



Lenten Devotions 2015

Rev. Dr. Richard E. Rusbult

A Spiritual Journey Press E-Book

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By Dr. Richard E. Rusbuldt

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Front Cover Photograph entitled “2014-07-23 WI 179 Green Lake Conference Center - Hearts.” Copyright © 2014 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. Lent is a journey in which we encounter the heart of God for all of humanity, through Jesus’ death and resurrection. This photograph was taken during the 200th Anniversary Celebration of International Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA. Jesus calls his disciples to experience and then share God’s love with others in every age, until the Great Commission has been fulfilled.

Back Cover Photograph entitled “2014-07-19 WI 121 Green Lake Conference Center - Judson Tower Heart.” Copyright © 2014 by Dr. Lee B. Spitzer. The Judson Tower at the Green Lake Conference Center offers an impressive view of the lake and landscape - if you are willing to make the 121 step climb to the prayer room at its peak. Once in the prayer tower, if you convince your eyes to look away from the outside world, you will find this heart on the wooden wall. The initials of so many people surround the heart, which for me represents the countless people who, like the Judsons, have had their hearts transformed by God’s love, and accordingly have embraced the compelling call to follow him.

This is a Spiritual Journey Press E-Book (Adobe Acrobat Reader Format).

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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. In our fast-paced lives, we rarely pause to ponder – to think – to reflect – to dream – to wonder – to meditate -- to affirm. Take this walk with Jesus, and you'll have opportunities to do all of them...and even more.

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.

Today's Christians get off comparatively easy when it comes to Lent. In the earliest days, the fast was demanding. 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 still 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 are invited to find time during the forty-six days of Lent to read a page from this journal each day. As you do, you'll be led to reflect on what happened to Jesus and others as they walked to that cross outside of Jerusalem.

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

In a world where much of its population is distancing itself from any thoughts of a living, loving God, you are invited to ponder through Scripture, stories, history, and meditation a rather vivid story of a God who loves and cares.

You probably won't agree with everything that's written herein – and that's not a problem at all. We're friends of Jesus, travelling together! You may not like some of the suggestions, conclusions or questions – if not, skip them! Perhaps you'll miss a day or two 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 with Jesus, God will be with us every step of the way. Over-riding our whole journey will be one universal truth:

GOD LOVES US -- AND GOD CAME!!!

Day One

Wednesday, February 18, 2015

John 1: 1-2

Thought: Are you ready to walk – to talk – to think – to listen – to wonder – to question – to fuss – to fume – to pray – to doubt – perhaps even to believe? The disciples were doing all of those things – and probably a lot more as they slowly wove their way through the maze that led to Jerusalem. You and I are joining them for the last 46 days of their journey. As we walk through our own “mazes”, let’s not lose sight of the fact they had been together, doing all of these things for almost three years.

As we join them on their walk, what do you think was the most difficult thing for them to grasp as they daily walked with Jesus, and listened to what he said to them and others? There’s little doubt there were many things they didn’t fully understand. Although exciting to observe, they had no explanation for the miracles, for instance. In a society where children had no value whatsoever, he suggested they were actually first in God’s coming kingdom. Instead of condemning wrong-doers, he forgave them. They heard Jesus chastising the leaders of the temple, which not only surprised, but scared them, as well. Many more things could be pointed out. However, none of these ranked as the Number One puzzle for the disciples.

At the top of the list was their inability to “get it” when he suggested in a variety of ways that “I and the Father are One.” How could anyone dare to equate self with the God of the Old Testament, with the God of the Universe? From time immemorial, God’s place was in heaven, or “someplace up there”, and if God needed anything done, there were plenty of angels or other beings to do God’s bidding -- so they thought.

Were things so bad on earth that the One who had created everything had to come -- in person – to clean up the mess? Such a thought was so contrary to human thinking of any age as to be unbelievable. Pause and consider the world of the disciples. Based on what you know of that time in history, was there more evil than good? Take a minute, and jot down what you would have found that was good at the time of Jesus; then list the evil that was in his world.

Good	Evil
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Most of us have a much longer “evil” list than “good” list. As you look about you today, do you see more evil than good? Or more good than evil? However you answer the question, Jesus tried, in a variety of ways, to help them see that the God of the Universe didn’t create the world, and then take a long trip, or go on an extended vacation. Jesus, again and again, attempted to give them reason to believe that God was walking with them to Jerusalem. In retrospect, we know they didn’t really “get it” until Resurrection Sunday – and even then, some doubted.

How is it with you, as you begin this walk? Do you, on a daily basis, feel strongly that the God of the Universe is your constant companion – specially on a day when just about everything has gone wrong? Do you see more good in the world as the years go by? Or do you see increasing signs of evil and wrongdoing in the world that God created? As we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, ponder the things that the disciples were struggling with – at the center of which was the big question – was Jesus really God? How could that be?

Prayer: Jesus, stretch my thinking on this walk to Jerusalem – help me know without a shadow of a doubt that you were – and are – God. Amen.

- Questions:**
1. Will the good in the world eventually overcome the evil? If so, how will that happen?
 2. What does God expect from Jesus’ disciples today?

Day Two

Thursday, February 19, 2015

Luke 14:23

Thought: Today is the second day of our Lenten journey, walking with Jesus and twelve followers to Jerusalem. What is your reason/s for investing time and energy in such a way today? Only you know the answer to that question. However, pause and ask the same question of the disciples. They met Jesus over two and a half years ago. Since then, they had left their occupations and homes, and had been separated from their families for days on end. For what purpose?

Pause for a moment and reflect on what you might have heard from the disciples if you asked them why they were walking with Jesus. Of the twelve, pick one out, and ask him your question. Their names, you ask? Choose from Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Thaddeus (Jude), Simon and Judas Iscariot.

Lest we forget, these men were no longer pursuing what had once been their vocational choices. Peter and the other fishermen no longer plied the sea in search of a net full of fish. Matthew was no longer involved in collecting taxes. No doubt some of them had a hunch that he might possibly be the long-awaited Messiah when he asked them to follow him. Certainly some thought he might, as well, bring a challenge to the hurtful, painful domination of the Roman Empire. Yet as the months went by, it was becoming more obvious that he had no plans to pull together an army, get organized, or make war on Rome.

Add to the above the fact that much of the time, they couldn't understand what he was saying – to them, or to the crowds that gathered on a daily basis. In fact, some of it didn't make much sense at all. "Turn the other cheek" – "Go an extra mile" – "Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven" – "I and the Father are one" – "This woman's two pennies are far more than any other gift given today" – "Go, and wash, and see..." -- "The meek will inherit the earth..." – and many more.

If you were to choose some words to describe why the disciples were still following Jesus after almost three years with no big success story looming ahead of them, what words would you choose? Consider some of these for starters: convincing; forceful; weighty; imperative; urgent; binding; unavoidable; irresistible; spellbinding; pressing; fascinating; gripping; powerful argument; persuasive.

In summary, it seems they were compelled to follow Jesus by all of these words. He was so compelling, they couldn't leave him, get away from him, or become complacent about what they had seen and heard.

One Sunday, as a pre-teen in my home church in Dunkirk, N.Y., I heard a missionary from Africa, Rev. William Munday. He and his wife were on furlough from what was then the Belgian Congo, and they had been missionaries there for quite some time. It was during the early years of World War II, and they had risked their lives crossing the Atlantic to make a trip back to the USA. Why did they come back? They wanted us to know what was happening, and how important it was for Jesus to be announced to anyone who would listen. They also said they couldn't wait to get back to Africa.

Someone asked if it was wise and safe to travel back in light of the German U-boats ruling the Atlantic. He simply said "We have to go back...we can't do anything else." And so it was they sailed for Africa on the ZamZam. A month later, word came that the ship was sunk by a U-boat, with all lives lost. Africa, for them, was all consuming, so compelling they couldn't do anything else but go back, even if it cost their lives.

How compelling is Jesus' Gospel to you today? Do you sense any of the commitment, challenge, frustration, and/or risk of failure that the disciples did? Of the "compelling" type words listed above, which ones describe your own walk to Jerusalem today? Do any of them fit? Or are we in a different world?

Prayer: Jesus, you were 100% committed to that cross outside of Jerusalem. Help me sort out my commitment to your cross today. Amen.

Questions: 1. Define or describe your commitment today as a follower of the Christ.
2. Would the level of your commitment have taken you with Jesus to the cross back then?

Thought: What was it that compelled the disciples to leave everything behind, and follow Jesus around the Palestinian country-side for three years? Did they find it compelling that he invested a good bit of his time in helping people, rather than trying to build up a political base from which to address the Roman oppression, or reform the Temple leaders? There is no question they found his teachings to be radically new and far different from anything they had ever heard. Were his words, teachings, illustrations enough to compel them to continue to walk with him? If not, what else might have caused them to do it?

Think of people you know who might be considered as “compelled” to do or be something. Do you actually have a personal acquaintance who would fit the label “compelled”? Of the public figures you know about today, which ones would you consider to be totally committed to a cause, calling, purpose in life?

I read about one the other day. His name is Ron Hunter, and he’s the basketball coach at Georgia State U. in downtown Atlanta. I’ve never met him, but I’d sure like to. Why? Well, for one thing, at least once a year, he coaches a whole game in his bare feet!!! He knows when he starts such a game he will be hurting when it’s over, and not because of whatever the outcome might be. He’ll have sore feet – very sore feet! “I’m very animated on the sideline, and I’m not about to change the way I coach,” says Hunter, in his fifth year of running the men’s basketball program at Georgia State. “But it’s tough. It really is. Those 48 hours after my ‘barefoot’ game are very, very taxing – my feet really hurt.”

In the ever-discouraging world of college athletics today, where doing the right thing is generally overruled by whatever it takes to make money and win games, Ron Hunter is a breath of fresh air. There’s a reason he coaches one game each fall without his fancy shoes on. He is trying to draw attention to his real passion in life – providing footwear to millions of poor children around the world.

Hunter has already collected more than 6 million pairs of kid’s shoes through the group Samaritan’s Feet, and personally delivered many of them on eye-opening trips to Third World countries, journeys that left him drained emotionally, but inspired to keep doing more. “I love coaching. I really do,” Hunter says. “But the fulfillment I get from a child not only receiving hope from a pair of shoes, but knowing that pair of shoes may be passed down to a sibling someday – that’s so much bigger.”

He calls his one night stand without shoes “Barefoot for Bare Feet”. Since he committed himself to this cause nine years ago, he has taken his players each year to villages in Africa and S. America, places where poverty’s stranglehold on society is beyond comprehension to most Americans.

His commitment has hit home, too. One of the players on the Georgia State team is his son, R. J. He went with his Dad on a trip to Peru. “We ran out of shoes”, Hunter tells. “Right then, a mother with a child ran up to the bus as we were pulling away. My son felt so bad for them, and wanted to help them in whatever way he could -- so he took the shoes and socks off his feet, and gave them to the mother.”

“There’s too many children we can’t help”, he says. While Hunter is more than halfway to his initial goal to collect 10 million shoes in 10 years, he now knows his commitment can’t be measured by a calendar. It’s become his life work. (If you want to help, check it out at <http://www.samaritansfeet.org>).

Hunter is one driven, totally committed, and compelled human being who wants to touch the lives of people in need. Jesus was also a driven, totally committed, and compelled divine/human being who wanted to bring the Good News to every person on the globe. On their walk to Jerusalem, each day the disciples caught another glimpse of what was driving Jesus – to the Cross.

Prayer: Jesus, you were so committed to the Good News task – what do you want me to do? Amen.

Questions: 1. To what are you committed – more than anything else – in your walk with Jesus?
2. Who do you know, or know about, who is “compelling” in their walk with Jesus?

Thought: For Jesus and the writers of the four Gospels, Satan/evil was the chief enemy of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God. In his ministry on his walk towards Jerusalem, especially in the casting out of demons experiences, Jesus was engaged in the first stage of the defeat of Satan by casting out his agents of evil. Most of us just a few months ago celebrated the coming of God to earth as he was born in a stable, and placed to rest in a manger of straw. I don't imagine one of us linked the miraculous birth of Jesus with a universal battle against evil during our Christmas celebrations.

Ron Hunter is compelled to collect and give away shoes to kids who don't have any. The Mundays were compelled to return to Africa to continue to tell the Good News to anyone who would listen. Why did Jesus come to earth? Would you dare to say that it was because God was compelled to come – in person – to once and for all defeat the ever-growing strangle-hold that evil had on a world that God originally created as good, whole, without sin?

A few days ago you were asked what “compelled” you to take this Lenten Journey. You were also asked why the twelve disciples were willing to drop everything, and follow Jesus for three years that ended with his death on a cross. Today you are asked to put into words what it was that compelled the God of the Universe to penetrate time and humanity in an effort to bring about redemption.

Some days, I am forced to ask myself if there is anything right in our world. Oh, I am sure there are some; but there are those days when good things or good people seem to be in short supply. Like never before in history, we who live today are hit with a media barrage every hour of the day and night. Unfortunately, it is interesting to note that those who are in the business of “news” know that bad, gruesome, gory details and stories “sell” much better than good news. So we are fed a diet of the former.

