have given up hope? How does one maintain a shred of hope when waiting such a long time?

A writer, Marilyn C. Mcentyre, told of finding a trove of letters written by a grandfather she never knew. During a particularly harsh winter in what was then the wilds of central Minnesota, he was pastoring a small church in an isolated town. Snowed in for several weeks, he and his family were down to the literal bottom of the barrel – no flour, no fresh food, and very little left that had been "put up" in the summertime. Having spelled out with remarkable matter-of-factness the extent of their dire situation, the letter ended with a sentence that took Marilyn by surprise: "How precious is it to wait on the Lord."

She tells of sitting with the letter lying on her lap for a long time, as she tried to "imagine how anxiety might be prayed into patience and patience distilled into a hope that might allow him, even in such dire days, to wake in trust and spend those cold days in expectancy undergirded by radical acceptance". In I John 3: 3, the writer suggests such hope purifies the heart.

How can we speak of hope to those in Japan who wonder with every breath, every bite, every brush with irradiated earth what they are doing to their bodies? Where is hope for those in Afghanistan or the Gaza strip whose homes have been destroyed by violence they are powerless to escape? Will there ever be hope realized by the people of Haiti, whose existence is a matter of bereavement, while they are landless and traumatized? At the age of 19, I was told by specialists that I had no more than six months to live. I had contracted the very disease that had killed my uncle at age 24. How does one find hope when the very ground on which you stand quivers and shakes? At least I could stand, was supposedly healthy, and anxious to get on with my educational agendas, etc. That fellow laying by the Pool of Bethesda for 43 years couldn't even stand up so he could have at least a bit of a chance to get into the so-called healing waters.

If you have some extra time, read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and jot down each time Jesus referenced hope. Most of you won't have the time to do that, so I'll solve that problem by telling you that you will not find one reference to hope by Jesus. That's right. Not one! Why not?

Because hope is relational. Hoping "in" is what faith is all about – not hoping "for". There is an old hymn that begins this way: "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." It is in the very person of Christ that hope is anchored, and whatever the outcome may be, that's not the point. It's the relationship that counts.

Did Jesus give hope to the man by the pool? No, Jesus did better than that – with a spoken word, he healed him, and gave him a new relationship with God. Did Jesus give the woman taken in adultery hope? No, he gave her forgiveness, and a new relationship with God. Did Jesus give the blind man hope that he would see again? No, he gave him sight – and a new relationship with God. The basic question is: Are you hoping "in"? Or are you hoping "for"? When you pray, are you more concerned about the "in" (relating to God), or the "for" (getting what you want or need)? Take hope.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for giving me a new life, through which I have all the hope in the world. Amen.

Questions: 1. Describe in realistic terms your relationship with Jesus today.
2. In what ways do you believe you are a hopeful person – and why?

Thought: If you're still reading these daily pieces, would it be correct to say you are a most persistent person? For most of us, life is rarely uneventful, without bumps along the way, as well as interruptions and surprises. Have you ever gone to a worship service, determined to worship, and when it was over, you felt as if it was a waste of time? Have you experienced trying to pray, and feeling as if you were talking to yourself, or as if God was on another planet? Have you ever prayed for something most meaningful, needed and desirable, and never got an answer?

In today's verses, Jesus' answer to these life experiences is "be persistent"! Keep at it. Keep knocking on the door at midnight. Keep on praying. Keep on walking. Keep making noise. Keep on searching. Keep on hoping. Keep on hanging on! After all, what baseball player gets a base hit every time he comes to bat? How many of the so-called "home run kings" hit a home run every game? How many basketball players score every time they shoot the ball at the hoop? How many golfers par every hole? None of them do. But rest assured they are persistent – they keep on trying – they win some and lose some – but they persist to succeed or win.

Before we go too far, please remember that this whole parable came about because the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. I doubt they expected this kind of response. As they listened to Jesus tell the parable, what do you imagine they were thinking? (Let's pretend that you were right there in that circle of disciples!). First, a man is banging on your door at midnight. The man says he's in a terrible fix. He has a friend who arrived at his house in the middle of the night, hungry after a long trip, "and I have nothing to set before him." If we were in such a situation today, and had nothing to feed the poor guy, we'd take him to an all-nite MacDonalds, the closest Pizza Hut, or an all nite beanery – anything to solve the problem.

But that's not the way it was back then. So, not having any of our current solutions at hand, he basically tells the fellow to "get lost". It doesn't work. Instead, the "intruder" bangs on the door all the harder, gets the telephone to ringing non-stop, sends text messages, leaves a voice-mail message, and by this time has all the kids awake and the wife, as well. In sheer frustration, he probably muttered "Though I care nothing for this man's predicament, and though I think the man is a pain in the neck to bother me in the middle of the night, I'll give him what he wants to get him out of my hair so I can get back to sleep!"

Who among us has time to be persistent – about anything? Why do most of us go through life with no more than one or two friends? Because to be a true friend, one must invest time – it takes time -- hours, months, and years of conversing with one another, being together, hearing stories about each other's life, and exploring the richness of another human being in order to be a true friend. It requires time. True, but it actually requires persistence!

By the way, have you ever "banged on God's door" at midnight? Have you ever been so concerned (so persistent!) about someone or something that you set aside sleeping, and pleaded with God for your concern? Do you persist in understanding God's words to us (the Bible) by reading passages again and again, asking questions of others, and literally pondering the meanings – or must you have your answers from the first reading? When facing a serious problem that's beyond your own capabilities, will you bang on God's door not once, but again and again – day and night?

Jesus' answer to the disciples' request to "teach us how to pray" can basically be summed up in two words: be persistent. As you are persisting in walking to Jerusalem, how do you rate your "persistent prayer life"?

Prayer: Jesus, there seem to be so many demands, so many agendas, and never enough time to do them all; please help me understand the need to be persistent in those things that are important. Amen.

Questions: 1. Make a list of times you have really persisted in "making a case" before God about a concern.
2. What would it take for you to become more persistent – about anything?

Thought: In Jesus' day, traveling teachers or speakers (Jesus was viewed as such) were regularly asked to speak in Synagogues on the Sabbath. There were no radios, TV's, cell phones, Ipods or other means of "instant" communication. Thus a "live" teacher was a special treat to the community. As well, by now (he was in his third year of ministry) Jesus had a reputation that preceded him wherever he went.

There was a woman present who was horribly bent over. In Jesus' day, medical writers used the term "loose" (v. 12) to describe a condition we now call curvature of the spine. Anyone dealing with this type of problem would stand out like the proverbial "sore thumb" because the bent over body was so obvious it couldn't help but draw attention.

When Jesus saw her difficulties in walking and living, he called her over, laid his hand on her, and suddenly she was standing straight and tall. She immediately began to "give glory to God". I wouldn't be surprised that you and I would have done the same thing. With lots of people around, one would think that there would have been all kinds of celebration over her healing. Not so – all because some rules were broken. The leaders of the synagogue had some problems with what he did. After all, he had broken their laws. Whose laws? They would have answered "God's laws". In reality, it was their own laws they were concerned about.

As you read today's verses, if you were asked what work did you see Jesus do, how would you answer? Did Jesus break their law when he placed his hand either on her arm or shoulder, and pronounced her to be free from her disease? Yes, so they said. "Laying his hand" on the woman was perceived to be work by many of them, and as such, he broke their law.

As well, you were only allowed to "work" six days of the week; on the seventh, you were to do nothing. In reality, though, this wasn't the case. You see, they found they had to bend their own laws just a tiny bit in order to be honest with life itself. Although they were not allowed to do any kind of work, yet they were permitted to take their cattle out of their stalls in the barns or enclosures, and lead them out for a drink!

Pharasaic rules also forbade being healed by anyone other than a physician. Everyone there knew Jesus wasn't a physician; he was a teacher. He wore the wrong label to be going around healing people. Also up for debate was saying a prayer on the Sabbath for someone who was sick. Can you imagine not being allowed to pray for someone in need during the course of a worship service on Sunday morning?

There are many reasons for liking this story. For me, however, first and foremost is the fact that Jesus practiced what he preached! If there is someone in need, he modeled for us that we need to do something about it. He didn't know this crippled woman; in fact, he assuredly had never seen her before during his years of ministry. It didn't matter. He also knew he would get into trouble if he did anything at all – there were those rules that the authorities would catch him with if he healed her. That didn't matter, either; he healed her, anyway. He also modeled for us that "God" is a caring God. He could just have easily gone on about his business of teaching, and left the healing to others. As the story is told, we don't hear the woman asking to be healed. Instead, Jesus (God) acted intentionally on her behalf to bring about healing. It's a good feeling to know that, at times, God acts on our behalf when we haven't asked for anything at all.

Not only was the woman healed, but Jesus, in a most public way, drove the wedge ever deeper between the established church and the purpose of his coming – to free all who would believe from bondage – whatever form it might take.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for reaching out to people in need, and for freeing us from the tyranny of unfair, unjust human laws. Amen.

Question: 1. Have you ever been "miraculously" healed – of anything? Did prayer to God, faith, friend, church, small groups, neighbor have anything to do with it? Make a list.
2. What are your "rules", if any, for Sundays that God gives to you?

Thought: “Increase our faith”. Have you ever wished you had more faith? Or, perhaps the question should be “How often have you wished you had a much deeper faith than you feel you have now?” Have you ever allowed yourself to think ahead five or ten years, and wonder if then, you will have a much stronger faith than you have today? Some people think that the longer you live as a Christian, the deeper your faith will be. Do you believe that? Does age make for greater faith?

Here we have the disciples asking for more faith. In a sense, one can’t blame them. Following Jesus around on a daily basis (nothing is said about days off, vacations, paid leave!) was time consuming, tiring, at times on the scary side, and other times, a business filled with confusion. They weren’t sure, even on a daily basis, where the day would take them. Neither did they have many clues as to where they were headed as followers of this Jesus.

The disciples felt they needed more faith, and asked Jesus to increase their faith for them. They were probably rather surprised to hear him say they didn’t need any more faith. Instead, he basically suggested that all they had to do was honestly use the faith they already had!!

The mustard seed was a very tiny seed, similar to our poppy seeds of today. They don’t come much smaller. Most scholars believe the plant Jesus referred to is the black mustard, a large annual plant that gained heights of nine or ten feet. Pliny, the Elder, in his *Natural History* published in 78 AD, wrote that “mustard...is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, although it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand, when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.” (Sounds very much like some things growing around my place!) Ben Witherington notes that Jesus could have used a genuine tree for the parable, and that the mustard plant demonstrates that “Though the dominion (reign of God) appeared small like a seed during Jesus’ ministry, it would inexorably grow into something large and firmly rooted, which some would find shelter in and others would find obnoxious and try to root out.”

The disciples had no problem understanding the size of the mustard seed, but they had plenty of difficulty in believing their own faith – that tiny seed of faith, as they saw it – could ever grow up like that.