There is much suffering in this world – physical, material, mental. In an unfair world, the suffering of some can be blamed on the greed of others. Material and physical hurting is being homeless, hungry, and suffering from a variety of diseases. Perhaps the greatest suffering is being lonely, unwanted, unloved – having no one. Mother Teresa probably said it best: “I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience.”

Now step back in time. Everything in the above paragraph was just as true in Jesus' day as it is today. Take a few minutes and jot down everything you can think of that's evil/wrong in our world today.

Now place a circle around each one that was present in Jesus' day. Jesus didn't solve everybody's problems, did he? No. Instead, he had a message for anyone who would listen: “I am here on earth because as God, I couldn't just sit around in heaven and not come and do something about my love for you. You see, all of humanity is in trouble – it's never been different. I'm going to love you all the way to a cross outside of Jerusalem. All you have to do is believe that God is willing to bail you out forever – all you have to do is believe.”

No, God couldn't do anything else but come. True love wouldn't allow staying away. That's the kind of love Jesus was sharing, talking about, and demonstrating on his walk to Jerusalem. Is it any wonder that the disciples were caught by its authenticity, and they couldn't let him go?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for both showing and being a God who loves unconditionally. Amen.

Questions: 1. What about God is most compelling in your faith in a loving, forgiving God?
2. How does your love for God grow as you walk your life journey?

Thought: Just what was so compelling about Jesus as they walked the dusty roads of Palestine? Without a doubt, it was the physical healings that first spread like wildfire throughout Judea and Galilee. One-third of the Gospel's stories about Jesus involve physical healings. There was nothing orchestrated about them. Jesus healed in spontaneous response to human need. He saw a suffering person, felt compassion, and healed the person. Not once did he turn down a direct request for help.

He spent his time in towns of small size and little importance, not in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Athens or Rome. Seven times the Gospel of Mark records Jesus instructing a person he had healed to: "Tell no one!". At the same time, he did not hesitate to use miracles as proof of who he was: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe in the evidence of the miracles themselves." When his cousin, John the Baptist, was in jail, and wondered if Jesus was really the Messiah, Jesus sent this message to John's disciples: "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives" (paraphrased by Frederick Buechner).

Without a doubt, Jesus was a skilled teacher. People listened with rapt attention, even those who knew they wouldn't agree with him. His style had little in common with that of modern mass evangelists, with their tents or stadiums or TV settings, as well as their advance teams, billboards and direct-mail campaigns. Jesus' band of followers possessed no permanent base of operations, and wandered from town to town without much of a strategy at all.

The group Jesus led had no headquarters or other property, and no officers except a treasurer. Financially, it seems that they just scraped by. In order to scrounge up money for taxes, Jesus sent Peter fishing. He borrowed a coin to make a point about Caesar, and had to borrow a donkey the one time he opted against traveling on foot. As the disciples walked through fields, they pulled off the heads of standing grain to eat raw kernels, taking advantage of Mosaic laws that made allowances for the poor.

As you reflect on it, what was so compelling about Jesus that his disciples kept walking with him, helping him whenever they could, and listening to his every word? Would you believe that in a recent survey in Great Britain, almost 50% of the under-twenty-five year old respondents not only didn't believe anything about Jesus, they said they didn't believe he had ever existed!!! Yes, two thousand years later, people still don't know what to do with Jesus.

A modern Jewish rabbi, Jacob Neusner, the world's top scholar on Judaism of the early Christian era wrote a book about how he would have responded to Jesus had he been there at that time (*A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*). Neusner has great respect for Jesus and as well, for Christianity. He says such teaching as the Sermon on the Mount leaves him "impressed – and moved." He says he would have found it so interesting that he probably would have joined the crowd that followed Jesus from place to place.

But ultimately, he says, he would have parted company with the rabbi from Nazareth. "Jesus takes an important step – in the wrong direction, by moving the emphasis from 'us' as a Jewish community, to an 'I'" "At issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all . . . In the end the master, Jesus, makes a demand that only God makes."

As you reflect on your present walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, how many years have you been a follower? _____ What attracted you to Jesus in the beginning? _____ Why haven't you been able to "let go" of Jesus Christ? In other words, what compels you to be a disciple – a follower? _____

Prayer: Jesus, "hang" on to me, as I try to "hang" on to you. Amen.

Questions: 1. Just how much do you feel God loves you?
2. What best describes your love for Jesus/God?

Thought: In last Saturday's reading, it was suggested that, although the stage for this play was on the dusty roads of Palestine, there was a much bigger play (battle) underway with universal implications. God and Satan were openly the antagonists – and life as God had once envisioned it was at stake.

The twelve disciples were not followers of Jesus when the confrontation took place in a remote, wilderness area. Matthew and Luke provide full coverage of Satan's attempt to win the battle without a fight, and Mark provides a condensed version. Jesus didn't take a backpack of sandwiches and drinks with him. There were no fast food stops along the way, or anywhere near him. He didn't drive – he walked. He couldn't use a cell phone and call his folks and tell them he was very hungry after weeks of fasting.

So Satan struck at his most human point, food and drink. Jesus knew all about hungry people. He had grown up among the poor. He knew how many there were with almost nothing to eat. Do you suppose that a part of Jesus' temptation in the early stages of his wilderness retreat was not so much to make food for himself, but to devote his ministry to providing food for everyone who had little? Jesus knew very well that there was nothing that could rally people as quickly as to give them what they most desperately wanted: better conditions of life; food; shelter; good health; prosperity. There were plenty of stones in Palestine. Why not turn them into bread, and he would have people everywhere willing to listen to what he had to say?

Not much has changed in two thousand years, has it? The industrial revolution, wars upon wars, technological advances, human sophistication, and reaching into space has provided little change from what Jesus found in Palestine: the rich and the poor; those who ruled, and those who were ruled; people oppressed; people without hope for any future. People – everywhere – want a better life that includes all the food they can eat, the best house to live in, good health every day, and the accumulation of finances that will never run out. Do you really believe that if all this is provided, life will be better?

Jesus didn't. So he chose not to turn stones into bread. Not for himself. Not for others. He had a more important gift to give to the world. It was the gift of a transformed life – resources for both times of hunger and times of trouble, tiredness, and being overwhelmed. Jesus spent his entire life trying to point us away from the notion that worldly treasure and the absence of hardship and pain were the keys to abundant life. He said it, and modeled it over and over again. He said clearly that God loves us when we're down – yes, even when we're hanging on a cross.

In his book, *On Fragile Wings*, Doug Forsberg tells how he learned about the ins and outs of homeless life. His friend, Mark, had a ministry in Dallas. It consisted of a van filled with donated sandwiches and tea. He would drive to seven locations each evening, where he fed and ministered to the homeless. Their third stop of the evening came at 9 pm at a downtown truck junkyard. He gave the signal of four toots on the van horn. Suddenly emerging from the rusting heaps of metal came people – worn, weary looking, hungry people. About 40 men and women called the junkyard home. Mark and Doug jumped from the van and began the nightly labor of love, of listening to and feeding these wounded men and women on life's highway. Some had part time jobs, but none had homes. One man was particularly memorable in that he seemed to exude joy in that terrible situation. His name was Louis, and he wanted to show Doug his home. He led him to the back of an abandoned garbage truck. It was a neat, clean, little room with a wooden floor, a small bed, a lamp stand with a candle, and a picture on the wall. Louis smiled with pride and held up three fingers. "Three months I live here", he said as he chewed on a sandwich. Louis talked about God. He was profoundly grateful for the ways God had been present in his life. His faith was both simple and profound. Doug said "But sitting there with Louis in his garbage truck home is now a tender memory. The picture Louis had on the wall was of Jesus. Never did a picture of Christ hold such profound meaning for me. It was astonishing to find people living in a junkyard. To discover Jesus among them was not."

Prayer: Jesus, thank you that you came for junkyard people, too, and include them in your kingdom. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your feelings when struggling with temptation, or right/wrong decisions?
2. What are you today that you would not be without Jesus' presence in your life?

Thought: First there was a feast; then they were filled with fear. It appears that the disciples had few “normal” days as they tagged along with Jesus. And this particular day and night was filled with so many different experiences, it was hard to even begin to figure it all out. Why?

Because they hadn’t begun to understand what to do with a “do-it-yourself” God. That’s right. After all, didn’t Jewish history include a variety of stories about God sending angels, using burning bushes, sending plagues to open the door out of Egypt, creating pillars of clouds and fire, and many more? They also expected – some day – a Messiah. But God would send the Messiah – no one ever dreamed that God would come in person!!!

First there was the feeding of thousands of people, using only five loaves of bread and two fish. No doubt the disciples were as flabbergasted at what was happening as were those in the crowd. There was absolutely no logical explanation for what Jesus did that day. Neither is there any today. Some thought it was magic, and they liked it as such. If someone could do something like this, just imagine what that person could do in other areas of their lives. And so, among the crowd, there was a whispering that made its way in all directions that maybe this was the time to make Jesus king. That’s when Jesus took over again.

He sent the disciples away so there was no chance they might be a part of whatever was going to happen. Then he managed to send the crowd away before any organized effort could be started to make him a king. Then we are told he went off by himself to pray. Why – at that moment? Because he was taken back to the wilderness once more – Satan’s temptation of Jesus didn’t end back there – he could not allow himself to be side-tracked from his original purpose, which was to die for these people, not just to feed them.

The disciples were having their own problems. They got into the boat all right, but a strong night wind kept blowing them off course, and tossing them around like a cork on the water. Suddenly they thought they saw a ghost coming in their direction, and they were terrified. Jesus calmed the situation with his suggestion that they “do not be afraid”. He got into the boat with them, and they were “astounded”. Not only about what had just happened, but also about the loaves and fish. And the net result was that “their hearts were hardened”.

Years ago, at a women’s retreat, one of the participants shared this story. She had rescued an abandoned, very frightened young dog that had not only been abused, but also half drowned. The dog desperately needed to be cleaned and medicated for its wounds. As she began to lower the dog into a warm tub, it was obvious how terrified it was of water. His abusers had tried to kill him that way!

He screamed and fought, his whole body a solid mass of fear. The woman quickly realized there was only one way to reach him through his panic. She stripped to her undergarments and got into the tub of water with him, along with all the fleas, dirt and blood now from both of them. She held him, stroking him gently, quietly talking to him until he began to relax. It was at that point that cleansing and healing began.

Are you bothered to think about a “do-it-yourself” God? After all, if it really wasn’t God who came to provide the sacrifice of self, why do you go to church? Why do you pray? Why do you believe? Most of us can find reasons with which to understand the dismay of the disciples as they finally reached shore after the loaves and fishes experience, followed so quickly by the stormy sea, which Jesus solved for them. But two thousand years later, do you, and those whom you know who call themselves Christians, live the kind of lives that would cause people to see – maybe for the first time – that God is alive and well on earth today – because God lives within your very heart and life? In other words, can people see God through me – and you?

Prayer: Jesus, I want to allow you to be seen as a loving, caring God to others – through me. Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you deal with fear when it surfaces on your journey?
2. Tell of a time when you “got dirty” to help someone else who was in a hurtful or desperate set of circumstances.

Thought: What did the disciples know about “church”, or a designated building in which to worship their God? It was summed up in one word – “Temple”. First, all of them knew there once was Solomon’s Temple. Eventually Solomon’s temple was destroyed, and a second temple was built by returning exiles about 537 bc. It lasted 500 years, longer than either Solomon’s temple, or Herod’s temple which was the last temple project. Herod’s temple rebuilding project began in 19 bc, and the bulk of it was completed 10 years later, or 9 years before the birth of Jesus.

In each temple, there was an outer court where the scribes held their schools and debates. As well, the merchants and money-changers had their stalls in this outer court. Next was the inner court, where signs in Greek and Latin were posted that said “No responsibility will be taken for the probable death of any Gentile who ventures within”. The first court inside was the Women’s Court. The Court of Israel (for men only) was raised above the Women’s Court. At the time of the Feast of Tabernacles (once a year), men were allowed to enter the Priest’s Court to walk around the altar. Then there was the Holy Place, open only to priests. Lastly, there was the Innermost Court, divided from the Holy Place by a huge veil, and into which the High Priest went only once a year.

Almost every Jew knew the layout of the three temples over the centuries. However, at the center of everything they knew one hard fact: God was hidden in the innermost area, and unless you somehow became the high priest, you would never, never get close to God. Then along came Jesus. He was never allowed to enter the Innermost Court. Yet everything he said sounded as if he knew God better than anybody else in Israel. People who listened to him had to wonder about his sources of information.

Jesus told them that God actually knew the number of hairs on each person’s head! Preposterous, you say? He told them to think of the birds that never plant gardens, but are fed by God – aren’t you valued by God more than the birds of the air? So you need clothing, you say? I tell you that God who clothes the grass of the field will also clothe you. So you are sad or mourning? Your God will comfort you.

Nothing that Jesus said about God matched Jewish thinking about who God was. God, to them, was remote, locked away in the Innermost Court, was not available to ordinary people, and you paid people to make sacrifices for you in order to get any attention at all. They had never heard a priest tell them to bypass them, and speak directly to God. Everything about God had to be done through a second or third person.

Is it any wonder the disciples were not only trying to figure out who Jesus was, while at the same time raising questions daily about who their God was. Perhaps they said just what someone else once said about Jesus: “Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit over-awes me, and his will confounds me. Between him and whoever else in the world, there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by himself. . . I search in vain in history to find a similar to Jesus Christ, or anything which can approach gospel. Neither history, nor humanity, nor the ages, nor nature, offer me anything with which I am able to compare it or to explain it. Here everything is extraordinary.” (Napoleon)

Do you suppose one of the struggles of the disciples was that they had never been so close to God before? Even if they didn’t “get it” when he told them that he and the Father were one and the same, they knew there was something so radically different about him that they couldn’t let him go, or just go back home and spend time on the lake fishing again.

Tell me – do you have to go to church to be aware of God? Or were you aware of God at work today, in your kitchen, in your classroom, in your backyard? Where does your God reside? In a temple/church? Or in your everyday life?

Prayer: Jesus, touch me, speak to me, or poke me – so I know you are still with me. Amen.

Questions: 1. Describe how God is revealed to you on an everyday basis.
2. Where does God live?

Thought: Yesterday we noted some things about the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. It was a fixture in Jewish life and thought. It was the center of all Jewish understanding about their relationship with God. At age 12, Jesus followed Jewish tradition and visited the Temple. At the heart of their history and understanding of their role as God's chosen people was The Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures. The Ten Commandments were the summary statement of the covenant requirements between God and Israel, and also included were the first five books of our Old Testament.

No doubt the disciples were steeped (or at least should have been) in temple teachings. Imagine their surprise when they heard Jesus making such statements as "I've come to fulfill the law", or "...there are two more commandments...". They were already struggling daily with things Jesus said and did, but great wonderment surrounded his comments about the Temple, God's teachings, the Commandments, etc.

How many of us, today, would literally be willing to die to save our Bible from being destroyed? In his book *Exodus*, Leon Uris tells the story of Simon Rabinsky, a poor boot maker living in 1884 with his wife, Rachel, and two teen-aged sons in a small village that was in Western Russia known as the Jewish Pale of Settlement. The boundaries of the Pale were established in 1804 as the only place in Russia where Jews could live. Despite the desperateness of their daily existence, Simon and all other Jews adhered to rigid codes of business ethics inside the Pale. No one was allowed to infringe on the livelihood of their neighbor, to cheat or to rob. Community life pivoted around the Torah, the synagogue and the rabbi.

They lived in wretched poverty. But not only the Jews were near starvation, so were all of the Russian peasantry. In trying to divert the people's attention from the real issues of tyranny, the masterminds behind the Czar found a way to make the Jews the scapegoats. Organized massacres of Jews called pogroms were staged as part of a plan to eliminate the Jewish population from Russia. One day, a pogrom came to Simon's village. His sons were at school when it began. Jews ran wildly for cover ahead of a frenzied mob of over a thousand students and Cossacks who swaggered down the streets smashing up storefronts and dragging any Jews they could find into the streets and beating them senseless.

Simon's sons raced from school. Using a route through back alleys, they ran home to protect their parents. They flung open the door to the shop. "Mama, Papa" they shouted. The shop was a shambles. They found their mother cowering in a corner in a state of hysteria. The oldest son ran to her shouting, "Where is Papa?" "The Torah!", she shrieked. "The Torah!"

At that instant, six blocks away, Simon Rabinsky staggered into his burning synagogue and fought his way gagging to the end of the room where the Holy Ark stood. He threw back the curtains with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them, and pulled down the Sefer Torah, the Scroll of the Laws of God. Simon pressed the holy parchment against his breast to protect it from the flames and staggered back to the door. He was badly burned and choking. He staggered outside and fell onto his knees. Twenty of the Russian Students were waiting for him. "Kill the Jew!" they screamed! Simon crawled a few yards and collapsed, covering the Torah with his body. Clubs smashed his skull. Boots ripped his face. "Kill the Jew!", they screamed. In mortal agony, Simon screamed out his last words "Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad" – "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God...the Lord is One!"

Simon risked, and ultimately gave his life because for generations those laws had provided the frame work for living in a right relationship with God. Jesus was walking to Jerusalem knowing very well Israel's commitment to the law would not permit them to visualize and experience a God of love and grace. This was, indeed, not an easy walk to Jerusalem.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your willingness to die to save us, as Simon died to save The Torah. Amen.

Questions: 1. Which one of the "twelve" commandments speaks most clearly to you? Why?
2. How much do you value God's written word in your life today? Would you die for it?

Thought: The past two days, we've looked at some aspects of the Temple, the Torah, the priests. Did you know that just four years before Jesus was born, people throughout Israel celebrated and danced in the streets, and riots erupted in every major district of Galilee, Judea and the Transjordan? Why? "King" Herod died. In the eyes of most Jews, he was nothing more than a client-king who upheld the Roman domination system, which existed solely for the benefit of the ruling class. What did they get for such celebrations? Rome dispatched the military to control the outburst. They marched on Sepphoris to recapture the capital city of Galilee, and left destruction and carnage in their wake. At Jerusalem, two thousand rioters were crucified in public view to deter further rebellion. Take note that when Jesus and his disciples walked toward Jerusalem, these events were still fresh in people's memories.

As the Roman empire expanded, it recruited and relied on native leaders to help administer the affairs of state. Historians tell us that about 8 percent of the entire population of the empire served as part of Rome's provincial bureaucracy. Also known as "retainers", they recruited 72 to handle its affairs of Palestine, and especially the capital city of Jerusalem. They were called the Sanhedrin. The members included priests, scribes and respected elders with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Josephus described the Pharisees as the defenders of the Torah and trustees of the oral law. Jesus described them as "lovers of money" (Luke 16: 14) and "who seek the best seats at banquets" (Luke 11:43), which means they were among the elites of Jewish society.

The Sadducees collaborated with the Romans, and promoted their political agenda. But whereas most Jews wanted to be free from Roman domination, the Sadducees were quite willing to compromise with Rome, which meant they could keep their elite status. Scribes functioned as copyists, teachers and interpreters of the Law. Because of their alignment with the Pharisees and priests, they were part of the Jewish ruling class and "representatives of the temple-state".

Elders were wealthy Jewish laymen who owned large amounts of agricultural property. Since every Jewish family supposedly owned land according to the Law of Moses, the only way elders could expand their land holdings was to confiscate ancestral lands of the peasants, contrary to the Law, in exchange for debt relief. In such cases, the peasants were either forced off the family farm or allowed "to stay on the land as tenant farmers. . . sharecroppers or day laborers." Because the elders served Rome so "faithfully", they were also given additional land as gifts from their Roman benefactors, who took it away from other Jews.

Together, the above group/s set the guidelines for what it meant to be a Jew living in Palestine under Roman rule. Their legal duty was to Rome, whom they served in exchange for privileges not enjoyed by the general Jewish population. It was also their responsibility to be sure that local affairs ran smoothly. As a result, Jewish peasants had a love/hate relationship with their leaders, and sometimes demonstrated against unjust and oppressive policies. Then their leaders turned on their own people. If that didn't work, they called in Roman support. There was no way those not in power were ever going to win anything.

If you're not a history buff, the above may come across as boring to you. It is shared, hopefully, to provide a more detailed background for what Jesus walked into once he began his journey to Jerusalem. Those were difficult times, there was tension everywhere, and it never took much of any kind of a comment or observation to get rumors and gossip going. No weakling could ever have set out to do what Jesus was doing. Neither should the disciples ever be considered as "weaklings" as they followed along with Jesus. Even when they couldn't understand it all – and sometimes almost nothing – they were strong men to be able to hang with Jesus as they walked inevitably to an unknown ending. Tomorrow we'll take a closer look at the people themselves, what they did for a living, how they felt about life under both Roman and Temple laws.

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes to the realities of the Jewish world of the disciples. Amen.

Questions: 1. When times get difficult, how do you describe your own faith?
2. Just a few weeks away from the cross, describe the disciples' feelings as the end neared.

Thought: As the crowds gathered wherever Jesus went, who were they? Who did they represent? We know that Jesus regularly confronted Jewish leadership, especially those whose base of operations was the Temple. In Jesus' day, the Temple had become a house of Caesar as much as a House of God. It was used as the clearinghouse for the collection of all taxes, and the tithes, as well. The priests collected both, and the amounts were based on the peasant's income from either crops grown, or wages earned. Taxes were received, records were kept, and monies were sent to Rome by the priests. The tithes went into the priest's coffers.

In Jesus' day, those who lived around the Mediterranean Sea were mainly farmers, or farm-related workers. Nearly 90 percent of the population, mostly peasants, lived in the country and earned their living by farming. At the time of Herod the Great, Israel consisted of 2,500,000 acres of land, of which 1,700,000 were farmed (Stegemann). The peasants worked the land and produced great wealth for the Roman Empire, but received almost no benefits for themselves. Almost all peasants were poor, but some of them were "dirt" poor, earning only two hundred denarii per year, about one-half the amount needed to subsist. Some only survived because of the Jewish charity system.

In the towns and villages, poor persons worked as artisans, making pottery, textiles and handcrafted items. Others were manual laborers working on construction projects such as temples, bridges, aqueducts, and roads. Still others were bakers, cobblers, tanners, carpenters, fishermen and barbers. In all cases, these people were poor, hardly making a livable wage. Collectively, they produced goods and services for the Roman aristocracy, and the Jewish priests, scribes and elders. They paid excessive and oppressive taxes, which kept them in poverty, but sustained the lifestyle of the "rich and famous."

Also in Israel there was a slave population. A large group of slaves worked at occupations ranging from menial labor to management. Some held positions of responsibility as secretaries and administrators within the Roman empire. Free labor was a major economic reason for the empire's wealth. Individuals became slaves in one of three ways: 1) captured as prisoners of war and sold to finance the military, 2) born into slavery, 3) submitted to or sold themselves into slavery to improve their lot in life.

The lowest of the low on the social scale were the expendables, people with no skills or resources to contribute to Rome's economic growth. Many were beggars, social outcasts, the handicapped, sickly, and prisoners.

In a nutshell, these are the people Jesus and the disciples encountered everywhere they went. Since the Babylonian captivity, Jews had waited for the "Day of the Lord" when God would intervene on their behalf, fulfill his promised new covenant, and restore the kingdom to Israel (Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Ezekiel 36: 24-27; Hosea 2-3). They looked forward to a new and united kingdom under another King David. After many centuries, people, in a sense, were becoming more and more impatient with what wasn't happening. A century before Jesus, literature began circulating raising all kinds of expectations for what was going to happen. There would be a new High Priest who would purify the Temple, and free them from Roman enslavement. Others began to look for a Messiah, like Moses had been, to free them from Roman tyranny. The Essenes withdrew to the desert to wait for the arrival of the Messiah.

In spite of all of the predictions, instead of a Messiah, Herod was appointed to be the king of the Jews, and Jewish leaders were in full collaboration with Rome. Is it any wonder why many of them felt that God had forgotten their nation? Pockets of resistance soon developed in and around Galilee, a hotbed of unrest. Rome quelled them all. Riots were numerous throughout Judea and rumors of revolution filled the air. Between self-proclaimed prophets, messiahs, bandits, charlatans, agitators and gangs of assassins, something was always astir. Then Jesus stepped onto the scene, talking about the immanent arrival of God's kingdom. Immediately both Roman and Jewish authorities labeled him as an agitator. It's easy to understand why.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your willingness to confront evil at every level of society when you came. Amen.

Questions: 1. How did Jesus communicate with the peasants and the aristocracy?
2. How did the poor of Jesus' day compare with the poor of today? Or is there no difference?

Thought: Last year some rather startling stats began to circulate regarding the “haves” and “have nots” of the global village. It was estimated that the richest 85 persons in the world held assets greater than over three and a half billion of the world’s poorest. In a global study, India was listed as the country with more poor/hungry than any other. In America’s largest cities, the number of children with insufficient food is staggering. Back in Jesus’ Palestine, over 95 percent of the people were poor, and hungry most of the time. Several years ago, a poem was included in the report of the Presidential Commission on World Hunger:

The Arithmetic of Poverty (by Appadura – India)

“Decide mother, who goes without, is it Rama, the strongest, or Baca, the weakest who may not need it much longer, or perhaps Sita? Who may be expendable? Decide, mother, kill a part of yourself as you resolve the dilemma. Decide, mother...decide...and hate.”

Listen in on a phone conversation with heaven – God is working the switchboard...

Caller: God, are you there? I’m so hungry. Don’t you care for us?

God: Yes, I do care.

Caller: My children haven’t eaten for four days now. The last time we ate, we had roots that I was able to dig up. They didn’t help our stomachs very much.

God: I sense your deep concern. You are really in need.

Caller: We are desperate. The government gave us some baby formula, but it’s gone, and there won’t be any more. My wife has no milk left to nurse the baby. It dried up while she used the formula.

God: Is there anyone who will share with you?

Caller: The few that have anything are keeping it for themselves. Maybe if I was in their shoes, I’d do the same thing. But I’m not, God. I’m hungry! I can’t understand why they keep food for themselves, when they know we are so desperate. And another thing, God – I’ve heard it said that there is so much food in some places in the world that it goes to waste. Why is that?

God: Believe me, it was never my intention that the world would be this way. My plan was that all members of the human race would share with one another.