When our granddaughter, Kenya, was about 5 years old, she would often stop by with her Mom. It rarely failed that when she came through the door and saw me, she would run as fast as she could, and jump into my arms. And I’d better be ready to catch her, or we were both going to tumble to the ground!

She was always wanting me to guess things, too, that she was all excited about, and for which I didn’t have a clue. One day she came through the door, and did her thing as she jumped into my arms. She was obviously bubbling over with excitement. “Pop Pop – Pop Pop, guess what?” Since I’d been through this many times before, and never once guessed the right thing, all I could do was play the game. When I gave up, she surprised me by saying “Two of my prayers were answered this week!” Her eyes were alive with excitement and glee as she waited for me to ask what they were. (...and no, she wouldn’t tell me until I’d asked, either!)

So I asked – and she told me of a woman she had been praying for who had cancer, and it had gone into remission that week. Then she told me of a married couple she had been praying for who had been dealing with severe marital problems. That week they had made an agreement to go to counseling together!

I guess Jesus was right – it’s not how much faith you have – it’s what you do with what you have!!!

Prayer: Jesus, help me use the faith I already have, for the sake of others, and to God’s glory. Amen.

Questions: 1. How can it be easier for a small child to have complete faith in God, with no doubts in the way at all – than it is for adults to believe God can, and will, do anything?
2. When you pray for “big ticket” concerns, what are your faith feelings?

Thought: Today it's faith, mustard seeds and mountains. Peter Marshall was one of America's greatest preachers. Here are some excerpts from one of his messages: *The Art of Moving Mountains*.

"...Now that is one of the most audacious claims (today's verse) about faith ever spoken. Does it strike you as overstated? Have you ever wondered why Christ chose this particular image – moving mountains – to illustrate the power of faith and prayer? He might have said something about mountain-climbing, but no, it is mountain-moving which is mentioned as the expression of a robust, virile and exuberant faith.

...For two thousand years, Christ's words have challenged us to think big – to be bold for him – to do great and audacious works in his name. Yet too often we do not believe his promises. And sometimes when our prayers are answered, we do not believe even then. We charge it off as coincidence. We search for what we call a "logical" explanation, for we do not want to be thought peculiar. How he grieves over our lack of faith!

But prayer is the key to Christian growth. Through prayer, God still works his miracles today just as he did when the first Christians had the audacity to think that they could convert the world. Do you remember when the Roman ruler of Judea – Herod Agrippa – decided to stamp out the fanatical band of men who were followers of the crucified Galilean by throwing their leader, Peter, into prison? Herod mounted a strong guard of soldiers to keep Peter in prison. Sixteen soldiers had charge of the prisoner. Two of them were chained to him, one on either side, and they occupied the cell with him. The others guarded the inner and outer doors of the prison – he could not escape.

Meanwhile, in a house in the city, in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, Peter's brethren were gathered. They were engaged in prayer. They had been praying all week. They were praying with passionate conviction for something specific. They were praying that Peter might be released from prison – that the Lord would somehow intervene on Peter's behalf. Peter was sorely missed. He was the leader.

Nearby in the prison – strange things were happening. Gates, chains, and guards could keep out friends and keep in prisoners, but they could not prevent the coming and going of the Lord's angels. An angel of the Lord appeared at Peter's side as he lay asleep, and a light that was not of men filled the prison. Peter was commanded to rise up – the shackles fell from him, and he stood free of the chains that had bound him, while his two guards continue to sleep. How was it done? We are not told. ...Still musing over the strange and wonderful thing that had happened, Peter walked through the streets, deserted and still, until he came to the house which served as a meeting place of the brethren. He knew he would find them there – praying!

Peter knocked for some time until a damsel came to the door, and hearing the voice of Peter, she became so overjoyed that she let him stand outside while she ran to tell the others the good news. Upon being told that their prayer was answered, they refused to believe it and told the girl that she was mad. Still she insisted Peter was outside. They next thought it must be his ghost, because Peter was in prison – they knew – and although they had prayed earnestly that the Lord should set him free – they had not expected anything like this. Maybe Herod had already killed him! They thought of every possibility – save that they had gotten what they had been praying for. The question naturally arises: Why were they praying at all? Their skepticism clearly demonstrated that they did not expect an answer. We are not much better today after nineteen centuries of practice in the art of prayer..."

There are plenty of "mountains" yet to be moved in this world today. But God knows so well that few of Jesus' followers are praying that they be moved. Instead, most of the prayers God hears today have to do with health, with problems and headaches, with strained relationships, with dying churches, and on and on. But God hears very little about moving mountains today.

Prayer: Jesus, I wish my faith was as big as a mountain – help it to grow big. Amen.

Questions: 1. What mountains have you taken on – and actually prayed that they be moved?
2. How do you rate your faith – do so, on a scale of one to ten – with 10 being mountain-sized.

Thought: I don't imagine these verses are among your favorites! You probably don't read them on a daily, or even a weekly basis. Why not? Because they predict tough times ahead. Note the repeated words: "they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planned, they built..." (v 28). In *The Message*, v 28: -- "...the people carrying on, having a good time, business as usual right up to the day..."

Although people came to listen to Jesus, he knew very well that only a few of them ever came to an understanding of who God is, that God loves and cares for the human race, and that with this God, for each person there will come a day of reckoning. Only a few had time to invest in "connecting" with God. Only a few sensed there is more to life than so many days, months and years. Have you talked with any of your earth travelling companions lately about this same God, about Jesus Christ and why he visited earth, about what will happen to them after they die? Consider some of the responses of fellow travelers you will hear if you ask these questions – some are quotes; some are illustrative.

- If God has a message for me, I have a cellphone; he can send me a text message – I don't have time to chase after a God I can't see.
- I have so much to do already that I don't have time to try to figure out God.
- I have a house, food on the table, three cars, and a retirement account – why do I need God?
- I'm healthy, have plenty, and don't have a care in this world – why do I need God?
- I'm 21 years old, with a lifetime ahead of me with all kinds of opportunities to do all kinds of things – I don't have any need for God.
- I used to go to church, but don't need to anymore. I never got anything out of it at all.
- I never met any saints when I went to church; those who attended were just as bad as those who never darkened the door of the church.
- More than once, I've asked God for something, and I never heard from God at all. I don't need a God like that.
- I have all kinds of plans for fun, adventure and excitement for years ahead – I don't have time for God in the foreseeable future.
- What with TV, sports, and never-ending entertainment, there isn't time to try to fit into my world a God I can't see.
- Science and innovation are more important to the human race today than your so-called God.
- The Bible doesn't make any sense to me at all; it's an old book, way out of date; I don't have time for such nonsense.

You've heard others, I'm sure. Even as Jesus attempted to communicate God's heart to those who would listen two thousand years ago, how do you communicate with your friends and neighbors today? Pick one of the above, and provide a response for that person.

Prayer: Jesus, help me be a better communicator of the urgency for all to seek out the Living God. Amen.

Questions: 1. Describe your own sense of urgency for people to discover the Good News of Jesus Christ.
2. How can Christians get their message of a loving God across to today's uninterested minds?

Thought: There are probably as many reasons why people don't try to reach out to God, to pray, to worship as there are people. Many people think that only those who stand behind pulpits have the ability, the right words, the passion to pray. Of course, they're quite wrong. Every last one of us can pray, and God has never given any grades to pray-ers! Richard Foster tells of a friend of his who was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything he could to quiet his son, but nothing helped. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, the father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went through the store, and into another. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme.

The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his boy into the carseat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

Many people don't pray because they grade themselves poorly for their effort. Yet there is no grading system with prayer. In earlier devotionals, I have challenged people to "pray out loud". Just say what comes to your mind, and that's all you need to do. There's another way to "do" praying – write out your prayers. Rachel Hackenberg tells of her devotional habit of keeping a pen handy to her at all times. While eating with others in a restaurant, she penned this prayer on a napkin: "God, bless me with a word, or else bite my tongue to stay silent". She tells of jotting down her prayers while in the coffee shop, while watching her kids' soccer practices, while sorting through utility bills and recycled homework papers. Here is one of her written prayer offerings as she considered the different images of God she uses in her daily life:

"O God,
if I call you Father,
will you please watch over me and those in my house,
and guard us like a watchman at night?"

O God,
if I call you Mother,
may I curl up next to you when I have nightmares,
and will you soothe me when I'm sick?

O God,
if I call you Savior,
will you rescue me during hard times
and keep me from rebellion?

O God,
if I call you Lover,
will you keep me company through thick and thin
and encourage my best self?

And God,
if I confess you are beyond naming,
will you please be greater than me and beyond my understanding,
so that things I cannot fathom but so desperately want --
lion-and-lamb peace, feeding miracles by the millions,
tears-into-joy justice -- can be conceived and built by your imagination?
Will you please be holy so that I can be human,
to the best of my ability?"

Perhaps Jesus also said "Take up your pen, and pray!"

Prayer: Jesus, teach me how to pray – whatever it takes! Amen.

Questions: 1. How long has it been since you prayed to God in a new or different way?
2. Are you willing to make a promise to God to communicate in a new way by (date)?

Thought: I met someone yesterday whom I am certain will be seated at God's head table when the time of the eternal banquet arrives. I was coming off my Beaver Hill exercise hike when I saw two women walking on the creek road toward me. I raised my hand in greeting, but the older of the two stopped me with a "Hi, I haven't seen you in a long time". Then I remembered I used to see her walking the dirt road beside French Creek, always accompanied by one or two persons with obvious disabilities.

She wanted me to meet her friend, Jaryl. I said "hi"; she said nothing. A hint of a smile appeared on her face as she turned to me. That was all. I said some greeting kinds of things to her, but there was no response. She can't talk. She walks with difficulty, shuffling her feet on the dusty road. She turns her head ever so slowly. She's a bit stooped in her upright position. She can't run. She can't smile. She can't laugh out loud. She can't use a cellphone. She can't dress herself.

What I wanted more than anything else as we stood there on that dusty road was to be Jesus – to touch her and make her whole – to speak a word, and see her healed – to mix the dust from the road with water from French Creek and place it on her face for wholeness – to be her friend. Jesus said if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can do these kinds of things. As much as I don't want to admit it, my faith has to be smaller than a mustard seed. Isn't that awful?

Her caregiver talked with me awhile, as Jaryl stared off into space. She had changed jobs since we last saw each other, and only occasionally can she bring her client to the dusty road beside the creek. After I left them, I had some other thoughts about Jaryl. Although "adult-size", Jaryl is only a child. Children, and child-like faiths are the residents of heaven. Jaryl's mind is less than that of a normal child, whatever the age. Jaryl has a tag on her – it says "heaven bound".