Caller: So why won’t people share?

God: People are selfish, greedy, caring only about themselves. My kingdom will never be that way.

Caller: Is there any hope for my family?

God: The hope is in others who care enough to share.

Caller: Will they?

God: A few will. They are kingdom people, my people, the real people of God.

Caller: Then there is little hope. We will all die.

God: Yes, many will die. Those who die in my name will never again be hungry. Perhaps this does not mean much to you now, but I am a just God. Those who are last will be first in my kingdom. Those who have everything in this world and do not share it with the poor and hopeless will never enter the door to my kingdom.

Caller: Why are you shouting at me, God?

God: I’m sorry...of course I’m not angry with you, but I’m so very disappointed with what I see happening in the world.

Caller: We’re so hungry and tired, God...please do something.

God: I promise you I will again speak with my people of their responsibilities. They must believe enough to act on what I have told them, that it is better to give than to receive.

Caller: I’m hungry, God, and I’m afraid.

God: I’m not going to leave you alone...I’ll stay with you to the end.

Caller: I’m hungry...

Prayer: Jesus, motivate me to look for people who are hungry, not just wait for them to come to me. Amen.

Questions? 1. How can you, your group or church help Isaiah 58: 6-7 come alive today?

2. What are the first five words that come to mind when you hear of “hungry people”?

Thought: Take a look around you at the dozen men we're traveling with as we follow Jesus around Palestine. How many of them had a high school education? None. How many of them went to graduate school? None. How many of them went to a seminary? None. How many of them had plenty of financial resources? Other than Levi (and he gave most of it away!), probably none. Basically, they were a rather nondescript bunch of followers. I find it interesting that at the most critical moment since the beginning of time, God hand-picked as the people who could get the job done such a group as the disciples.

They knew little about what their jobs would be. But look who they had as a teacher – none other than Jesus himself. Jesus was known as “The Teacher”. Of course, there were many itinerant preachers roaming Palestine at that time. Yet somehow, Jesus not only taught, but modeled his teaching on a daily basis.

One of the first things he did was to teach them how to pray. “And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?” (The Message...also the verses below.) Remember that temple leaders were there, and listening, too!

“Now here's what I want you to do. Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.” Now why did he want them to pray? Because these were the front-liners in taking on the Roman Empire, in doing battle with all of the entrenched evil in the world.

Please note he didn't tell them to go to the Temple to pray. He didn't tell them to go to church and pray. He didn't tell them to get into a small study or cell group and pray. No, go find yourself a quiet, secluded place for your time of prayer. “This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

**Our Father in heaven,
reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
do what's best – as above, so below.”**

Two things. First, show me who you are, God, and what you want me to do. Second, show me how to transform earth into heaven.

Jesus was compassionate about his task. He was filled to over-flowing with compassion for those who didn't know God, those who were in slavery, those who were hungry, those who were trapped in life's problems, those who were sick, those who were oppressed, those who were totally without human hope. Vishal Mangalwadi (India) said: “If compassion had meant for Christ merely what most Christians understand by it today, then Jesus would never have been killed. He would have been a fit candidate for a Nobel prize, not the cross . . . In many cases, the ‘Sunday-school Jesus’ confines himself only to the changing of men's hearts; the Jesus of the Gospels aimed at changing both human hearts and human society.”

Ponder the disciples. Then think about yourself. When was the last time you prayed the way Jesus instructed the disciples to pray (see above)? Have you ever prayed that way? Then choose a word that describes your compassion for God's world that's in need of redemption. Would Jesus be pleased with your word?

Prayer: Jesus, teach me how to pray. Amen.

Questions: 1. What is it God expects from you regarding a broken world?
2. What is your “passion” in life? What drives you? What do you treasure?

Thought: One writer described children at the time of Jesus as “the least of all humans”. Yet on several occasions over his three years of ministry, he suggested to those listening that if they didn’t become like children, they’d never get to heaven! Is it any wonder that Jesus’ teachings, as well as his sacrifice of life itself in such a horrendous way holds little appeal to a world insane with power, wealth, things and security?

There is no doubt in my mind that in God’s sight, the most beautiful people in this world don’t make the news, never are shown on TV for any reason, hold no titles, and are unknown except to a few people. Joni Eareckson Tada tells this story: “Every morning Connie opens Diane’s door to begin the long routine of exercising and bathing her severely paralyzed friend. The folds of the covers haven’t moved since Connie pulled them up around Diane the night before. Yet she can tell her friend has been awake for a while. ‘Are you ready to get up yet?’ ‘No...not yet,’ comes the weak reply from under the covers. Connie sighs, smiles, and clicks shut the door.

The story is the same each dawn of every new day at Connie and Diane’s apartment. Sunrise stretches into mid-morning by the time Diane is ready to sit up in her wheel chair. But those long hours in bed are significant. In her quiet sanctuary, Diane turns her head slightly on the pillow toward the corkboard on the wall. Her eyes scan each thumb-tacked card and list. Each photo. Every torn piece of paper carefully pinned in a row. The stillness is broken as Diane begins to murmur.

She is praying. Some would look at Diane – stiff and motionless – and shake their heads. She has to be fed everything, pushed everywhere. The creeping limitations of multiple sclerosis encroach further each year. Her fingers are curled and rigid. Her voice is barely a whisper. People look at her and say, “What a shame. Her life has no meaning. She can’t do anything at all.”

But Diane is confident, convinced her life is significant. Her labor of prayer counts. She says she moves mountains that block the paths of missionaries. She helps open the eyes of the spiritually blind in southeast Asia. She pushes back the kingdom of darkness that blackens the alleys and streets of the gangs in east LA. She aids homeless mothers...single parents...abused children...despondent teenagers...handicapped boys...and dying and forgotten old people in the nursing home down the street where she lives.

Diane is on the front lines, advancing the Good News of Jesus Christ by holding up weak saints, inspiring doubting believers, energizing other prayer warriors, as well as delighting her Jesus. This meek and quiet woman sees her place in the world; it doesn’t matter that others may not recognize her significance in the grand scheme of things. In fact, she’s not unlike Emily in *Our Town* who signs her address:

Grovers Corner
New Hampshire
United States of America
Western Hemisphere
Planet Earth
Solar System
The Universe
Mind of God.”

Jesus loved the children...those who were of least count in that society. Nothing has changed. God, too, loves the children, as well as every human being who is trying to become the person God can love perfectly. Our circumstances count little in God’s sight. What counts is believing that a loving, caring God exists, and that living for and loving that God is of the utmost importance – nothing else really matters. Watch this Jesus carefully, as you walk with him to Jerusalem.

Prayer: Jesus, help us to love the unlovely, and to know what is important in life. Amen.

Questions: 1. As you walk your journey, what do you count as most important to you?
2. How would you feel towards God if you were like Diane in the story above?

Thought: As we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem this year, I'd like you to fast-forward yourself by about two thousand years. If Jesus had instead chosen to come in 2015, would he again say: "...go find yourself a quiet, secluded place for your time of prayer...your Father knows better than you what you need...God loves you, and you can pray very simply 'Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are. Set the world right; do what's best – as above, so below.'"

Would Jesus understand the fast-paced lives we live today, or could he only communicate with an agricultural mind-set? After all, we are living in a period of history in which change is happening faster than we can process it. Changes in the moral norms that have existed for centuries and changes in science and technology have rendered the world almost unrecognizable. The challenges we face globally are overwhelming. For example, our relentless overconsumption of goods at the expense of a balanced ecology, and overuse of non-renewable, polluting energy sources is causing one weather disaster after another, and our planet is on a collision course with destruction – and no one has either the will or voice to call for changes.

Yet in spite of the obvious complexity of today's world versus that of Jesus' day, every person who breathes today, as they did then, has to make a decision. Either God does not exist – or God does. One doesn't need to intellectually make a case for a non-existent god – it's easier to ignore the question, and live life as it comes. Isaiah challenged those who didn't believe, as well as those who did. In the midst of their captivity, he said "Look to the heavens. The one who made all that. . . is here, right here, even in this seemingly God-forsaken land." (Isaiah 40: 21-31) He told them that the same God who hung the stars in the sky for a purpose is the God who knitted you in the womb, numbered the hairs on your head, and knows you through and through. Why? Because there is a purpose for you as you live your life...God is working out God's purpose – through YOU!

Where have you seen God at work in your life? Most of you who are Lenten readers are believers in a loving, caring God – that's what Lent is all about. But how is God working out God's purposes in you? In others whom you know? I lost one of my best friends last year in the person of Martin Rolfs-Massaglia. In one of his messages of a few years back, he told a personal story focused on how God can work in today's world – in ordinary people.

He was in Kansas when he learned that his wife's cousin, Jeannine had died. Could he come and share in the memorial service. Of course he and Kay went. Jeannine's life had been mostly about pain. She suffered from serious mental illness from her teenage years on; and in her twenties, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, and then breast cancer. She wasn't someone you'd pick out of a group to be used by God to help others. When at the "open mike" time, one person after another told of how she had ministered to them.

One woman told a story that moved everyone. She had known Jeannine many years ago. Then 20 years ago, she and her family moved away. When the woman's mother died about 3 years ago, she became the primary caregiver for her father. He was inconsolable, and in failing health. He was also a complainer. Nothing suited. Nothing mattered. Nothing helped. Finally he was moved into an apartment that Jeannine's church owned. When the daughter came to visit, all he did was complain. Then one day, he was totally different.

She began to hear about a woman in the apartment building who had begun to call on him every few days. "This woman is an angel. . . pure and simple", he said. "She always has time for me; she sits and listens to me vent; and when I'm talking to her, I'm really at peace. She has cancer, too, but never complains. Actually, she makes me feel ashamed for complaining." One day, when visiting, his angel happened by. "Here she is! My angel!", he said. The angel was Jeannine! In our blazingly fast world today, God worked thru Jeannine. Is God working through you, just as Jesus suggested was possible?

Prayer: Jesus, show me how to reflect our loving, caring God to someone today. Amen.

Questions: 1. How can Christ's people share with busy, pampered people that God loves, God cares?
2. In what new way could your church "prove" to people that God loves, God cares?

Thought: In light of what we've been reading the past couple of days, the crowds that gathered around Jesus were composed of about 95% poor people. As noted earlier, some were poor; and some were "dirt-poor". Besides these, there were the beggars, social outcasts, handicapped, sickly and prisoners.

Jesus said to them "Don't be afraid of missing out". Jesus seemed to identify the emotion attached to the age-old infatuation with money and prosperity. If we don't have enough "money", we're afraid. I grew up "dirt poor" in the days of the great depression. I have to tell you I was very afraid...afraid we wouldn't have enough to eat...afraid we'd freeze to death...afraid in the dark which we lived in most of the time...afraid that tomorrow would bring more of today...afraid to go to school because being put down hurt. I didn't know Jesus at that time, but if he'd have told me not to be afraid, I've have told him I was petrified about life, about tomorrow!!!

How do you think the poor in the crowd interpreted what he was saying? Especially when it was followed by the statement that "the Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself." And then, just a sentence or two later, he shocked them most by telling them to "Be generous. Give to the poor."

The fear connected to providing for ourselves against tomorrow has many expressions...and all are self-destructive in their own way:

- for some the fear is expressed in constant, never-ending fretting, worrying and bitching about what tomorrow will bring;
- for others, it means filling one's life with working – overtime – extra jobs – because one never knows whether there will be enough;
- still others express their fear of not having enough by overspending – by overextending themselves with credit/cards; taking out foolish loans; borrowing on an unknown future;
- the fear is yet seen in others who obviously have more than enough, but as in the parable of the foolish farmer, you will need all the surplus you can get, so build more and bigger barns.

Then Jesus told ALL who were listening: "Get a bank that won't go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bank robbers . . . a bank you can bank on. For where your treasure is, that's the place you will want to be..."

So how does it feel, living on a fixed income, or perhaps living without enough income for survival, to be told to "give to the poor"? Do you say "Ouch!" Do you wince? Do you cringe? Do you say "you've got to be kidding!" Do you say, "I'd like to, but I can't." Or, "I'm already giving all I can." Or, "I want to be generous – just as soon as I get out from under some of my own debts." All of these responses are based on fear; on limits; on banking on earth; on worrying about tomorrow.

Jesus didn't tell them to "give to the poor" because it's the right thing to do. He told them to "give to the poor" because if you do so, you've set aside your fears about tomorrow, about God's inability or unwillingness to provide what you need, or about being invested in the wrong bank!!!

There was a poor thirteen-year-old boy who heard an appeal for contributions to Santa Clause Anonymous, a group that provides gifts for kids who would otherwise go without Christmas presents. The boy joyfully struggled to save a few pennies for the cause. On the Friday before Christmas vacation, he had fifteen cents and planned to turn in his small treasure at school that day. But a furious blizzard covered the area that Friday and the school buses couldn't run. So he waded a long distance through deep snow to give his fifteen cents to the school principal. The principal fought back tears as he accepted the boy's gift, because the frozen boy who stood beaming before him – so pleased to be able to help – was one of the destitute children listed to receive a Christmas present from Santa Clause Anonymous. Jesus said – "Give to the poor."

Prayer: Jesus, let me tell you what I have in my bank – and where my bank is. Amen.