You see, I believe in, and worship a compassionate God. The heart of God aches for every person on the globe who is undeveloped in any way, whose mind is less capable than others, who is disadvantaged in any way, who as an adult still thinks as a child, who is unjustly treated, who is in bondage in today's so-called "free" world. The word "passion" is derived from the Latin verb, *patior*. It means "to undergo". It is related to the word "passive". As he walked the dusty roads of Palestine, Jesus was in an "action" stage. For three years he went from village to village, town to town, preaching, teaching, responding to people's questions, healing the sick, confronting the hypocrites, consoling the sorrowing, calling the dead back to life. Wherever he went there were large crowds of people admiring him, listening to him, asking him for help. He came and went as he felt it was right for him to do.

In a few short weeks, as we walk and remember with Jesus, we will come to a place called Gethsamane. In the Garden of Olives, all this action came to a sudden end. There Jesus was handed over by one of his own disciples to undergo suffering. That's where his passion began. From that moment on, Jesus could no longer *do* anything; everything was done to him. He was arrested, put in prison, led before Herod and Pilate, flagellated, crowned with thorns, given a cross to carry, stripped of his clothes, nailed on a cross, and ridiculed until he died. He could no longer act. He was only acted upon. It was pure passion.

The great mystery of Jesus' life is that he fulfilled his mission not in action, but in passion, not by what he did but by what was done to him, not by his own decisions but by other people's decisions concerning him. It was when he was dying on the cross that he cried out, "It is fulfilled."

Jaryl's future is already determined – she's heaven bound. Why? Because our God is a God of compassion, whose death totally covers every person born with the inability to understand God's gift of life to the world. Jesus loves Jaryl just like she is – now, and ever after.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your compassion for those who never had a chance to know...the truth. Amen.

Questions: 1. Are there any "Jaryls" in your life? If so, what are your feelings toward them?
2. At which table do you think you will be sitting at that last and final banquet?

Thought: Yesterday we noted Jesus' compassion so vividly portrayed in the events leading to the cross, and his death that "finished" his task. During the three years of his ministry, Jesus modeled compassion in an assortment of ways. Today's verse is just one of his many parables, which often reflected compassion in some way. At times he amazed his disciple followers with his ability to be compassionate. He wanted his followers to do the same.

Here is a story (author unknown) that illustrates human compassion, far beyond the so-called norm for human beings.

"It was a few weeks before Christmas, 1917. The beautiful snowy landscapes of Europe were blacked by war.

The trenches up one side held the Germans and on the other side the trenches were filled with Americans. It was World War 1. The exchange of gunshots was intense. Separating them was a very narrow strip of no-man's land. A young German soldier attempting to cross the no-man's-land had been shot and had become entangled in the barbed wire. He cried out in anguish, then in pain he continued to whimper.

Between the shells all the Americans in that sector could hear him scream. When one American soldier could stand it no longer, he crawled out of the American trenches and on his stomach crawled to that German soldier. When the Americans realized what he was doing they stopped firing, but the Germans continued. Then a German officer realized what the young American was doing and he ordered his men to cease firing. Now there was a weird silence across the no-man's-land. On his stomach, the American made his way to the German soldier and disentangled him.

He stood up with the German in his arms, walked straight to the German trenches and placed him in the waiting arms of his comrades. Having done so, he turned and started back to the American trenches.

Suddenly there was a hand on his shoulder that spun him around. There stood a German officer who had won the Iron Cross, the highest German honor for bravery. He jerked it from his own uniform and placed it on the American, who walked back to the American trenches. When he was safely in the trenches, they resumed the insanity of war!"

Mother Teresa had this to say about compassion: "Compassion begins today. Today somebody is suffering, Today somebody is in the street, today somebody is hungry. Our work is for today, yesterday has gone, tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today to make Jesus known, loved, served, fed, clothed, sheltered. Do not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow we will not have them if we do not feed them today."

To further illustrate the point she was making, she told of an event in her life: "Sometime ago a woman came with her child to me and said: 'Mother, I went to three places to beg for food, for we have not eaten for three days but they told me that I was young and I should work and earn my living. No one gave me anything.' I went to get some food for her and by the time I returned, the baby in her arms had died of hunger."

It is a well established fact that those who have less always give more. In a world that is possessed not only with getting, but getting more, where is compassion to be found? Obviously it's an individual matter. But for those who follow Jesus, it's more than that. Jesus expects us to reflect his own passion for a world in need of being saved. How often do you have compassionate feelings – and act on them?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the ultimate in compassion – you gave your life for the world. Amen.

Questions: 1. Remember a time when you exhibited compassion for someone.
2. Make a short list of people to whom you could show compassion of some kind.

Thought: Yesterday, you read several quotes from Mother Teresa. Her name is well known around the world as one who was totally compassionate to the poor, the helpless, the needy. Few, however, know the story of how she lived her life in order to follow her Jesus as a compassionate disciple.

Even in her later years, she was up at 4 a.m. every day. She was already in the chapel before the Sisters got up at 4:30 a.m. She prayed for awhile, and followed the mass which started for the whole community at 6 a.m. She always ate very little; towards the end, hardly anything, other than a few biscuits soaked in tea.

Her small room served as her office, and was the hottest in the house, being situated just above the kitchen. There was a small window there, but she would not have a fan. So, in the hot months, it was a very uncomfortable room to be in for any reason at all.

She prayed and worked the whole day, writing letters until late into the night – this was after she had suffered three heart attacks. She said “God’s greatest grace to me has been to send me suffering so that I could be similar to Jesus dying on the cross out of love for us.”

How does one develop such a passion for people? Teresa is her name to the world. At home she was called Agnes, her baptismal name. Agnes Bojaxhiu, daughter of Nicolas and Rosa, sister of Agata and Lazarus, was born on August 26, 1910. The Bojaxhiu family belonged to the Albanian minority living in Serbia, Yugoslavia. The young Agnes never set foot in Albania. In 1920, at age 10, she went to study in a state secondary school in Croatia. She heard about India and the work of the Catholic missionaries in West Bengal. What she heard made her wish to come to Bengal as a missionary. Learning that the Loreto nuns from Ireland worked in Calcutta, she went to Dublin to apply to join them. At age 18 she left home and travelled to Ireland to become a novice of Loreto. She was well received there, and soon was sent as a young novice to the missions in India.

She began to teach at St. Mary’s high school in Calcutta, and later became the headmistress of the school. On September 10, 1946, which was observed by her congregation as “Inspiration Day”, as she travelled by train to Darjeeling, Teresa *was told by Jesus* “I want you to serve Me among the poorest of the poor”. This message, inspiration, calling, whatever it was changed her life. She knew she had to leave Loreto and her teaching, and devote her life to work and prayer among the very poor.

Two years later she took a crash course in medical aid at the hospital of the American Medical Missionaries Sisters. On returning to Calcutta, she began to work in the slums. In February, 1949, Teresa was welcomed by Mr. Michael Gomes who put at her disposal first a room, then the entire top floor of his large house. On March 19, a young lady who later took the name of Agnes, came to tell her “I want to join you”. She said “It will be hard”. She answered “I know. I am prepared.” This was the beginning of the Missionaries of Charity, the name she had chosen for those who worked with her.

In joining “orders”, candidates took the vows of religion, namely poverty, chastity and obedience. But Teresa added a fourth vow of “wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor.” Most of you know the rest of her story of showing compassion to the poorest of the poor in ways the world had never seen before. And through it all, she referenced her model, Jesus, as the one who not only called her to such a compassionate ministry, but who expected such obedience.

As you contemplate your own journey, has Jesus ever called you to be compassionate, to model in ways you’ve perhaps never dreamed about touching the lives of people in need? Ponder – on the way to Jerusalem.

Prayer: Jesus, plant a seed of compassion in me that I’ve never known before. Amen.

Questions: 1. Why aren’t there a lot more Mother Teresa’s in the world today?
2. In what ways do your church exhibit Jesus’ call for compassion to the world’s needy?

Thought: Jesus touched lives, in many ways. Once in a while he used a physical touch. Other times, he touched people with special words and messages. He often went out of his way to touch people's lives. He allowed himself to be interrupted, and at times, physically worn out because people needed to be touched in a variety of ways. He also allowed people to touch him. In spite of his "busyness", his main business was touching the lives of people, whoever they were.

Neither was he selective in his touching. He touched both poor and rich, and those in the middle. He touched young and old. He touched men and women. He touched so-called "good" people, and he touched those who were labeled as "bad" people. He touched synagogue folks, and he touched lives that never went inside of the synagogue. He touched leaders, and he touched followers. He touched clean, and he touched dirty.

He also asked those he called to be his followers to be ready to touch the lives of people. In today's reading, the disciples tried to do that very thing, but were totally frustrated. So was the father who brought his son to be freed from the evil spirit. At least the disciples didn't have to go looking for someone whose life needed to be touched – the father bought his son to them.

The greatest challenge of this century for the church of Jesus Christ is to do just what he wants us to do – touch the lives of people. He didn't ask us to bring them to church, nor did he ask us to help them become members. He solely asks us to touch the lives of people – in his name – that he himself can become available to yet another life. In our busy, wired, touch-less society, it isn't easy to do this anymore.

A long-time friend shared a story with me recently, and I asked if I might share it with you as an illustration of "going out of the way" to try to touch the life of someone who was hurting. She reluctantly agreed, and I thank her for sharing. Norma Koth told me of going to a viewing the week she wrote me. A young widow, Joan, had now lost her father. As Norma walked into the funeral home, no one was there with them. She told how she "hurt for them" in their aloneness. You see, Norma had been with Joan when her husband, Ed, died – Joan had called with the news at midnight – and Norma and Bud (hubby) immediately went to be with her.

Ed had suffered from cancer for a long time. They went to Mexico to try an alternate treatment. Joan called Norma one night from Mexico, and she prayed with her on the phone. They left Mexico to come home via California, but Ed became too sick to travel and was hospitalized. They were in a town where they were totally alone, not knowing a soul. Norma, concerned for what they were facing, and while they were totally without friend or family, called the hospital in that town and asked the number of the nearest Methodist Church. The operator provided the number, and when Norma dialed, a "live" person answered the phone, which thrilled her. She asked if there was someone in their church who could go to the hospital, reach out in love to them, let them know they were not alone, and pray with them. They said they would be pleased to do this.

Joan told of looking up towards the door, and seeing a lady standing in the doorway holding a rose for her. The rose had come from her own garden. "I remember looking up and seeing folks in the doorway of Ed's room. They said, 'I understand you are here alone; we are here for you. They were like angels'". The couple visited every day that Ed was at that hospital – God moments, for sure.

Ed died, and now her Dad had passed away. He was ill for some time, and Joan wanted to care for him – and lost her job in the process. As I write this, she is trying to get unemployment, and find a new job -- very much alone. But Norma is still standing with her, and praying for her. And now I've been enlisted as a prayer partner. You see, even if a person is on the other side of the world, and you care, and act, there are ways to touch hurting, lonely, sometimes desperate people. This is what Jesus calls us to do.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to slow down, consider those who hurt, and reach out and touch a life. Amen.

Questions: 1. When was the last time you went "out of your way" to touch someone else's life for Jesus?
2. What is holding you back from doing what Jesus wants you to do?

Thought: Not many days remain for Jesus to walk the dusty roads of Palestine. Jerusalem is just over the next hill. Jesus knew that in only a few weeks, his group of followers would be left alone – without his leadership. He also knew that what was waiting for them was going to be difficult, challenging, and even life-threatening.

Are you aware of the fact that historians now estimate that more people have been martyred for Christ in the past fifty years than in the church's first three hundred years? The word *martyr* means “witness”, or “blood witness”, and is used as such throughout the New Testament.

Contrary to some current thinking, the idea of martyrdom did not originate with the Christian church. It was inspired by the passive resistance of pious Jews during the Maccabean revolt of 173-164 B. C. Antiochus IV, the tyrannical Seleucid king, ignited the revolution by a variety of barbarous acts, including banning Palestinian Jews from religious practices such as circumcision. Stories abounded of steadfast Jews, such as Eleazar the scribe, who chose torture and death rather than violate the Law by eating pork.

Less than 40 years after Jesus' resurrection, the Jewish war of A.D. 70 saw thousands become martyrs for their faith rather than capitulate to Roman paganism. What happened to the Jews helped to shape the early Christian stance on martyrdom.

Not all Jews, however, followed Eleazar's lead. Leaders such as Judas Maccabeus instead chose to be avenging rebels, and often carried out “guerilla” raids against the establishment. What prompted the disciples, and most Christians to emulate the passive resisters, rather than to be armed revolutionaries like Judas Maccabeus?

The answer to that question lies in the person of Jesus himself. The disciples, and the early church understood martyrdom as an imitation of Christ. Jesus was the example of nonviolence at his own trial and execution, declaring that his servants would not fight because his kingdom was not of this world. Can you not hear Jesus' words repeated, again and again, in the decades after his death and resurrection? Consider:

- “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also...” Luke 6: 29
- “...do not resist an evil person.” Matthew 5: 39
- “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...” Matthew 5: 10
- “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” John 15:20

Paul and other New Testament authors sustained and developed the theme that followers of Christ were to suffer, not fight, for their Lord. A believer's weapons were not composed of iron or bronze but were made of sterner stuff! (Ephesians 6: 13) Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died a Christ-like death, praying earnestly for his tormentors. Eusebius, the church historian, called Stephen “the perfect martyr”; thus he became a prototype for all martyrs to follow.

As Jerusalem looms before us as we walk through Lent, try to grasp some of the serious, life-threatening implications Jesus was trying to convey to his followers – and to those who follow centuries later. As a Christian, consider this question: Could the depth of my faith ever make me a martyr?

Prayer: Jesus, may my faith be sufficient for whatever life testing that may yet await me. Amen.

Questions: 1. When on your life journey has your faith in Jesus Christ been most tested?
2. Even though you don't know who they are, do you pray daily to God on behalf of those whose lives are now threatened because they follow Jesus?

Thought: We've now been walking with Jesus to Jerusalem for over a month. I know that some of you (because you've told me!) are diligent, faithful readers every day. I also know that some of you (again, because you've told me!) miss some days, catch up some days, and keep at the task, although not a daily reader. In most of our lives, many things happen to us on a daily basis. Sometimes at the end of a week, it's hard to recall the multitude of things that occurred during the week just ended.

So it was with the disciples. Nothing stayed the same for them. Every day brought a new experience to them, in almost every case something they had never experienced before. Some days were, no doubt, pleasant days. Other days were inevitably troubling. Where was Jesus going? Why can't he communicate better with us, instead of using parables all the time? Some of it we get – and some of it makes no sense at all, so they muttered.

During his walk to Jerusalem, Jesus was doing many things. He taught, he healed, he encouraged, he chastised, he walked, he prayed, he waited for his rendezvous with a cross. Pretty much unknown to the disciples, he was doing something else, too. During these three years, they were involved in a crash training course on taking over the leadership to bring God's Good News to the whole world. God had made a decision to entrust the Good News to that tiny band of followers in Palestine. He was going to leave the world soon, and the disciples would manage the Good News movement. Well, not exactly. Jesus wanted them to "care-manage" the Good News. That means they would be disciples with a *passion* for the Good News. It meant they would go beyond the ordinary, on God's behalf.

A friend of mine in New England, Lou George, told this story of what managing with a passion is all about. "My dad died from a heart attack when I was 10 years old. My mother had five children to raise, aged 7 months to 15 years, and there was no insurance of any kind. We lived hand to mouth. Making ends meet was tough. One evening when I was in 9th grade, I was standing with a group of my friends on a corner in town, doing not much of anything. As we were talking, a local merchant came down the street to check his store and get a cup of coffee at the restaurant next door. He always chatted with us on such occasions. Before he left, however, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Louie, your mother needs help raising your two younger sisters. You come to work for me on Monday after school." I said "Sure, Joe," and we all laughed.

I talked with my mother that evening about the conversation, and she encouraged me to take the job, not so much to help her but to earn some spending money for myself. So, on Monday after school, I showed up at Joe's clothing store and started what was to be 4 years of work there, at the sum of 25 cents an hour!

I still remember my first payday. Joe called me to the office for my pay. I was surprised to receive four pay envelopes instead of one. He told me how many hours I'd worked and how much money I'd earned. Then he handed me the first envelope. It was marked 'Tithe'. The second envelope had the word 'Savings' written on it. The third was marked 'Your Mother', and the fourth was marked 'Yourself'. I asked what this was all about (Remember? The disciples kept asking Jesus what it was all about, too!!!) He said 'If you don't learn how to manage your money when you earn a small amount, you will never learn when you earn a lot. I am taking money from each week's pay and putting it into a savings account in the bank in your name. I hired you so you could help your mother with your two little sisters, so I've set some aside for her. You need some spending money for yourself, and that's there. But there is also your tithe to your church. I am a Jew – I tithe because the law demands it. You are a Christian – does grace expect any less?'"

Two thousand years after the disciples did a fantastic job of care-managing the Good News, how much passion do you have today for your own role in care-managing God's Good News for the world?

Prayer: Jesus, remind me once again of the importance of your Good News for the world. Amen.

Questions: 1. How much passion do you have for sharing God's Good News with others today?
2. What one thing could you do during Lent to share with someone the Good News?

Thought: Early in his ministry, the disciples asked him to help them pray better, and he gave them what we call “The Lord’s Prayer”. In today’s verse, he suggests we should often pray to God to “...deliver us from evil” – or as some translations say, “the evil one”. When you pray this part of the prayer, just what do you mean?

If you respond by saying you aren’t too sure, you certainly would be in good company. The word *evil* is found 627 times in the 66 books of the Bible. It is found 45 times in the Gospels, and 88 times in the rest of the New Testament. During Jesus’ three years of so-called public ministry, do you think Jesus became more and more aware of evil? As the disciples neared the end of their three-year journey with Jesus, do you think they were more aware of evil than when the journey began?

A friend of mine recently wrote that with each day’s news, the feeling was that there is little hope left for the world. “Evil is taking over in every aspect of life today, and good people are helpless to do much about it.” Do you ever have days when your thinking might be similar?

Today’s morning local paper had as its lead headline: “...Man Charged With Raping 13 Month Old Baby”. This ugly story wasn’t alone. I debated listing the rest of the items in one day’s news that reference in one way or another the word “evil”, but it would fill the rest of this page. Last year, I was part of a small group that invested significant time in an intensive study of the word *evil*. We surely learned a lot; at the same time, we learned that a solid grasp of what evil is in today’s world is most difficult to come by, or to agree upon.

How did people think about the subject of evil before the Genesis account was available? There is a Babylonian creation myth called Enuma Elish, in which the god Marduk establishes himself as king over the gods by defeating Tiamat, the chaos monster. There is also an important surviving work from Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennia before Christ in which the hero, Gilgamesh, suffers as he searches for immortality and founds a city. Then there is the Genesis account.

Why do evil and suffering exist in today’s world? What can a follower of Jesus Christ do about them?

What were the sources of evil that impacted Jesus every day of his three year ministry? Probably one of the earliest dealings with evil is found in his forty day wilderness adventure with Satan, in person. In the confrontation, Jesus made some choices – and in each case, he chose God. Early in his ministry, he was made quickly aware that the leaders of the Jewish synagogue would not allow him to “preach a new gospel” without incurring the wrath of the temple itself! Evil, personified in temple leadership, grew in size and volume for three years – and finally, evil triumphed on a hill named Golgatha.

Or did it? Followers of Jesus know full well that the tomb was empty three days later. Even the temple leaders knew that. Roman leadership was satisfied when it was determined he was dead. Some of them laughed when they heard about a possible resurrection; some, however, weren’t so sure what had really happened.

Two thousand years later, we are aware of evil in almost every aspect of life. Most would agree there seems to be more of it than ever before. I find the words of Jesus in John 3: 19-21 as the best approach for us today: “This is the crisis we are in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light, and won’t come near it. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is!” (The Message). That’s it!!! We’re to be God-light, no matter how evil the world is or becomes!

Prayer: Jesus, shine through me so that even the evil of the world will see your God-light. Amen.

Questions: 1. What is your thinking about evil in the world today?
2. What are some ways that followers of Christ can confront evil today?

Thought: When was the last time you heard a sermon on this parable of Jesus? Most of you will not remember the last time; and many of you have never heard it addressed. Without a doubt, it is the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand. With unusual candor, most commentators admit to being puzzled by this dicey parable.

A friend tells the story of when he was five years old, his father was getting ready to spank him. Dad told him "Now son, this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you." To his five-year old mind, this didn't make much sense and he said "Wait a minute! You're going to spank me, but it's going to hurt you more than it's going to hurt me, and *I'm* the one who did something wrong?" His Dad fell into his trap by saying "That's right." The boy responded with "Why don't you let me spank you, and then I would suffer properly?" He said his father didn't think much of his way of thinking; he didn't get an extra week's allowance either, but instead, got a worse spanking!!!

In Luke's story, if you can follow along the lines of the above story, I'm the kid who has done wrong, but comes up with this ingenious idea, and God doesn't give me a harder spanking, but is merciful, and says "Well done!" At least a part of the understanding of this parable comes from historical background. As a result of the demands of King Herod, most of the former rural property owners had lost their independence. Obligated to mortgage their goods in order to pay the taxes, they were thereby reduced to half-slavery. The obligations in kind, in oil and wheat, which they paid to their masters often amounted to half or more of their harvests.

The peasant situation in Israel was aggravated by another plague: the absenteeism of the owners. A hierarchy of in-between managers contracted for the collecting of debts. They extorted from the sharecroppers arbitrary sums which widely exceeded the rent, debt and taxes which were really due.

But the poor were always wrong. They had no recourse because the collectors presented fraudulent accounts to their masters, which permitted them to accumulate in very few years what Jesus called "unrighteous wealth." It was by pursuing without end this kind of ill-gained wealth that the collectors completely lost "real wealth", namely the friendship, respect and honest caring of their fellow citizens.