Questions: 1. Tally up what you've deposited in your bank in heaven.
2. In terms of the world's perspective, how has God provided for you?

Thought: Jesus said “Don’t be anxious about your life...” What he really meant was ...”stop being distracted by everything under the sun”. “Focus on God -- not on these distractions.” Of course, it’s always been that way, hasn’t it? Go back to the story of creation. There they were – Adam and Eve – in a most delightful place named the Garden of Eden. They had nothing to worry about. They didn’t have to get up each morning and go to work. They had no bills to pay. They never got sick, nor did their bodies hurt or age. There was plenty to eat, and it was delicious. They didn’t have to pay any taxes. Neither did they need a retirement plan. They never got tied up in traffic. They never saw a doctor. They never got tired. There were no distractions – well, almost none.

You see, there was that special tree there in the garden. God said it was better to leave it alone. “I wonder why”, they said to each other. “I wonder what would happen if we did eat the fruit”, they pondered. It began to bug them. When God came to spend time with them, of course they wouldn’t bring up their wonderings about the tree. “No, we’ll keep that to ourselves; God doesn’t have to know.” It became quite a distraction to them. In reality, God, in person just wasn’t enough. And you know the rest of the story.

In the centuries that followed, God tried one way, then another, to be a presence with the people of God, whether in bondage, whether in the wilderness, whether in battles, whether in the Tabernacle, or whether in the Temples. But it was always the same. There were distractions, like needing food and water, like unfriendly neighbors, like countries to be defeated and taken over, like gods from here and there that provided new experiences, with no strings attached or punishments promised. There were so many distractions, there wasn’t time to devote to spending time with a God you couldn’t see or touch!

Then came Jesus, God in person. As he talked to them on that mountainside, did those gathered have any distractions in their lives that would make it difficult for them to know a personal God? Well, over 90% of them were poor, which meant they were hungry because they’d traveled there and sat for hours listening to him. And most of them didn’t have much of anything to eat in their homes. Some of them sat there without jobs. Some were worried about not having enough money to pay their taxes to Rome. Those same folks didn’t have the money to pay their taxes to the temple priests, either. And if they didn’t pay, horrible consequences lay before them, including even slavery. Distractions? Yes, there were plenty of them when Jesus walked those dusty roads.

Two thousand years later, we surely aren’t a “distracted” people, are we? After all, most of us have enough food to eat, more than enough gadgets and things to play with, at least a little money in the bank, and daily trying to figure out how to get more of everything. Yet we have become the most distracted people in human history. Why? We have the Internet, which challenges us daily in our attempts to be more intimate with God, with one another, and with the world around us. Nicholas Carr says: “Google is, quite literally, in the business of distraction.” Carr wrote a book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. In it, he says: “The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it . . . it returns us to our native state of bottom-up distractedness, while presenting us with far more distractions than our ancestors ever had to contend with.”

After all, we’re walking with Jesus to Jerusalem because God realized nothing else had worked to break through the distractedness of the very people God had created. God chose to come in person to communicate without all the distractions. “If I become like them, live among them as a human being, listen to them, heal them and teach them, maybe we can once again be what we once were...friends, in a garden”.

We know what happened. Throughout all of history, humans have struggled with distractions and barriers that kept them from knowing God in person. Pause, and consider what are your own distractions keeping you from a closer walk with God. My Number One distraction is: _____

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes to see what’s keeping me from a very close talk with You. Amen.

Questions: 1. If the Internet “owns” your time and mind, how can you take back your mind and life?
2. What are life’s biggest distractions for you?

Thought: Who among us doesn't live in a "wish world", at least some of the time? "I wish I didn't have to get up and go to work today." "I wish it would stop snowing!" "I wish that dumb driver behind me would go another way." "I wish God would heal me of my cancer." "I wish I had a job that paid a living wage." "I wish (fill in the blank) _____."

Today's reading tells of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who lived in a "wish world". Every small town that Jesus visited found him healing people of a variety of illnesses. In a land with no doctors or dependable medical systems, there came a fellow named Jesus, who, with no payment requested, healed all kinds of diseases. "I've got to go hear him." "I've got to go see him". "I wonder what he'll do today?"

Around the Mediterranean world for many centuries there were temples, cult centers, pilgrimage centers, all seeking to entice visitors from the then-known world to come, to pay, to see the magnificent things they could do. Many, if not most, were dedicated to one or many of the Roman and Greek pantheon of gods. Yes, people lived in a "wish" world then. Those dealing with disease or illness, and possessing resources, made the trip in search of healing for themselves, or for loved ones.

There were stories of miraculous events that permeated all of the cultures around the Mediterranean Sea. One such place was in Sais, Egypt where there was a magnificent temple dedicated to Minerva, the Roman goddess of crafts, poetry, and wisdom. Having paid to get in, wealthy pilgrims gathered around the centerpiece of worship, an enormous gilded altar, around which a bronze snake wound its body in order to look down upon the surface. On one side stood Bacchus, god of the vine; on the other, Diana, the mother goddess. Each held a pitcher over the altar, waiting their cue to offer libations of wine and milk to Minerva.

At the appointed time, Minerva's priests entered the sanctuary, prepared a second altar, and set it ablaze. As fire consumed the wood, the smell of incense permeated the room and then wafted slowly up through the open roof. Then Bacchus and Diana spontaneously poured out their drink offerings. As wine and milk flowed from their pitchers and mingled on the gilded altar, the bronze serpent hissed in loud approval. It was the miracle the worshipers had traveled so far to see, and paid so dearly to experience.

Religion was big business in the Roman world. A temple could put a city on the map if the miracles were impressive enough or the supernatural displays sufficiently believable. We know that Jerusalem had a temple. In terms of architecture and sheer size, Herod's temple complex was the envy of the ancient world.

But the Jews had a problem. They worshiped a silent, invisible God, who declined to amuse visitors. Even his name was too holy to pronounce. Jews lived in a wish world, too. The prospect of experiencing the supernatural proved irresistible. False prophets commonly won a hearing outside the temple through sleight-of-hand tricks, and carefully crafted illusions. In fact, so common was the use of magic that audiences came to expect a show. No sooner would someone begin teaching when he would be asked "What sign do you give?" The would-be prophet then had to impress his hearers with something astonishing, or lose them.

With this background, can you see why the many acts of healing that Jesus did spread like wildfire across a tinder-dry forest? First, you didn't have to pay to get in. Second, there were no hidden props, gimmicks, or anything of that nature. Third, all you had to do was come – and ask him to be healed. The Jewish population, most of them poor or destitute, discovered a "wish world" come true. They didn't have to travel anywhere – Jesus came to them. They truly found it difficult to believe what was happening. "Is it possible that Jesus is the Messiah?" And a few might have asked if, perhaps, Jesus was truly God. While this was going on, the Jewish leaders were threatened to their foundations when they saw what was happening, and were unable to stop it – at least, for awhile.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for paying attention to people's needs, then, and now. Amen.

Questions: 1. What are your feelings about our needs for being healed today?
2. What is the greatest miracle Jesus has performed in your own life journey?

Thought: “Listen to him”, so said God. Why? “Because he’s my Son, the Chosen One!” What do you suppose God would say to humanity in a one-on-one conversation today? I think he would say the very same thing: “Listen to him...he’s my Son, the Chosen One!”

Of all the miracles Jesus performed before the cross, this is the only one that happened to him personally. Although the three main characters would surely be Jesus, Moses and Elijah, certainly the most impressed would have been Peter, James (son of Zebedee) and John (the Apostle). First, they heard the actual voice of God. Second, they saw light and brightness that their human eyes couldn’t begin to comprehend. Third, they saw a living Moses, their leader of leaders! Fourth, they saw – alive – Elijah who their ancient records said had never experienced death. And fifth, they heard it straight from God that the person with whom they were walking to Jerusalem was, indeed, the Son of God!!! In itself, that was a transforming moment!!!

And having seen and heard such glory and majesty, on their way down the mountain, they were told by Jesus not to talk about what they had just experienced. At least not for a little while. Jesus calmed the disciples as they walked down the mountain to level ground. For Jesus himself, the miracle gave him new energy and boldness to face some very difficult days just ahead. Perhaps you haven’t thought about it, but there was something special in the miracle for Moses and Elijah, too. At that moment of tender mercy, Moses finally realized his life dream. He was standing on a mountaintop smack in the middle of the Promised Land he had never been able to walk into. And Elijah was rejoicing that his prophecies were actually, at that moment, beginning to unfold in finality. Yes, God remembers the dusty ones, the meekest, and the greatest, as well.

In one of his books, Philip Yancey tells of two phone calls he received in a matter of days. “A youth pastor in Colorado had just learned his wife and baby daughter were dying of AIDS. The mother had received a contaminated blood transfusion just before her delivery date. ‘How can I talk to my youth group about a loving God?’ he asked. ‘How can I tell them God cares?’” What could he say?

“A blind man called me on a public phone. Several months before, he had invited a recovering drug addict into his home as an act of mercy. He had just learned the recovering addict was molesting his wife – under his own roof. ‘It’s like God is punishing me for trying to serve him,’ he said. Blind, he began to imagine all that had been going on. Had the addict forced his wife, or did she cooperate willingly? Just then he ran out of quarters...and the phone went dead. Silence.” Again, what would God say to him?

O.K. Now it’s your turn. If God would speak to us today, what would we hear? If God would speak to these two situations shared by Yancey, what would they hear? What would God say today to catch the attention of the world? Jot down some of your thoughts:

God told the disciples to “Listen to Him”. We know the rest of the story, don’t we? Jesus ascended into heaven, and we haven’t seen him since. Or have we? Perhaps Peter was Jesus’ voice when he took on the forces of Rome? Do you suppose that Paul might just have been the “voice of God” as he planted the seeds of the Good News around the Mediterranean world? Is there any chance that, perhaps, your voice can be God’s voice to your family, your neighbors, your co-workers, the strangers you meet? Somehow, I can’t escape the truth that you and I are, today, God’s voices in the wilderness of the world. What are we saying?

Prayer: Jesus, help us not to be silent, but bold in being your “voice” in the world today. Amen.

- Questions: 1. When was the last time you spoke to someone on behalf of God?
2. What changes can you make in your life so that you can be heard more clearly by the world?

Thought: The transfiguration gave three disciples a “taste of heaven”. It didn’t take them long after coming off the mountain to realize that “earth” is decidedly different from “heaven”. God’s mandate to Peter, James and John was “Listen to Him”, as it was to all the disciples, and is to us today. Did you find today’s reading comforting, gentle, soft, easy to digest?

In this early stage of his earthly journey, for Jesus, it was all about living and dying. He wanted those who followed him to take their faith journey as a very serious matter -- even to die for it, if necessary. These were strong words to a group of followers who were just “getting their feet wet”. History tells us they did a terrific job of “listening” to Jesus as they took the Good News to all the corners of the Mediterranean, and beyond.

Forty-three years before Jesus’ birth, Lucius Plancus, governor of the Roman province of Gallia Transalpina, founded a town known as Lugdunum, later to become Lyons. It was here that the Council of the Gauls met every August. It quickly grew in size and importance, and at the time Jesus was traveling through Palestine, a giant theater, seating over 10,000 spectators, was already under construction. It was dedicated to Rome, to Augustus, and to the Roman and Greek pantheon of gods.

Christianity was brought to Lyons by Greeks from Asia Minor who moved there in large numbers. Prominent in their belief was that there was one God, and Jesus had come to earth to die that those who believed in him would live forever. In Lyons, religion was all about “gods”, dozens of them, replete with temples, sacrifices, pledges, and loyalty to the politics. Public loyalty was expected from all to the pantheon of gods. But Christians took today’s Scripture literally, and refused to even think of denying Christ.

In a letter sent to Christians in Asia Minor, here are some excerpts: “But those who were worthy were seized day by day...and were collected together out of the two churches...And some of our heathen servants also were seized...and these, fearing for the tortures they were seeing, and urged on by the soldiers, accused us falsely of Thyestean banquets and Edipodean intercourse, and of deeds which are not only unlawful for us to speak of or to think, but which we cannot believe were ever done by men...then the people raged against us like wild beasts.

But the whole wrath of the populace, and governor, and soldiers was aroused against Sanctus, a deacon, Martus, a new convert, Attalus, a pillar of the church, and Blandina. Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner, so that they acknowledged that they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. She exclaimed ‘I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us.’

...They endured again the running of the gauntlet and the violence of the wild beasts, and everything that the furious people called for or desired...and at last, the iron chair in which their bodies were roasted, tormenting them with the fumes. Still they did not recant...at last, having been made throughout the day a spectacle to the world, they were sacrificed.

Blandina was suspended on a stake, and exposed to be devoured by the wild beasts who would attack her...as none of the wild beasts touched her, she was finally taken from the stake, and put back in prison. On the last day of the contests, Blandina and a 15 year old boy were brought to the arena...neither would deny Christ...after scourging, after another round with wild beasts, after the roasting seat, she was finally enclosed in a net, and thrown before a bull. And after being tossed about by the bull, she finally went to be with her living Christ.”

Where, when, how often do you “stand up for Jesus”? Are we, indeed, worthy of the name “Christian”?

Prayer: Jesus, give us the courage to not, in any way, ever deny our relationship with you. Amen.

Questions: 1. How many people in your “world of contacts” know you are a follower of the Christ?
2. How does your light shine forth for Jesus today?

Thought: I wish I could have been there that day in Capernaum. You see, he had to leave town because there was, literally, no place he could be alone to pray, meditate, whatever. In those small villages, the streets were very narrow. The homes consisted of one room, and in Capernaum, they were built in small blocks of four homes facing a small courtyard. Many people lived in each home (in Egypt, as many as 20 people lived in a one-room house!). Needless to say, privacy was unknown to these people. So Jesus went outside of town to pray. But the people didn't want him to leave, and came to make a case for him staying with them. With great care, Jesus looked into the eyes of these dear people and said "I can't stay here with you because I was sent to reach other people in other places – to give them the good news." Yes, that's why Jesus came: to reach others – and others – and others – and others!!!

But unfortunately, that's not the way it is in most churches in America today. The zeal of the "reaching others" Jesus is not to be found. In her book, *The Love Revolution*, Joyce Meyers shares the story of Pastor Paul Scanlon in the United Kingdom. "The average church size in the UK is twenty people, and 98 percent of the population not only does not attend church but is actually 'anti-church'. So by British standards, we were a fairly large church with more than 450 people at that time in a building that was almost paid for.

We had great preaching and were gifted musically and creatively. But we were trapped in what seemed like an endless cycle of looking after what could only be described as 'high-maintenance, overfed, and under-exercised Christians'. High-maintenance Christians are one of the devil's best-kept secrets in his plan to neutralize the church. . . When everyone is so happy, loving, friendly, and blessed, who wants to announce that we are dying? I then said to our church, 'We are naked, comfortable, intense, safe and irrelevant – beginning with me'. Don't get me wrong. We had a theology about reaching the lost, but weren't reaching anyone. We prayed for the lost, preached and sang about the lost, we even wept over the lost, but no lost were being rescued. We had become an inward-looking religious club, and in our comfort and blessing, had lost sight of Jesus' heart for 'the others'.

I preached a sermon titled 'We are leaving the 99 in '99!' (Remember the one lost sheep?) I was stunned by the reaction of good, Spirit-filled people, who, when push came to shove, could not stomach the idea of our beautiful church being trashed by an influx of dirty sinners. So, we launched a bus ministry in 1999. Within weeks we were busing in hundreds of those dirty sinners. These un-churched, often rough, rude and unpredictable people ruined our beautiful club. They were referred to as the "bus people" by our respectable members. Every day I received unpleasant, often nasty and threatening letters and phone calls from people I loved, and who I'm sure loved me, but who just didn't get it. The kids who came on the buses were accused of ruining our Sunday School, and their parents were accused of ruining the main service, usually by smoking, swearing, and worst of all, actually daring to sit where long-standing members usually sat!

. . . Then came the exodus. People began to leave, and with them went their money. And the newcomers had little in the way of this world's goods to replace what was leaving. . . I love the local church. . . But as much as I love the church, I refused to die in the comfort of soft Christianity. I have determined to live full and die empty. I can't do that within the four walls of the local church, and neither can you.'

For generations, the church, like the people of Capernaum, has been trying to keep Jesus to itself, and for generations Jesus has been trying to leave comfortable Christianity to continue reaching others. This fundamental misunderstanding about what matters most to God is at the heart of the church's failure to impact a hurting world." (Long story short...the church now numbers in the thousands!)

Jesus came to walk to the cross – to reach others with the love of God. No other reason. How would you describe your home church's purpose for existence today? How do you describe your own?

Prayer: Jesus, show us who some of the others are whom you want us to reach. Amen.

Questions: 1. As Scanlon described his congregation (above), how would you describe yours?
2. Where do some "lost sheep" live in your community?

Day Twenty Two Wednesday, March 11, 2015 Matthew 19: 16-22;6:24

Thought: Did Jesus really mean what he said to the young adult who brought his questions to him? Could Jesus have actually meant that if you go to church faithfully, if you've confessed your sins before God and accepted Jesus as your Redeemer, and if you've then been baptized and are doing everything you can to lead a faithful life before God -- that you're not there yet? There's still one more thing you need to do???

When did you ever hear a preacher tell you that, if you want to be fully Christian, you need to divest yourself of your bank and retirement accounts, sell your home/s and possessions, and . . . follow Jesus? When did you ever hear a preacher tell you that "getting more" is not the way of Jesus? How do you handle some of today's preaching about the so-called "prosperity gospel"?

Did you know that it was over 150 years after Jesus ascended before a very few people of wealth began to be seen in the early Christian communities/churches? Why? Because early Christians took most seriously what Jesus said – even when it came to their pocketbooks!!! Not just our country, but today's world is obsessed with "getting things", "more and more", and wealth of every kind. Even the youngest of today's children are faced with the challenge of "riches" from their earliest learning moments – and at home. One wonders what the mindset of the next two generations will be with this kind of "life" education.

As noted earlier, most of those who gathered to hear Jesus could be labeled as some degree of being poor. Some were extreme cases, while the majority of them were people who worried about food for the next day, or the next week. All of those who were poor knew exactly who was in the opposite group – the rich! In that day and culture, they sort of "stuck out like sore thumbs"!

But when Jesus said those words in today's reading "You cannot serve God and mammon", he wasn't talking just to the rich young ruler. No, he was addressing the multitudes gathered on the hill side when he began his earliest teaching ministry. And the poor were definitely there; in fact, most of those gathered to hear his teaching about The Lord's Prayer and The Beatitudes were poor people. So even we who don't have so much apparently need to be well aware of how much we keep for ourselves, and how much we choose to share with others, regardless of how we are able to do that.

I will never, ever forget the generosity of an older couple who didn't have a lot of this world's goods, but who slipped into the hands of a very young and poor preacher a twenty-dollar bill so I could buy a new pair of shoes! I guess the holes were pretty obvious when I was up front, doing my thing. The wealthiest fellow in the church, owner of properties and businesses and new cars never did such a thing. Is that what Jesus meant for us to do? When we're desperate ourselves, should we try to help someone else who is hurting?

History tells of a woman named Marcella, who grew up in Rome 300 years after Jesus' earthly sojourn. Her mother, Albina, was an educated woman of wealth and benevolence. One childhood memory impacted Marcella greatly. St. Athanasius, The Patriarch of Constantinople, stayed in their home for a number of years, and she listened to his stories, particularly those of the desert monks.

As a young woman, she married a wealthy aristocrat, but he died 7 months later. She then decided to devote the rest of her life to charity and prayer, and was convicted that God was directing her to a life of poverty and service. She left behind her fashionable dresses for a coarse brown garment. Along with other women, she formed a community known as the brown dress society, spending their time praying, singing, reading the Bible and serving the needy. Her palatial home became a refuge for weary pilgrims, and poor people. Marcella was one person who took what Jesus said with the utmost sincerity – ". . . this I must do, if I am to serve God". What do you think the disciples thought when they heard what Jesus said? What do we do in today's world as we wrestle with what Jesus said about "God and mammon"?

Prayer: Jesus, two thousand years later, help us sort out what you thought was most important. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways is living in a culture of "acquiring" a challenge to you today?
2. How do you interpret Jesus' instruction to the rich, young ruler for your life today?

Thought: In today's reading, and in many other places, Jesus talked about "service", "serving", and "servants". In many of his parables, he made reference to servants, or those who served in some way. After all, there were many, many of them in that society. Tension was great between those "in authority", and those who were bound to listen and obey. One result was that even Jewish religious leaders had little respect.

For Jesus to tell his listeners that they should live their lives as servants wasn't easy to take. In that society, neither Greeks or Jews thought very much of their servants. The Greeks looked down on the common table servant. The Jewish attitude was a bit better, and there was even some protection provided in Jewish law (Lev. 25: 42-55). But the overall attitude was still very negative. A contemporary penned these words that reflect the attitude of the public: "Yoke and thong will bow the neck, and for a wicked servant there are racks and tortures. Put him to work, that he may not be idle, for idleness teaches much evil. Set him to work, as is fitting for him, and if he does not obey, make his fetters heavy."

The call from Jesus to service and servanthood throughout his ministry is all the more remarkable against this societal background. In today's verses, Jesus was saying that the mark of greatness in both the Gentile and the Jewish world was authority. But if you were a servant, you did so out of your own need. The words of the centurion in Matthew 8:9 (and other passages) confirm the normal view of service and servants in the Greco-Roman and Judean world: "I say to my servant, 'Do this', and he does it." In short, "service" meant menial service to meet the needs of the master.

If you were in the crowd listening to Jesus talk about servants, and you were looking for a strong, authoritative Messiah-type leader who would challenge both the oppression of the Roman Empire and the Jewish temple, what would you think? I suppose we have to admit that it would be difficult to conjure up confrontation with either oppressor – and winning – by a bunch of slaves and other types of servants.

What kind of people impressed Jesus? A widow who placed her last two pennies in the offering. A dishonest tax collector who climbed a tree to get a better look at him. A nameless, nondescript and unimportant child. A woman with a string of five unhappy marriages. A blind beggar. An adulteress. A man with leprosy. Strength, good looks, success, the right connections and a competitive instinct bring success in a society like ours, but those very qualities probably block entrance to the kingdom of heaven. According to Jesus, dependence, being sorry, repentance, a longing to change – these are the gates to God's kingdom.

Perhaps you've missed it in your journey, but throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God has a partiality toward the poor, the servants, the disadvantaged. Why does God single out the poor and servants for special attention over any other group in society? Monika Hellwig listed ten "advantages" to being poor or a servant: "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. 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 born of acknowledged dependence. 8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want. 9. When the poor hear the Gospel preached, it sounds like good news, and not like a threat or a scolding. 10. The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have little to lose and are ready for anything."

Keep walking with Jesus, and you will see far more of a servant than you will a king! Was Jesus serious about us being "service people?" Is Christ's church today missing its original calling to be "servants"?

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes so I can see who you really want me to be. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways do you serve "the world" in the name of Jesus Christ?
2. How does your church touch the life of its community as a servant church?

Thought: The key to this story of healing is found in the book of Numbers 15: 37-39 – “The Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon each tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them...”

The word in Hebrews for “corners” is *kanaf*. The word for “tassel” (or “fringe”) is *tzitzit* (pronounced seet-see). If you were to move within a Jewish community today, you would see that many Jews wear a prayer shawl to obey this text. The prayer shawl is found in some interesting places throughout the Bible. Perhaps the most significant for us during Lent is found in the book of Malachi 4:2 -- “But for you who fear my name the Sun of Righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

The word Malachi used for wings was *kanaf*, the same word used in Numbers that referred to the edge of a garment, to which the tassels were attached. In the centuries before Jesus’ birth, a legend had grown that when the Messiah came, there would be special healing powers in his *kanaf*, in the tassels of his prayer shawl.

Fast forward three of four hundred years to the time of Jesus. A woman had been sick for twelve years, and no one could help her with a cure. She pushed her way through the crowd to get to Jesus. When she got close to him, she grabbed his cloak. Now in case you haven’t noticed it on your journey so far, Jesus was a Torah-observant Jewish rabbi who kept the scripture commandments word for word. This included passages like Numbers 15, which meant Jesus would have been wearing a prayer shawl.

When she grabbed the edge of his cloak, it’s exciting to realize she was demonstrating that she believed Jesus was the Messiah, and that the tassels had healing power. She believed that Jesus was exactly who Malachi was talking about!!!

If you were in the crowd that day, what would you have thought about her? She believed that Jesus was the Messiah. She touched his shawl. She was healed. How does your faith match the faith she displayed?

Then Jesus told her to “...go in peace”. The Hebrew word “shalom” (peace) is an important word in the Bible. For many, it conveys a wish for peace, and especially the absence of conflict. However, the true meaning of the word includes peace, even in the midst of conflict, or when facing death. Shalom is the presence of God; it’s the presence of wholeness – completeness. Jesus placed a blessing on “all” of the woman, not just her physical body. For Jesus, peace with God involves all of you/us – our body, soul, mind, emotions, relationships, actions – every inch of our being.

Billy Graham wrote about Dr. Effie Jane Wheeler who taught English and literature where he attended college. She loved God deeply, and publicly. She was enthused about the subjects she taught, and loved the students, the good and otherwise. One day in May, 1949, this letter from Dr. Wheeler was read in the chapel service. “I greatly appreciate the moment in chapel that may be given to reading this, for before you leave for the summer I should like to have you know the truth about me as I have learned it just this last Friday. My doctor at last has given what has been his real diagnosis of my illness for weeks – an inoperable case of cancer. Now if he had been a Christian, he wouldn’t have been so dilatory or shaken, for he would have known, as you and I do, that life or death is equally welcome when we live in the will and presence of the Lord. If the Lord has chosen me to go to Him soon, I go gladly. Please do not give a moment’s grief for me. I go gladly. I do not say a cold goodbye, but rather a warm Auf Wiedersehen till I see you again – in the blessed land where I may be allowed to draw aside a curtain when you come to join me. With a heart full of love for each of you...Effie Jane Wheeler.” She died two weeks later. Here, indeed, was a woman who knew the full meaning of Jesus’ Shalom!!!