The parable says, however, that there's even more to the story above. One day, somehow, an absentee owner discovered the dishonesty of his own manager. Not content only to cheat the sharecroppers, this manager was also stealing from his employer to whom he presented falsified records. Now that his cheating had been fully discovered, the manager felt a guilty conscience. He understood that he would never be able to pay back the amount of his embezzlement. But he decided that at least he would not demand from the sharecroppers the big sums by which he had increased their obligations. He therefore restored to his debtors the unjust excess of the debt which they were supposed to owe him.

This is what Jesus declared in conclusion: "Practice the jubilee which I am announcing. By liberating others from their debts to you, liberate yourself from the bonds which keep you from being ready for the kingdom of God." What Jesus is really saying is 'You're all running out of time – the Kingdom will soon be here – shed yourselves of anything, everything that is keeping you from being completely ready to go into the Kingdom'. In a world where "money is king", this really hurts. Almost everyone is intent on getting as much as one can, or getting more, anyway one can. Jesus calls on us to get smart – instead of buying that new coat, next time buy one for someone who really needs it. Only pay your electric bill when you, at the same time, help someone else pay theirs. When you buy another car, give away the "old" one. For each meal you prepare or eat, always set aside one food item to take to a food pantry the next time you go. Change your ways, Jesus said, and He'll tell you, too – "Well done!"

Prayer: Jesus, help me know what really counts in your coming Kingdom. Amen.

Questions: 1. How much are you accumulating that you don't really need for your journey?
2. What can you "give away" in order to be a manager who will be told "Well done!"?

Thought: I suppose the disciples thought they already loved Jesus enough, but then he told them that the test for such love was that they had to love each other so much that people would take notice. As they walked those dusty roads following him around, do you think that those who looked on and listened gave a thought to the disciple's care for each other? Doesn't matter – this was the test. Their love was going to be graded – by God – as to its authenticity. What does this say to us today? Are we going to be “graded” at the end of our journey – by our love for each other, in Christ? I don't like tests – never did – do you?

Max Lucado tells this story about a test for love. “John Blanchard stood up from the bench, straightened his Army uniform and studied the crowd of people making their way through Grand Central Station. He looked for the girl whose heart he knew, but whose face he didn't, the girl with the rose. His interest in her had begun thirteen months before in a Florida library. Taking a book off the shelf he found himself intrigued, not with the words of the book, but with the notes penciled in the margin. They reflected a thoughtful soul and insightful mind. He found the former owner's name in the front of the book, Ms. Hollis Maynell.

With time and effort, he located her address. She lived in New York City. He wrote her a letter introducing himself and invited her to correspond. The next day he was shipped overseas for service in WW II. During the next 13 months the two grew to know each other through the mail. Each letter was a seed falling on a fertile heart. A romance was budding, so it seemed. He asked her for a photograph, but she refused. She felt that if he really cared, it wouldn't matter what she looked like.

“When the day finally came for him to return from Europe, they scheduled their first meeting – 7:00 PM at the Grand Central in New York. ‘You'll recognize me,’ she wrote, ‘by the red rose I'll be wearing on my lapel.’ So at 7:00 he was in the station looking for a girl whose heart he loved, but whose face he'd never seen. Blanchard told what happened this way: A young woman was coming toward me, her figure long and slim. Her blonde hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were as blue as flowers. I started toward her, entirely forgetting to notice that she was not wearing a rose. As I moved, a small provocative smile turned her lips, ‘Going my way, sailor?’ she murmured.

Almost uncontrollably I made one step closer to her, and then I saw Hollis Maynell. She was standing directly behind the girl. A woman well past 40, she had graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump, her thick-ankled feet thrust into low-heeled shoes. The girl in the green suit was quickly walking away. I felt as though I was split in two. So keen was my desire to follow her, and yet so deep was my longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned and upheld mine.

And there she stood. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible, her gray eyes had a warm and kindly twinkle. I did not hesitate. My fingers gripped the small worn blue leather copy of the book that was to identify me to her. This would not be love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even better than love, a friendship for which I had been and must ever be grateful. I squared my shoulders and saluted and held out the book to the woman, even though while I spoke I felt choked by the bitterness of my disappointment. “I'm Lt. John Blanchard, and you must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad you could meet me; may I take you to dinner?”

The woman's face broadened into a tolerant smile. ‘I don't know what this is about, son,’ she answered, ‘but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should go and tell you that she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test.’” Blanchard passed his “love test”. What will be your grade when you are given God's final “love test”?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to love you better, and to love others far more than I do now. Amen.

Questions: 1. In simple, meaningful words, describe your love for Jesus on this walk to Jerusalem.
2. Describe the love you have for others who are followers of the Christ.

Thought: Some of you may have wrestled with yesterday's question about your grade when God gives that final "love test". But most probably didn't, and especially if you're male!!! Other than the "trash" love of TV and the media, not much meaningful is said to address the fullest meaning of the word. Very few people are willing to share their deepest feelings about the subject of love. Even fewer people invest time thinking about their love for God, and trying to put those feelings into words. It isn't easy.

For instance, for several years I have encouraged readers to get off someplace where you can be completely alone for a while, and begin to pray silently. After a few minutes, begin to talk with God using spoken words. Say whatever you will – then reach the point in your sincerity and authenticity that you tell God – out loud – that you love God with all your being. Expressing love to each other isn't easily done, and for many people, is rarely or never done. Expressing love to God is rare, even by God's most faithful followers.

While writing yesterday's devotional, I received an email from a friend that addressed the subject of love – from the viewpoint of small children!!! Perhaps we can learn from children how to say from the mind and heart what's really there about love. I couldn't resist sharing some of them with you. Enjoy!!!

- "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents – and listen." (Bobby – age 7)
- "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate." (Nikka- age 6)
- "Love is what makes you smile when you're tired." (Terri – age 4)
- "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know your name is safe in their mouth. (Billy – age 4)
- "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of yours." (Chrissy – age 6)
- "Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford." (Chris – age 7)
- "My Mommy loves me more than anybody. You don't see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night." (Clare – age 6)

For most of us, it's difficult to peel away the layers of life's veneering that, as the years go by, slowly encase our child-like feelings in what we call "maturity" – and our real feelings are unable to ever escape into our real world. The truth of the matter is that we assume God, and assume our feelings for God are good enough just as they are. In God's sight, that's wrong thinking. God wants us to grow, wants us to grow in our relationship with him, and wants our love to grow, as well. In fact, there's little else that God wants from us – other than our willingness to love as we are loved.

Prayer: Jesus, help me be willing to "go public" with my love for God. Amen.

Questions: 1. Is your love for God authentic, child-like, and honest, or is it assumed?
2. Are you bothered or ashamed to even think about your love for God? Is so, why?

Thought: The gates of Jerusalem are less than a week away. Jesus has given the disciples ample warning of what was lying in wait for him – he would die! They protested, not wanting to believe what they were hearing. After all, this was a good man, committed to God in ways they had never thought possible, compassionate towards others in ways never before witnessed. Why should he have to die? What could they do to prevent it? Let's consider the evidence "against" Jesus at this point. First, let's look at what he said:

- When you have been wronged, don't seek to get even – turn the other cheek.
- Love your neighbor as you love yourself.
- Forgive others, not seven times, but seventy times seven.
- Pray to God who is your "Abba" – Daddy.
- You cannot serve two masters – God and money.
- Find time to be holy before God.
- Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

You can add many others to the list. Now let's look at what he did:

- He healed lepers.
- He once fed over five thousand hungry people, and over four thousand another time.
- He called for dirty children to come and sit on his lap.
- He cried as he looked at the plight of the city of Jerusalem.
- He was open to spending time with sinners, not just "church folks".
- He defied Satan in the wilderness, and cast out Satan's legions many times.
- He performed countless miracles.
- He raised Lazarus from the dead.

You can add many more. Now how can we who know the outcome-in-advance ever recapture the dire end-of-the-world feelings that descended on Jesus' followers about this time? As you read the four Gospels, note that only two mention the events of his birth, as startling as they were, and that nothing like it had ever happened in all of human history! All four Gospels mention his resurrection, but you will find only a few pages in each that address that tremendous event! All four Gospels, however, devote over a third of their stories to the events leading to Jesus' death.

After all, nothing remotely like it had ever happened before. Celestial beings had slipped in and out of human history prior to Jesus' coming (remember Jacob's wrestler and Abraham's visitors) and a few humans had even waked from the dead. But when the Son of God died on planet earth – how could it be that a Messiah should face defeat, a God get crucified? Nature itself went belly-up at the deed: the ground shook, rocks cracked open, the sun stopped shining and the sky went black.

Jesus knows what's coming. The disciples don't know, but are getting a lot of rather clear warnings from Jesus about what lies ahead. There is a mood of apprehension that seems to permeate the crowds, kept at a boiling point by temple leaders and Roman impatience with whatever was going on. If you listen carefully, you can almost hear a bass drum beating dolefully in the background, unceasing, as anxiety increases, fear spreads, and wishes for a happy ending continue to be dashed. No miracles break in, no supernatural rescue attempts are made, not even Jesus is predicting victory – apparently the cross is inevitable.

As you look at the lists above, and consider what was about to happen to Jesus, is there any doubt that evil was and is alive and well in this world? Only evil, of the worst degree, could do to Jesus what it was intending to do.

Prayer: Jesus, help us grasp the feelings of dread and helplessness your disciples experienced. Amen.

Questions: 1. Why did Jesus have to die this way?
2. What kind of feelings do you have as you approach what today we call Holy Week?

Thought: Jesus said he was the Light. If so, why couldn't they see it? Obviously, light has no meaning – without darkness. There was plenty of “darkness” in Jesus day. Look around you, and you'll see ample evidence of significant “darkness” today.

Jesus said quite plainly that he came to bring light into the darkness. One can wonder why God didn't use a lightning bolt to catch the attention of the world, rather than a tiny, flickering candle, in a far-away edge of the vast Roman Empire. In fact, why couldn't God have used a thousand other methods and means to accomplish his eternal purpose?

There is a story told about a little girl who was afraid to sleep at night. She often cried and made such a fuss about it that her parents dreaded tucking her in at night. They tried reading to her, and then she would say her prayers. They would sit with her after the light was out, and eventually she would go to sleep. But it was never very long before she was back at her parents' bedside.

One night, when she was there, her mother asked her of what she was afraid. “I hear sounds and they scare me”, she said. Her mother said “Well don't you know that God is here and it's alright, and that God will protect you?” The little girl thought about it for a minute and then said, “But I want somebody with skin on.”

Don't we ALL want “someone with skin on” to help us find our way through life's mazes. There's the answer. What God did in Jesus was put skin on. Didn't Jesus say in today's verses: “Whoever believes in me, believes not just in me, but *the One who sent me*. Whoever looks at me, in fact, is looking at the *One who sent me* – God.”

At this moment of the journey to the cross, do you think that even one of the disciples might have had the feeling or awareness that their leader was, indeed, God in the flesh? Do you think that any of the leaders of the Pharisees or Sadducees saw even a tiny candle in the darkness? Do you think any of the temple priests might have sensed that Jesus was different, perhaps even a visitor from heaven? Almost three years into his ministry, do you suppose Mary still saw the light of a tiny candle?

When I was a 19 year old student at Eastern Seminary, one of my three jobs (needed to stay in school!) was to work in the kitchen peeling potatoes from 5 am to 7 am. When I got to work at 5 am, having just completed cleaning the library at 2 am, Andy was there to greet me. He was from Ireland, spoke little English, and was the janitor. But there was something about him that made me feel when I was with him that I was in the presence of God. He told me (and others) again and again, how he would pray for us – and we were absolutely sure he did.

Then a day came when I learned that I had the same disease that killed my only uncle at age 27. I was scared, so much so that I told no one about it but Andy. He said he would pray for me. He also told me I would not die. Often, in very broken English, he told me he was “God's Servant” – whose task was to pray us students through seminary. Six months later, x-rays indicated something was happening to my disease – that it was in “retreat”, they said. A year later, I was pronounced “clean” – and I had never seen a doctor. I needed a “God with skin on” – and I met one whose name was Andy – a servant of the living God..

It is my prayer that every reader of today's devotional will be “God with skin on” to someone who is hurting, is lonesome, is helpless, is hungry, is hopeless.

Prayer: Jesus, help us shine, even as tiny candles in this dark world, so that someone will see your Light.
Amen.

Questions: 1. What else do you think God could have done to provide salvation, rather than coming as Jesus, to die on a cross?
2. Think carefully: of all your acquaintances, to whom can you be “God with skin on”?

Thought: As Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem, he told the parable of the “lost son”. As we read the story today, we have warm and positive feelings about a father who would care so much. We also have little difficulty understanding the feelings of the father towards the “left-behind” son.

Jesus, however, didn’t have much of the above in mind. To his listeners just before he went into Jerusalem, the parable was shocking, disgusting, and totally unacceptable to the Jewish mind-set. Why?

- In Jesus’ day, asking your father for your inheritance was absolutely not done. Craig Keener, Bible scholar, suggests that if you did, you would, in effect, be saying “Father, I wish you were already dead.” In a patriarchal environment, such a request was never to be made.
- If, perchance, a foolish son did ask for his inheritance, a father had the “right” to have the son beaten – or even worse!
- Although when we read the story today, we think the father was most considerate and understanding, those who heard the parable “live” thought the opposite. There was no doubt in their minds that the father was not only stupid, but an absolute failure for not disciplining his son.
- In reality, the son did not receive half of his father’s holdings. In cases where there were two sons, the youngest always received one-third of the distribution; the oldest son received two-thirds.
- Jewish law did permit fathers to designate their holdings prior to their death; but such holdings would never be distributed to heirs until after death had occurred.
- An 18 year old in Jesus’ day would have had no experience whatsoever managing resources; this was solely the prerogative of the father of the family.
- Those who listened to Jesus tell this parable were ready to end the son’s adventure when he was reduced to feeding pigs – the most unclean of animals! “He got what he deserved”, they thought, and the story was over!

But of course, we know that wasn’t the end of the story. By far, those who listened were of Jewish heritage, and thought like the above statements indicate. It is my guess that among those who listened that day, one or two might have remembered something else Jesus told them – when some Roman soldier has commandeered your time and energy to carry his luggage a mile down the road, go with him two miles. Another person might have remembered Jesus saying “Blessed are the meek...”. Yet another might have remembered him saying “...turn the other cheek”.

But the synagogue leaders, by then quite organized in their efforts to get rid of Jesus, heard it entirely different. The parable was blaspheme in their opinion – it went against temple teachings, temple laws, and Jewish heritage. Now they had even more urgent reasons to get rid of him..

Why did Jesus tell this parable then? First, because he knew, personally, the depth of the love of his Father. Second, as he neared the cross, he did everything he could to let those who listened know that God was a loving, forgiving, seeking and welcoming God – before he demonstrated such love by hanging on a cross.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for showing us the almost unbelievable patience and love God has for us – and thank you for forgiveness, too. Amen.

Questions: 1. Can you think of a “prodigal son” story that has happened during your own lifetime?
2. How close is your “forgiveness level” to God’s “forgiveness level”?

Thought: On Palm Sunday, many choirs sing anthems that are titled or use the theme of: “Hosanna!” Contrary to what many think is implied when they hear the word, it is not a song or cry of victory. The word *hosanna* is derived from the Hebrew root “hoshia”, which means “to save”. Or it can be translated as a cry for “Help!!!”, or “Help us!”. They shouted:

“Blessed is He who comes in God’s name!
Blessed be the coming Kingdom of our father David!
Hosanna to the highest heaven!”

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem seated on the donkey, people lined the way shouting “Hosanna!”. At least for a moment or two, they were allowing themselves to think that their Messiah had come. Their release from bondage was here. Jesus was the one for whom they had been waiting centuries to come.

To call Palm Sunday a “triumphal entry” is rather over-blown, don’t you think? There were no cheerleaders, no brass bands, no soldiers passing by for a military review, no guns or tanks or planes. There was really nothing but a man on a donkey, surrounded by well-wishers that included many women and children. They only wished for a better life, for some relief from the burdens they bore daily, for freedom from a variety of bondages.

When Jesus approached Jerusalem, Scripture says he wept. Why? Because they just didn’t get it! Not even the disciples “got the message”. Everybody, then and now, thinks that life, the world, and God is all about power and possessing. We believe in power: military power; economic power; political power; yes, even ecclesiastical power!

But WHAT IF God is just like Jesus, the lowly, ludicrous man on the donkey, the lonely and powerless man hanging on a cross? WHAT IF the God who sways the universe is not a God of prestige and power, but is a God of self-giving love calling us all to a similar way of relating to one another?

The very next day, Jesus took on so-called power. He went to the Temple. Jewish leaders were livid with the Palm Sunday events. But they were not half as upset as they were the next day when he visited the Temple. He walked into the Temple, and immediately began to tip over the tables of the bankers (money-changers), and knocked down the stalls of the pigeon sellers. He also ordered people to get out!

Now Jesus’ anger wasn’t focused on the money-changing that was required by Mosaic law – and it was to be done in Jerusalem, besides. No, Jesus was most upset by the fact they had completely taken over the very area that was set aside for the worship of God. He then cited Isaiah 56:7, which suggests God’s house was intended to be for all people. But in Jesus’ day, the temple was segregated by race and gender “for purity reasons”. Jewish women were relegated to a lower area outside the Court of Israel, and non-Jews were “banished” to the outermost court.

If anyone had any doubt yesterday as he rode a donkey into Jerusalem, they certainly knew where Jesus stood today! With thousands and thousands of visitors in town, Jesus captured unbelievable attention on this day, by this act! The priests and Jewish leaders saw their roles, and their cozy bureaucracy under full-blown public attack. Battle lines were drawn now as never before. He had to go. The cross was guaranteed from this day forward.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your willingness to stand up for people when they were put down. Help us be willing to follow in your footsteps, no matter what the cost. Amen.

Questions: 1. What do you think Jesus accomplished by what he did in the temple?
2. Are today’s churches as “open” as Jesus wanted them to be? Do you want Christ’s church to be “for all people”?

Thought: Most of the focus on Holy Week begins with the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, and the rest of it on Thursday night's "Last Supper" experience, and Friday's crucifixion. What tends to be missed is that Jesus was a very busy person from Monday to Thursday. Consider the following:

- His authority was questioned by the chief priests and elders...he responded – Matthew 21: 23-27.
- Told the parable of the two sons – Matthew 21: 28-32.
- Told the parable of the wicked husbandman – Mark 12: 1-9.
- Told the parable of the King's son – Matthew 22: 1-14.
- Answered the Sadducees' question – Luke 20: 27-40.
- Announced the Great Commandment – Mark 12: 28-34.
- Told the story of the Widow's Mite – John 12: 30-36.
- Talked with the visiting Greeks – John 12: 37-50.
- Discussed with them the meaning of unbelief – John 12: 37-50.
- Discussed coming calamities, signs and events – Matthew 24: 1-14.
- Gave the parable of the Ten Virgins – Matthew 25: 1-13.
- Gave the parable of the Ten Talents – Matthew 25: 14-30.

In each of the above, he was involved in not only presenting the subject, but also engaged in dialog and debate with a wide variety of people. As they moved to Thursday, there was the preparation for the Passover to be handled, and all the events at the Passover meal, as well. He never had a moment for himself. He probably never was able to get a decent night of rest, either.

Leading up to these moments just before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus had to be under tremendous emotional, mental, psychological and spiritual stress. One cannot wrestle with people as Jesus did and not be physically exhausted. One doesn't wrestle with God and not be emotionally and spiritually exhausted. One doesn't wrestle with letting life go at age 33 without being totally drained. One doesn't contemplate crucifixion, the most painful and humiliating form of capital punishment known to humanity at that time, without shuddering inwardly at the thought.

It is difficult for us to read the stories 2,000 years later, and fully realize the extent of suffering to which Jesus was subjected. The movie "The Passion of The Christ" was an attempt to jar viewers into reality regarding the immensity of Jesus' suffering, humiliation and punishment. It came from all sides. But his awareness of Judas' intentions, as well as feelings he already had of complete abandonment, probably hurt the most.

Mother Teresa put it well when she said "For all kinds of diseases there are medicines and cures. But for the disease of being unwanted (abandoned), except where there are willing hands to serve and there is a loving heart to love, I don't think this terrible disease can ever be cured."

Have you ever truly felt abandoned at some point in your life journey? For most of us, it doesn't happen often, thank goodness. Many years later, though, I can still vividly remember feeling completely abandoned – by everybody. I was a college freshman, 400 miles from home, and the first holiday weekend was coming up – Thanksgiving! I was going home!!! I was absolutely excited at the thought of getting home to home-cooked food, to see the folks, to see my Grandmother, and maybe even see a girl friend. I just couldn't wait. I didn't own a car, and had no money so was hitching a ride with a friend to near where I lived. The night before the call came. There had been an early blizzard in W. New York State, and we couldn't go home. I was devastated. I was also alone in the dorm, the cafeteria was closed so there was no meal of any kind, and I had almost no money. I couldn't even make a call home. I remember eating half of a stale sandwich left over from sometime the week before. But it was those feelings – inside – of loneliness, abandonment, discouragement, hopelessness. Compared to Jesus' feelings, mine were nothing. But they still hurt!

Prayer: Jesus, help us to reach out to people who are unwanted, and feel abandoned.

Questions: 1. Of all of Jesus' sufferings, which do you think was the most difficult?
2. How do you extend love and care to some of today's abandoned people?