Prayer: Jesus, give me Shalom peace – about everything, and in everything. Amen.

Questions: 1. Describe your innermost feelings about your salvation – do they include everything in life?
2. In what parts of your life do you experience Shalom -- peace?

Thought: Two days ago, the same verses were listed as the text for the day. Because of the text, I wanted to see if you are still walking with us to Jerusalem. Or, perhaps, did you do what Jesus told the young man to do? Because if you are doing that, you obviously won't have time to walk to Jerusalem, or do much of anything else until you rid yourselves of all your belongings.

Why is it that you and I can read the same words of Jesus, and arrive at very different conclusions? Do you suppose that those who listened to him teaching on the hillsides of Galilee heard different messages, too? We live in a world today that is steeped in the things of mammon: wages; bank accounts; credit cards; retirement plans; buying "bigger and more and better" is the domain of TV advertising. Since Jesus said we "...can't worship God and money both", why haven't we done what Jesus told the rich young fellow to do?

A few hundred years after Jesus ascended, a young man sat in church and heard the verse from Matthew that said "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor". Since they were the words of Jesus, he took them personally. Without delay, he sold everything he owned, gave it all to the poor, and went into the desert (about 270 AD). At the age of 18, he moved to the desert to live in perfect solitude. His name was Antony, and today we know him as the "Father of Monks", since many followed in his footsteps.

Antony first apprenticed himself with an old ascetic in a neighboring village. From there he moved into deserted tombs located some distance away. Then he moved to a deserted fortress across the river, and eventually he established a monastery by the Red Sea.

The idea was that if you were going to be in touch with God, you had to remove anything that would be a distraction from allowing that to happen. Solitude was desired by many who removed themselves from the world of mammon. But more and more joined them, so that if you truly wanted to be alone, you had to move farther into the desert. It was reported at the time that at the end of the 4th century, 2,000 monks lived in monasteries near Alexandria, and 5,000 in Nitria.

What do you do daily to get closer to God, please God, or listen for God's voice? Read your Bible? Pray? Attend a worship service? How about taking a walk in your bare feet on hot coals? Or scorpions? Or asps? That's what some monks did. Some monks had hair so long it served as their clothing. Some monks wore chains, day and night. Omnophrius withdrew so far into the desert that Paphnutius had to walk over 8 days and received miraculous aid before reaching him. Abba Bessarion avoided sleep for 14 days and nights by standing upright in the midst of thorn bushes. Eulogius often fasted an entire week, eating only bread and salt. Pachomius bound ashes against his loins so that they ate away the flesh. A hermit in lower Egypt avoided the temptation of a woman by shutting himself in his cell and dousing the flame of lust by thrusting his fingers one by one into the flame of his lamp!

Scripture served as the ultimate guidebook for these men and women. They read it carefully and often, and committed large portions of it to memory. Antony paid such close attention when he heard Scriptures read that his memory served him in place of books. They also lived the Scriptures. When Macarius returned to his cell one day, he found a man stealing his belongings. He reacted calmly and helped the thief load his donkey with the objects from his cell. As the man left, Macarius watched him go while saying words from Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away...blessed be the name of the Lord."

How can some read God's words, and respond as these people did, while others respond differently, or don't respond at all? How do you and I respond when we read God's words today? Or, perhaps, do we respond at all? We're all busy -- but are we busy serving God, or serving mammon?

Prayer: Jesus, open my eyes and ears anew to the messages from our God, who loves us. Amen.

Questions: 1. How can Christians today love God, and not serve mammon at the same time?
2. How has God spoken to you through the printed Word? ...through prayer experiences?

Thought: Since we've been speaking about reading and understanding Scripture for a few days, how much Scripture do you think the twelve disciples knew? Jesus grew up in a most orthodox Jewish region of Israel called Galilee. They believed there was a day when God had actually given Moses a copy of what he said. And they believed the first five books of the Bible were what God said: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They called these five books the Torah.

The word *Torah* can mean “teachings”, “instructions”, or simply “the way”. They thought that the Torah told them how to live their lives as God wanted them to live. The entire focus of faithful Jews of Jesus' day was to teach, live and obey the Torah.

When did they start teaching the Torah? One ancient rabbi said “Under the age of six, we do not receive a child as a pupil; from six upwards accept him and stuff him (with the Torah) like an ox”! So the kids of Jesus' day went to school when they reached the age of six. They went to the local synagogue, and were taught by the local rabbi. Their schooling was called *Bet Sefer* (House of the Book), and lasted until they reached the age of ten. You may find this hard to believe, but at age six or seven, they began to memorize the Torah, and by the age of ten, most knew all five books from memory!!!

Memorization was important, because almost no one had their own copy. In a village, there was probably one copy, which was kept in the synagogue in a closet called the Torah's Ark. During most weeks, it was brought out just once to be read publicly. The village rabbi who taught the Torah was the most respected member of the community. He knew the text inside and out. Not many qualified for this role.

At the age of ten, students who gave evidence of grasping and understanding the texts would go on to the next level of education called *Bet Talmud* (House of Learning). For the next four years, they received intensive Torah training. Those who were slow or showed little interest would focus on their family trade, seeing their future just as that of their parents. Amazingly, during the next four years of schooling, the top students would have memorized the entire Old Testament – all 39 books!!!

Once this phase of schooling was completed, the young men moved to the next level of study, called *Bet Midrash* (House of Study). A student would present himself to a well-known rabbi, and say “Rabbi, I want to become one of your disciples.” In doing this, he was saying he wanted to learn to do what the rabbi did. It's important to note that those who became rabbis did so when they were approaching thirty years of age. If the rabbi believed that a student who approached him had what it took to be a follower, he would say the simple words “Come, follow me.”

We tend to think that what Jesus did -- about 30 years of age -- did while walking along the Sea of Galilee and calling for some fishermen to become his disciples was unique, unusual, a once-in-a-lifetime kind of step to take. It wasn't. There were rabbis all over Palestine recruiting followers, too.

But there were two differences:

- First, the fishermen didn't come to the rabbi and ask to become followers; no, Jesus, the Rabbi, went to the fishermen and asked them if they would become his disciples.
- Second, the twelve men Jesus asked to become disciples were the rejects; they weren't good enough when they turned 14 to continue to pursue Torah education, and become attached to a disciple. Instead they went to fish, work in the fields, or whatever. The twelve rejects were the people that Jesus decided would not only be his disciples, but become apostles, and on them the future of Christ's church – forever – would rest.

Prayer: Jesus, we were among the rejects, too; thanks for choosing us. Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you feel about Jesus' selection of leaders for God's kingdom movement?
2. Has Jesus ever asked you to “Come, follow me” – about anything? Would you go, if he did?

Day Twenty Seven

Monday, March 16, 2015

**Matthew 14: 15-21
Mark 8: 1-9**

Thought: A longtime pastor friend and colleague, Ed Heist (Aliquippa, PA) recently shared some of his thoughts about Jesus' feeding of five thousand people on one occasion, and four thousand on another. He said, "I've always been fascinated with these two stories of feeding hungry people. Jesus surely did care about people, and their respective needs. These two stories took place on opposite sides of the Sea of Galilee. When he fed the five thousand people, they were on the so-called Jewish side of the Sea. Jesus used five loaves and two fish from a little boy's lunch, and blessed it. Rather amazingly, at the conclusion of the meal, Jesus asked for the leftovers to be collected, and there were twelve baskets full – obviously far more than what they had at the beginning.

The feeding of the four thousand took place on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. This is called the Decapolis, which means ten cities. Today the area is called the Golan Heights. After three days with Jesus, the people were obviously hungry. This time they found seven loaves and a few fish, and after Jesus' blessing, again all the people were fed. This time, seven baskets full were collected. Have you ever wondered what Jesus did with the leftover in these stories? Do you think he gave it to the local "Meals on Donkeys" programs? (I don't know either, but it's fun to guess about!)

Feeding the 5000 on the Jewish side of the sea showed Jesus' love and concern for reaching out to his brethren. Feeding the 4000 on the other side of the sea showed him reaching out to the Greeks of the Decapolis. Now why do you think the Greeks would have any interest in turning out to hear the Jewish Rabbi, Jesus?

Sometimes it's all about location. Remember the story of the deranged man who hung out in a cemetery on the Greek's side of the Sea of Galilee? He was such an extreme case that the locals tried to keep him shackled in chains. How do you think he felt when he heard Jesus had come back to the area? I'm guessing it was this very man who heard that Jesus was coming, and he made the rounds to the ten communities to spread the word that the man who had healed him was coming back. "Come and see him yourself", he said – and they came out four thousand strong.

Have you ever wondered where they could, at the end of the meal, suddenly come up with 12 baskets? In those days, most people carried a basket (sort of backpack size) to put in items of clothing, and a few pieces of fruit or snacks. When Jesus suggested the leftovers be collected, each disciple most likely took his own basket and made his way through the seated multitude.

However, the word for basket used after feeding the 4000 is different. It means a "hamper-sized basket". Do you recall the story of Paul escaping over the city wall in Damascus? He went over the wall in a "hamper basket" – which means these hampers were large enough to hold a grown person! There may have only been seven of them, but it was a lot of food!

Right after feeding the four thousand, the disciples and Jesus left on the boat to go back across the lake. But they forgot to bring food with them – there was only one loaf! So Jesus gave them a pop quiz. "When we fed the 4000 people, how much was left over?" "Twelve", they said. "And when we fed the 4000, how many baskets of leftovers did we have?" "Seven", they said. So Jesus said "Do you still not understand?" What he was really saying was "Don't you get it – bread is not our problem."

As we travel with Jesus today, slowly we learn to offer him what we have. And Jesus blesses it, and multiplies it, and uses it in his kingdom work, and both we and others are blessed by him. We also learn that he uses what we give. These two stories tell us that God's resources are quite unlimited."

Prayer: Jesus, help us offer you ourselves, as well as what we have – and bless us and others. Amen.

Questions: 1. What kind of pop quiz would Jesus give you today? What don't you get about Jesus today?
2. Do you ever sense that Jesus is really a fun person – nudging you along?

Thought: In most athletic games, there comes that moment that is called a “turning point”. The outcome of the game is usually determined when the turning point has arrived. Today’s verses are, indeed, a turning point for Jesus. Consider what he did.

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Pharisees had selected the fourth commandment as their favorite. “The seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work...therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20: 10-11) From the beginning, the seventh day was set aside to commemorate God’s creation of the world, and to celebrate God’s provision for humans. “Sabbath” is based on the Hebrew verb “to cease”. God paused to declare all creation complete and good. It was to be a day of feasting and singing, a time in which families delighted in their God and bonded with one another.

Most of us today live with a lot of rules and laws. If we break them, there is usually a price to pay. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had transformed the Sabbath day itself into a myriad of “speed traps”! They made the Sabbath to be something totally different from what God had originally intended. God said people were to “rest” on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees added a long list of “don’t do’s”! And just in case they had missed something, they actually added a long list of thirty-nine categories of forbidden activities: carrying; burning; extinguishing; finishing; writing; erasing; cooking; washing; sewing; tearing; knotting; untying; shaping; plowing; planting; reaping; harvesting; threshing; winnowing; selecting; sifting; grinding; kneading; combing; spinning; dyeing; chain-stitching; warping; weaving; unraveling; building; demolishing; trapping; shearing; slaughtering; skinning; tanning; smoothing; and marking!

You’ll have to admit that with a list like the above, you’re not going to be doing very much on the Sabbath that might in the slightest way hint of work or activity!!! Today’s verses represent a turning point for Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. He gives a broadside to the Pharisees by telling them that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Then he drives the point home by telling them that he, himself, is Lord even of the Sabbath!!! To the Pharisees this was a public fist in the face! Not long after, the turning point for Jesus continued when he said “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11: 28-30)

First, he didn’t tell them to go to church. Nor did he tell them to go to the Temple. Neither did he tell them to make a sacrifice, or go on a pilgrimage, or do a lot of good deeds -- none of the above. All you have to do is “come to me”, he said. The key to his words above are his description of self as “gentle” and “humble”. The Greek word for “gentle” is “praus”, which means to find oneself in a stunted, humble lowly position. It was a social and economic term for “one who is in the position of a servant.” It describes a person who owns no property and who has to earn bread by serving others.

The word for “humble” is “tapeinos”, and pictures someone bowing low, and means “bowed down,” “small,” “insignificant in comparison to something else.” When he said these words, he identified himself with the people he came to lift up. To help the lowly, he became low. He burdened himself with the burdens of those he wanted to set free.

Second, he described the Pharisees – indeed, this is the public turning point. “They do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues – and love being called Rabbi by men.” (Matthew 23: 5-7) In these few words, he reached out his arm to the downtrodden, and while he made a determined enemy of those who owned the Synagogue. Yes, this is the final turning point for Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, you were so committed, in spite of the odds against you. Help us grow our own faith. Amen.

Questions: 1. Is your view of God as One who is humble and gentle? If not, what is your view of God?
2. What do you suppose the disciples thought when he portrayed the Pharisees as he did?

Thought: For most of Jesus' listeners, food was a daily challenge, an everyday concern. Early in his ministry, he suggested that the God of the Universe was, indeed, interested in their everyday problems. When it came to the subject of food, he told them to boldly ask God to "...give us this day our daily bread"; or, "...give us today the bread we need"; or, "...keep us alive with three square meals!"