Thought: Many thousands of Jews from near and far were gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover experience. For all Jews there had to be a Passover Meal. Did Jesus and the disciples experience the Last Supper associated with a Passover meal? There are many reasons to assume such:

1. The Passover meal had to be eaten within the walled city of Jerusalem, and we know the Last Supper was eaten within the city walls.
2. The Passover night had to be spent within greater Jerusalem, which included the surrounding hills facing it. That night Jesus and the disciples were in the room provided for them within the city, and later in Gethsamene, but not at all in Bethany.
3. Jesus and the disciples reclined as they ate. It was customary to sit at ordinary meals, but recline at the Passover.
4. People in Israel usually ate two meals a day, with breakfast around 10-11 am, and the main meal in late afternoon. The Last Supper was eaten in the evening, which was what the Law required for the Passover.
5. The Last Supper ended with a hymn, and it was customary at the end of the Passover to sing the last part of the Hallel Psalms (115-118).
6. It was also customary at the Passover to give some money to the poor, yet another reason for Judas to leave the gathering early.

The Passover meal was an elaborate ritual full of symbolism and redemptive history. Consider the meal itself. First there were the Passover elements, six of them:

1. The most significant was the Passover lamb, which had to be roasted over a fire. All the lamb had to be eaten that night. Nothing could be saved. The lamb reminded participants of the first Passover in which the angel of death was kept from visiting the first-born of Israel because they were protected by the blood of the lamb.
2. The unleavened bread reminded them of the swiftness of God's deliverance. His salvation was so swift that the people of Israel did not have time to bake bread.
3. The bowl of salt water reminded them of the tears shed in their captivity and the crossing of the Red Sea.
4. The bitter herbs recalled the bitterness of their slavery.
5. A fruit puree called Charosheth reminded them of the clay which they used to make bricks in their captivity in Egypt.
6. Finally, there were four cups of wine, mixed three parts water to one part wine, which reminded them of the promises of Exodus 6: 6-7. The third cup of blessing was probably the one Jesus used in the Last Supper.

While the meal was going on, there were also some parallels to the Passover. During the meal, someone, usually the youngest son, was designated to ask the question "Why is this night different from other nights?" At this point the host would recall the story of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt and the meaning of the various elements of the meal. As the host of the Last Supper, Jesus would have been the one who retold the story. Later, the parallels between the Passover and the Last Supper which Jesus was establishing would be quite apparent.

There are four key concepts or "words" emerging from the Last Supper. 1. "This is my body..." Jesus states clearly he has come to give himself on their behalf. 2. "This do in remembrance..." Jesus' vicarious death and his inauguration of a new covenant was to be remembered often. 3. "This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many..." the needed sacrifice has been provided. 4. "Until...the kingdom of God..." this is a reference to God's future – and all who believe. The Last Supper provided those closest to him a summary picture of what was, what is, and what is yet to come.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your willingness to be the sacrifice for all of humanity. Amen.

Questions: 1. When you take the bread and the cup during communion, what are your thoughts?
2. What feelings do you have during a service of communion?

Thought: Their walk from the Last Supper experience to the Garden of Gethsemane took no more than ten or fifteen minutes. They arrived there around 11 P.M. The word “Gethsemane” is transliterated from the Hebrew to mean “olive press”. There was a sizeable olive grove on the Mt. of Olives, so the name is appropriate. Crushing had to happen in order for there to be olive oil!!!

In spite of all that Jesus had shared with the disciples, they were more confused (and perhaps disappointed) than earlier. For Jewish families, it was customary to stay awake late on Passover night as they told the stories of God’s redemption. No one doubts that at this point the disciples and Jesus were very tired human beings!

For three years, Jesus had been walking the roads of Palestine, touching the lives of a great many people, and establishing for himself quite a reputation, some of it accurate, and some of it rumor. As we look back on the story that ended with the grave, the crisis point wasn’t hanging on the cross. No, the crisis of the whole journey occurred in Gethsemane. The crisis was, indeed, about the life of the Son of God. Here, for the first time, Jesus experienced the silence of God, a divine estrangement or separation that came to expression finally in Jesus’ cry of abandonment from the cross (John 15:34).

Please understand this: Gethsemane does not so much demonstrate Jesus’ anguish in the face of death as his fear of being abandoned by God. The humanity of Jesus was no where else more vividly portrayed than at this moment in the garden! After all of the things Jesus said about God and his relationship with God, suddenly he is faced with the reality of his greatest fear – separation from God. The enormity of God’s total rejection of evil, sin, and wrong are found in the silence of the garden. This was the battle of the universe. God would, forever, conquer evil and wrong. But the humanity of Jesus made him a part of the cosmic evil because he took upon himself sin, our sins, and thus incurred silence from God.

The human side of Jesus didn’t want to die any more than ours does. The human side of Jesus didn’t want to have to tolerate total separation from God, either. Since he was human and divine, he needed to clarify for the human side that dying for humanity was still God’s will. In his agonizing prayers, he learned that he was still the intended sacrifice for all humanity.

Jesus began his prayer “Abba, Father.” “Abba” is the Aramaic word for Papa, a term of great intimacy and affectionate respect. Some of us have probably used the term “Daddy” for our own fathers. It could be used by Jews for their own fathers, and sometimes it was used in reference to teachers. But because of the great intimacy inferred, Jews would never use the term in reference to God. Yet this is precisely the message that Jesus had been trying to get across to his disciples – God loves you, God loves me, and it’s quite appropriate for you to love God, too.

In the midst of this caldron of feelings, Jesus returned to the disciples perhaps for support of some kind – and they were sound asleep!!! It happened several times. Of course, I’ve fallen asleep during some of my prayers, too, over the years. And it’s a fact, indeed, that some people fall asleep during worship services, too, at the time of the pastoral prayer – especially if the “pray-er” goes on at great length!!! It just means that we are all normal human beings – and so were the disciples. After all, they were still there in the garden with him, when they could have headed for the hills long before they did!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for showing us how we ought to pray when faced with significant decisions or choices on our journey. Amen.

Questions: 1. Do you think Jesus could have chosen some other response to his situation? Or did he HAVE to die? If so, why?
2. What are your feelings about the disciples as they fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane?

Thought: Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from A.D. 26-36/37. Little is known about him before or after this ten year period. Josephus and Philo, early historians, each give some attention to him. Of course, the four Gospels also focus on his role in the trial of Jesus. According to Philo, it seems that Pilate obtained his position via his mentor, Sejanus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard. Pilate is described by his contemporary Philo, and later by Josephus, as being one who was greedy, inflexible, cruel, and who resorted to robbery and oppression when he chose.

Pilate is known to have treated Jewish customs with contempt. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Palestine in A.D. 26, he was at odds with the Jews. His first act of provocation against the Jews was the introduction into Jerusalem of Roman standards with embossed figures of the emperor. Previous rulers had been careful not to offend Jewish religious views by not allowing any sign of emperor worship when the troops entered Jerusalem. This act of Pilate aroused great anger on the part of the Jews, and as a result they sent a delegation to Caesarea who pled for five days for removal of the standards.

On the sixth day, Pilate ordered a detachment of soldiers among the crowd, and at a given signal they would draw their swords. When this occurred, all the Jews bared their necks and stated that they would rather die than transgress their laws. Pilate, realizing that this might lead to a national revolution, removed the offensive images from Jerusalem. Later, Pilate seized funds from the sacred treasury known as the Carbonas in order to construct an aqueduct. The next time he came to Jerusalem, the Jews besieged him with angry clamor, and he, seeing the possibility of an uprising, ordered his soldiers to mingle among the crowd dressed as civilians armed with hidden clubs. When the protest became even more intense, the soldiers, on a prearranged signal, drew the clubs from under their tunics and began to beat the protestors, killing many in the process.

Apparently Pilate was a slow learner. Again he set up gilded votive shields bearing the name, though not the image of the emperor in the former palace of Herod in Jerusalem. Prominent Jews, including the four sons of Herod, appealed to Pilate to remove the shields. He refused to hear their request. So they wrote directly to Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius was enraged and immediately replied, ordering Pilate to remove the shields from Jerusalem and place them in the temple of Augustus at Caesarea. Pilate's early friend and mentor, Sejanus, was executed on October 18, A.D. 31, thus opening the door for Jews to complain directly to Tiberius, in spite of Pilate. Pilate thought he was doing the Emperor a favor by bringing in the shields the second time. Instead, Tiberius was very displeased, and the focus of his anger pointed at Pilate. This incident took place in A.D. 31, not long before Jesus was brought before him by the priests of the temple. Can you see Pilate's dilemma in wanting to pacify Jewish leaders, even though it appears he honestly tried but couldn't find any crimes that Jesus had committed?

Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate early on Friday morning of passion week, accusing him of setting himself up as king. When Pilate found no wrong in Jesus, and when the Jewish leaders suggested that he had caused trouble both in Judea and Galilee, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod Antipas who was ruler over Galilee. Herod took no action and sent him back to Pilate, who then wanted to release him. But because of the history shared above, Pilate finally gave in to the pressure of the Jewish leaders when they threatened him with the accusation of not being a friend of Caesar. Pilate was most vulnerable; that was the last thing he needed at that point in his rule.

Yes, evil triumphed that day, and good became a pawn of the devil. Pilate, wishing to absolve himself from all that was happening, washed his hands in full view of Jesus' accusers. We all know such "cleansing" doesn't exist in a real world.

Prayer: Jesus, 2000 years later, we shudder as we read the accounts of your "trial", and regret that it was our sins that placed you in that position. Forgive us. Amen.

Questions: 1. If you had been there, how could you have influenced the wrongs of the trial?
2. What did Pilate accomplish by washing his hands of the whole affair?

Thought: Most scholars think that crucifixion was probably Oriental in its origins. The Roman Empire used death on a cross with which to execute criminals. Cicero described it as being “the cruelest and the most shameful” way to die. It was applied to slaves and noncitizens in cases of revolt, theft, breaking of laws or murder; and a Roman citizen could be crucified in a case of high treason. It appears that Jews first experienced crucifixion as a punishment around 88 B.C. when Alexander Janneus crucified 800 Jews. After that, the Roman occupation made more and more use of crucifixion as a punishment for whatever crime had been committed.

While the Romans probably didn’t invent crucifixion, they transformed the technique into a macabre art. An *exacto mortis* who was schooled in the finer points of death led a team of soldiers called a *quaternion*. Their sole task was to make execution a terrifying spectacle. And their experience gave them ample opportunity to experiment with different methods. The historian Josephus wrote “...that the soldiers would nail their victims in different positions either for their own amusement or out of rage, sadism, whimsy or hatred.” Over time, they learned how to add various elements to the procedure and adjust them to achieve the desired effect. They could expertly control the amount of suffering, the cause of death, and even when the victim would die.

Crucifixion was always preceded by flogging, either on the way, or before the victim began the trip to the cross. Tied to a post, the condemned person would be beaten with the flagellum, which was a Roman-type leather whip with metal knotted into its thongs. This whipping bloodied the victim’s back, leaving strips of flesh hanging from the wounds. This was done to weaken the victim, which would mercifully shorten the time it would take for the condemned person to die on the cross. If the executioner wanted the victim to die quickly, he would choose a scourge with jagged bits of sheep bone braided into the tails. On the other hand, if they wanted the person to hang on the cross for days before dying, a scourging with nothing but leather straps would be used, thus prolonging the person’s life for even up to a week.

Then came the mockery of the governor’s soldiers. Brutality by Roman legions is legendary. Jesus bore the full brunt of a cohort of soldiers numbering in the hundreds. Since he was being executed for claiming to be a king, they belittled both his claim and his person. The purple robe connoted sovereignty, and the “kingly” crown of thorns pushed down over his forehead drew blood which streamed down his face. They knelt in mock allegiance before him, placed the king’s scepter (a reed) in his hand, and spit on him. Then they hit him over the head with the reed.

Nakedness was especially embarrassing to a Jewish person. Thus when they took off the purple robe, he was naked except for a covering of his groin area – the height of humiliation to Jews. Spitting on a person was one of the most grievous insults short of physical violence. Jewish people considered the spittle of non-Jews particularly unclean.

To endure what Jesus did as they prepared him to die gives strong evidence of an unfathomable love and commitment to carrying out the wishes of his Father. For one who had no sin to take on the sin of the world is beyond understanding by those for whom he died. Today, as then, some of us have chosen to believe his commitment to be the sacrifice for all of us, and we are counted among his disciples and followers. For most of us, the mere thought or remembrance of the ugliness, the pain, and the loneliness Jesus endured causes us to shudder inwardly. Such evil in the world – and such unfathomable love, at the same time!!!

Prayer: Jesus, we can never cease to be amazed at the depth of your love, and your willingness to endure all that dying on a cross entailed. Thank you. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your feelings about the brutality of Jesus’ suffering on the cross?
2. Compare your love for Christ with Christ’s love for you.

Thought:

SUBSTITUTION

Pause for a moment and ponder the word. That's what this whole story is all about – substitution. Of all the people in history, Jesus was the last person who should be hanging on a cross. You and I, among countless others, have far more reasons to be crucified than did Jesus. Then why was he there? He was a substitute – for you and me! He was the required sacrifice, the paschal lamb.

Charles R. Swindoll, in his book *The Greatest Life of All – Jesus*, tells about a substitution that occurred that day for a fellow named Barabbas. “Jews throughout the Roman Empire had filled the city to capacity, which gave Pilate a rare opportunity to make a very public example of an insurrectionist and two accomplices. The thought of helping the Romans with anything kept Barabbas from drifting off to sleep the night before – that, and an over-whelming fear of the agony he was to endure on the cross. He sat rubbing his face in a dank cell down in the dregs of the Antonia Fortress when he heard the sounds of a riot coming from the Praetorium.

As the roar of angry, Jewish voices spilled over the palace wall and crashed against his cell door, droplets of words fell upon Barabbas. ‘Blasphemy! Sedition! No . . . friend . . . Caesar!’ When the clamor ebbed, Barabbas could hear the unmistakable voice of Pilate, but he couldn't make out the words. He surmised from the intonation of the procurator's voice that he asked a question of the crowd. ‘Barabbas! Barabbas! The man, Barabbas!’ Another muffled question from Pilate gave way to the mob's unanimous shout, ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ The blood of the insurrectionist ran cold. He had once been popular because of the trouble he caused for their Roman oppressors. What had happened to suddenly incur their hatred?

Pilate spoke again, but the response of the crowd was more violent than before, with non-stop shouts of ‘crucify him! His blood shall be on us and our children!’ Barabbas sank into a corner, put his head in his hands, and waited for death to open his cell door. In less than 30 minutes, the foreboding sound of soldiers' feet echoed down the corridor and grew louder with every step. At last, the jangling of keys allowed sunlight to spill into the tiny, square room for the first time in many days.

‘Barbaricus!’ The deliberate distortion of his name meant ‘foreigner’ in Latin, a well-placed jab in the man's Zionist ribs. ‘Get up. Time to haul your filthy carcass out of here!’

Barabbas stood up and held out his wrists for the guard to place them in irons. Instead, the soldier reached into the darkness, grabbed Barabbas by his grimy tunic, and pulled him sharply into the corridor. The light slammed his eyelids shut and sent pain shooting deep into his head. Another guard shoved him from behind and kept pushing him down the hallway toward the main exit from the dungeon. As the gates slammed shut behind him, he stood motionless, alone, and alarmed in the blinding light of morning. After several minutes, he realized that the voices around him belonged to passersby, and they were speaking Aramaic, not Latin or Greek. He quickly turned around, and found no one behind him – or anywhere near him for that matter. He was free! After months in a cell barely big enough to lie down and stretch out, the expanse of the outside world felt disorienting and dangerous.”

What were Barabbas' feelings when he finally was able to believe that he was, indeed, a free man? No doubt he very soon learned why he had been freed. He learned that a fellow named Jesus took his stripes from the lictor, carried his cross through the streets and up the long climb to Golgotha, and who endured the agony he genuinely deserved. Do you suppose Barabbas ever learned that Jesus went willingly to the cross, to be his substitute? ...to be my substitute? God so loved us, through Jesus, that we are forever free! Rejoice!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for being my substitute, for making me free, and acceptable to God. Amen.

Questions: 1. What feelings do you have towards Jesus, who substituted for us – on the cross?
2. Why does the world, in general, not feel any need for redemption today?

Day Forty-Five

Friday, March 29, 2013

John 1: 1-5; 19: 32-37

Thought: John spent three years walking with Jesus on those dusty roads of Palestine. We've been walking for forty-five days! In a sentence or two, how would you describe Jesus? How did John? In today's verses, John set forth one of the most descriptive and revealing one-liners in history – "Jesus has never not been". Because we celebrate Christmas each year, we allow ourselves to lose sight of the "foreverness" of Jesus. God came in the person of Jesus to make possible the restoration of a pure and holy relationship between those who would believe – and God!

On this day of the cross, it was doubly important to the Jews to observe their ritual requirements since not only was the Sabbath tomorrow, it was the day of the Festival, as well. The breaking of the legs of those being crucified was not part of the actual act of crucifixion. It was merely a way to hasten death. In the case of Jesus, it was important that he be buried before sundown. For the Romans, it was merely a matter of getting the job done. Actually, Romans wanted bodies to remain on the crosses until they rotted. What better way to get their message across to the public? Requests could be made, however, to have the bodies removed. Crucifixion victims' remains were thrown into a common grave for criminals, and were not to be mourned publicly after their deaths. In Judaism, however, burying the dead was an important duty as well as an important act of love; being unburied was too horrible to be permitted, even for criminals.

In Hebrews 7: 23-28, we find these words that address what happened on Friday on the cross: "Earlier there were a lot of priests, for they died and had to be replaced. But Jesus' priesthood is permanent. He's there from now to eternity to save everyone who comes to God through him, always on the job to speak up for them. So now we have a high priest who perfectly fits our needs: completely holy, uncompromised by sin with authority extending as high as God's presence in heaven itself. Unlike the other priests, he doesn't have to offer sacrifices for his own sins every day before he can get around to us and our sins. The law appoints as high priests men who are never able to get the job done right. But this intervening command of God, which came later, appoints the Son, who is absolutely, eternally perfect." (The Message)

Dr. Manfred Brauch, noted biblical teacher/scholar was asked by a student one day: "Dr. Brauch, in one sentence, how would you describe the Gospel of John?" He said he didn't have an instant answer, and gave it some thought. Upon reflection, he decided the Gospel of John could be totally defined in one sentence saying this: "*God has become visible and available*".

For three years, Jesus listened, prayed, cared, healed, debated, encouraged, affirmed, defended and loved -- then hung on a cross. His love for God's creation was so great he was willing to pay the greatest price – his life and body hanging on a cross. As he hung on the cross, he was obviously visible. But as he hung on the cross, he was also available – to a thief who hung beside him, and who discovered forgiveness and new life through Jesus.

Did it have to be this way – a cross? Mother Teresa had an answer: "I don't know what God is doing. He knows. We do not understand, but one thing I'm sure, He doesn't make a mistake."

The challenges of his earthly journey were now over for Jesus. But for his followers, then and now, the challenges were/are just beginning. First we have the task of making Jesus visible, in every way that is humanly possible, to humanity. Second, we have the task of telling others that Jesus is available to them, whatever their needs or situations may be – perhaps we can close this 45th day by simply saying "Let's get to work!"

Prayer: Jesus, help us carry out the task you have given to all of your followers, to make you both visible and available to those whose lives we touch. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your most vivid feelings of Jesus' life coming to an end, hanging on a cross?
2. What are your own thoughts and feelings about dying?

Day Forty-Six

Saturday, March 30, 2013

Thought: Here are some thoughts for you to consider about the “silent” Saturday:

- There were no crowds on Golgatha – the middle cross was empty – there were two dead bodies hanging on the other crosses – unless someone requested the bodies late Friday, Roman practice was to leave the bodies on the cross until the birds, wind and weather left nothing but bones.
- If you went to Joseph of Arithamea’s tomb, you would see the huge stone in place, and tying together the door and the rock tomb was an official Roman seal, requested by the temple priests, and authorized by Pilate.
- You would see several Roman soldiers off to one side, relaxed, with nothing to do. They were hired by the temple priests, and paid for from the temple treasury. They had to stay on watch through Sunday – three days after the crucifixion, because Jesus had advised the temple leaders he would rise in three days.
- Some distance from them you would see some temple guards who had been assigned to oversee the burial details. There’s nothing to do for them, either, and they will leave the tomb area before the day is over.
- Peter hadn’t slept all night, and as a result, was not a person to be around that Saturday.
- Thomas, in hushed tones, told those near him “I told you so – now he’s gone, and he couldn’t do what he said he was going to do.”
- Mary Magdalene was busy organizing the women who would complete the burial process on Sunday morning.
- Mary (another Mary, that is) Salome and Joanna were working with Mary Magdalene to gather what was needed to finish the embalming of Jesus’ body.
- The rest of the disciples had very little to say that whole day.
- Other followers talked in whispers, worried about what might yet happen to them.
- The angels in heaven could hardly wait for Sunday morning.
- Wherever they were, the agents of evil gritted their teeth, knowing what was going to happen, and being totally unable to do anything about it. Their battle was over – and they had lost.
- Even the birds didn’t sing that Saturday.

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book.

He never held an office.

He never had a family or owned a house.

He didn't go to college.

He never traveled 100 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of those things usually associated with greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

He was only 33 when public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.

When he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Two days later, the grave was empty.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race, the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as much as that One Solitary Life.

(author unknown)

REJOICE!!!!

HE IS RISEN, INDEED!!!

YOUR REFLECTIONS



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