Since his listeners were Jews of one brand or another, Jesus was referring to their ancestor's journey through the wilderness under Moses, around 1400 BC. He was reminding them of the days when they had to travel light, because they were always moving. He was reminding them that each day they had to collect manna, enough food for that day. Nothing could be "stored" for the next day. They would be moving again. So each day, they lived in utter dependence on God's provision.

Fast forward two thousand years. Who among us is not insulated from such daily dependence on God? Who among us, once a meal is eaten, pauses to reflect with gratitude to God for such a meal? We have bank accounts, credit cards, and insurance policies. We have countless grocery stores begging us to buy their foods. We have refrigerators, freezers, fast food restaurants, lunch containers, and air conditioners to keep us pleasantly cool while we eat. Such things have produced around the world a smug sense of independence and invulnerability. To many, Jesus is quite out-of-date. We don't need to ask God for our daily food supply, because we can handle it ourselves.

But wait a minute. In the same context that he offered the model prayer, he said some other things to a sophisticated, independent, self-centered civilization yet-to-come. He reminded us that we can't keep our hair from turning gray, or falling out! Not one of us can add a day to our lives. Neither can we make ourselves taller. Unlike the sparrows flying overhead, we live within creaturely limits. Our "show" is not going to last forever. There is change ahead, if not right now. This awareness of our creaturely limitations, dependence and vulnerability doesn't make us less happy, Jesus suggested; it actually increases our happiness. Why?

It liberates us from the addictive drives of the never-enough system within which all of us live: more food; more drink; more clothes; more cars; more information; more entertainment – always more, more, more. We are freed if we can see ourselves as loved by God within what God has created, instead of as self-made consumers in a self-made economic system. When we pray "Give me this day my daily bread", we've been radically liberated from the never-enough system of today's cultures. In fact, Jesus suggested that if we "do these things" all we could possibly need will come to us (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus loved the disciples. So, too, God loved the disciples with every ounce of Godly love that was available. Jesus loves every disciple alive today, too, including you who are reading this lesson. If Jesus loves you, so does God. Or, is our love for God conditioned by a good day, some good luck, or good fortune that has come our way, yesterday or today? Is God, in whatever are your circumstances, enough?

There is a word from a Jewish song that has been a key part of the Passover celebration for over a thousand years. It's the Hebrew word *deyenu*, and it means "It would have been enough".

- If God had brought us out of Egypt, *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.
- If God had split the sea for us, *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.
- If God had led us out on dry land – *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.
- If God had provided for our needs for forty years – *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.
- If God had fed us manna – *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.
- If God had led us to Mount Sinai – *deyenu* – *it would have been enough*.

Whatever are your life circumstances today, can you say with the Hebrews of old – *deyenu*???

Prayer: Jesus, two thousand years later, thank you for your words of wisdom to us. Amen.

Questions: 1. How close do you allow God to become a part of your daily life?
2. How close do you allow yourself to edge towards a living God on a daily basis?

Thought: Grace. That's what today's reading is about. That's what Jesus' walk to Jerusalem was all about. In a variety of ways, Jesus embodied the grace of God. Think of a normal Sunday morning worship service that you attend. That's how this story begins. Jesus was teaching a group of interested people from all walks of life when he was rudely interrupted.

A group of Pharisees and "teachers of the law" disrupted everything by literally dragging a woman before the group. She had been caught in adultery. Now Jewish law stated clearly that when people were caught in an adulterous situation, both were to be put to death! Where was the man? Do you suppose he might even have been a Pharisee? When guilt was determined, first they were to be stoned by those who were bringing the accusations. Then all who were present were to throw stones. Such an act of stoning, however, was to take place outside the city walls.

It was an ugly scene, as always. The woman was stripped to the waist as a token of her shame. She was terrified, defenseless, publicly humiliated, and covered before Jesus, her arms covering her bared breasts.

Now there was a problem. Moses' law specified death by stoning for adultery. But Roman law forbade Jews from carrying out executions. Would Jesus obey Moses or Rome? They'd prepared an interesting trap for him. He already had a reputation for kindness, and extending mercy, understanding and forgiveness. Would he be able to find a way to let this adulteress off the hook? If he did that, he'd have to defy the law of Moses before a crowd of temple leaders and followers gathered in the very courts of the temple.

Jesus said nothing. Instead he bent down and wrote in the sand with his finger.

In your mind's eye, take a look around you. Who do you see? For the Pharisees, the answer was obvious. They saw the "guilty" person, but the rest of them weren't guilty. For others in the crowd, they saw the guilty woman, and were glad they didn't wear her label. For the disciples, they saw the guilty woman, and were also glad they weren't classified as such.

That's not what Jesus saw. Instead of seeing both guilty and "righteous" people, Jesus saw two different types of guilty people! There were guilty people who acknowledged their wrongs, and guilty ones who did not. After all, finding fault or blaming others is as wrong as adultery, or saying something and not meaning it, or loving God on Sunday, and living as if God didn't exist the rest of the week – the list could go on forever!!!

After writing something in the sand, and those who were closest read it and whispered it through the crowd gathered, Jesus finally stood up and said "If any of you are without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her." He gave them plenty of time to think about that by bending down and writing some more words in the sand. By the time he stood up, the woman stood near him – all alone – while the disciples watched from a distance. "Has no one condemned you?" he said. "Not one, sir", she says. "Then neither do I condemn you. . . go now, and leave your life of sin." And at that, Jesus walked towards her as he pulled off his shawl, and placed it around her shoulders. Jesus was/is a person of grace, of understanding, even in the face of sin and shame.

This is one of history's most beautiful stories. But it rattles me because by my human nature, I identify more with the accusers than the accused. I hear weird, wild, almost unbelievable stories every day of people who have gone wrong, done wrong, or dealt wrong. Almost always, it is easy for me to place blame on them without a shred of evidence of their circumstances, stories, hurts or pain. There's not much grace in that!

This walk to Jerusalem is all about grace – it's the grace of Eternal God who through Jesus is willing to pay whatever it costs to redeem every guilty person on the face of the globe. May we reflect such grace.

Prayer Jesus, thank you for your grace to forgive me for the sins I haven't yet committed. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways have you experienced the grace of God on your journey?
2. Describe to yourself how you think God views you on your journey today.

Thought: We've been walking alongside Jesus for thirty days. Have you figured out who he really is? Do you read the story of Jesus as the story of the Good Samaritan? When did Jesus not cross to the other side of the road because there was someone who was in need? When did Jesus not have time to help someone, or to listen to a plea for help or healing? Perhaps the biggest question emerging from the Good Samaritan story is "where are you and I in the story"?

One semester, a seminary professor decided to bring some reality to his preaching class. So one day he scheduled all of the class members to preach on the story of the good Samaritan. He set up his experiment so that on the day of the class, each student had to go, one at a time, from one classroom to another where he or she would preach a sermon.

The professor gave some students ten minutes to go from one room to the other; to others, he allowed much less time, thus forcing them to rush in order to keep up with the schedule. Each student, one at a time, had to walk down a certain corridor. They had to walk by a bum (who was deliberately planted there!) who was most obviously in need of some kind of help or aid.

The results were surprising, depending on your expectations. Overall, the percentage of those who stopped to help was very few. And those who did stop did very little to help the man because they had another agenda – they had to get to the classroom in order to preach their sermon on the good Samaritan! Those who had the most limited time to get to the next classroom just didn't have time to stop at all.

When it was all over, the professor shared with class members what he had observed. There were expressions of shock, regret, anger, and disgust (both at the professor for "setting them up", and at themselves for not making a connection between what they were preaching about, and what they ended up doing!). How ironic that they could actually walk by a beggar sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall, do nothing for him, and then deliver a sermon on the Good Samaritan.

I suppose the remaining basic question for today is, are we any different from the students? From the "beggar's" point of view, there is a poignant poem that addresses the issue (anonymous):

*"I was hungry and you formed a humanities club to discuss my hunger.
Thank you.
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel to pray for my release.
Nice.
I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.
What good did that do?
I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your own health.
But I needed you.
I was homeless and you preached to me of the shelter of the love of God.
I wished you'd taken me home.
I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me.
Why didn't you stay with me?
You seem so holy, so close to God; but I'm still very hungry, lonely, cold, and in pain.
Does it really matter to you?"*

There is an old hymn that opens with the line..."Open my eyes, that I may see..." Perhaps that is the song we should sing when pondering the story of the good Samaritan. Jesus will open our eyes, if we ask.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to stop looking at my cell phone face, so that I can see the face of a beggar or someone in need whom I could help. Amen.

Question: 1. Where/who are the beggars in your daily walk?
2. Reflect on the last needy person you helped – who was it? How did you help them?

Thought: When was the last time you used the word “sin” in a conversation with someone? When was the last time you heard a sermon on “sin”? When was the last time you read the word “sin” in your local paper, or favorite magazine? When have you ever seen the word “sin” online in any form? When was the last time you thought about something you did as “sin”?

We live in a world in which a concept of sin doesn’t exist anymore. We talk about laws, and statutes, and rules not to be broken. The secular press refers to laws, and punishments for those who break such laws. Jesus saw it somewhat differently. Yes, there were secular laws that needed to be heeded. But Jesus spoke of sin and sinners many times on his way to Jerusalem. He described sinners as those who were not within the Covenant (after all, he was addressing orthodox Jews!), and who did not observe God’s will. Ah, that was the crux of it. To Jesus, God did (does) have something to say about divine expectations regarding human behavior. Jesus denounced sin! He even denounced sin that lay in the secret roots of our human behavior. So where is sin to be found in our world today? Non-existent? Everywhere? Perhaps it depends on who you are, and where you are, as well. At the close of yesterday’s reading, that old hymn “Open my eyes...” was referenced. Perhaps it’s needed today, as well, in the story of Lazarus.

Rob Bell (author) told of his trip to Kigala, Rwanda in 2002. They drove from the airport to the hotel. “Soon after leaving the airport I saw a kid, probably ten or eleven, with a missing hand standing by the side of the road. Then I saw another kid, just down the street, missing a leg. Then another in a wheelchair. Hands, arms, legs – I must have seen fifty or more teenagers with missing limbs in just those first several miles. My guide explained that during the genocide one of the ways to most degrade and humiliate your enemy was to remove an arm or a leg of his young child with a machete, so that years later he would have to live with the reminder of what you did to him.” Is it possible that, for many, this world itself is a literal hell?

Not long ago, I looked into the eyes of a young man, and wondered what he saw. His was not a normal look, but was unique in that it was a ravaged, empty stare that saw me, and didn’t see me -- or much of anything else. He was a cocaine addict, and his world was, indeed, hellish.

I ran into a couple I’d known years back, when their family was growing up. They were a fun family to know and be around. I asked about the kids. They talked about their daughter. I asked about the son. They told me that he had committed suicide in his early twenties. Life had become hell for him.

So you don’t like the word “sin”? Neither did Jesus. After all, it was that word that cost him his life a few weeks later. He tried to impress upon people the seriousness of sinning by using rather extreme language such as suggesting that we ought to gouge out our eyes or maim ourselves rather than commit certain sins!

In verse 15 of today’s reading, Jesus told the Pharisees “...for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” In a world that denies God, then or now, Jesus was telling anyone who would listen that God IS important, that God DOES have expectations, and that God LOVES every one of us in spite of our sins and shortcomings! Jesus drew a picture of God who loved a man in rags, a woman with open sores, a man with no money, a woman with no title, a man with no bank account, a woman with no cell phone – and a man who had to rely on dogs, not doctors, while eating scraps from someone else’s table. That’s what Jesus was about. In the next two weeks, all that happens to Jesus is because of sin: individual sins, corporate sins, government sins, religious sins, all the sins of humanity.

I know you’re probably not very happy or pleased with today’s readings. I certainly don’t blame you, either. Nobody is happy to confront sin – or sinning – or sinners. However, don’t ever forget that that’s what Jesus came to do – confront sin – and love sinners. I say with Paul -- “of whom I am chief”!

Prayer: Jesus, help me not to shy away from the Lazaruses in the world...show me how to love them. Amen.

Questions: 1. What bothers you most about the concept of sin, as dealt with in the Bible?
2. Where can you find a Lazarus to help?

Thought: In the story of the raising from death of Lazarus by Jesus, this verse is rarely referenced. Why would Thomas and most of the other disciples think that there was a possibility that they would face death by going with Jesus? It is true that the many teachers in Israel at this time were revered by their followers/disciples. However, Jewish teaching said death might be an expectation in circumstances about God or the Torah -- but certainly not from one of the teachers of the day.

As Jesus' three years of ministry were rapidly coming to an end, there was no doubt that all of the disciples were apprehensive about the situation. People were talking. It was no secret that the Pharisees were trying to find a way to stop Jesus' ministry. Roman leaders were in open conversation with temple leaders. Gossip was rampant. Some of the talk was ugly. Some of the talk was about death. Some of the talk was about the group who followed Jesus around Palestine – the disciples. It was becoming readily apparent that to be associated with Jesus might have dire consequences.

Most of us have not had to even think about making a choice between dying because of our faith, or living by walking away from it. However, throughout history, many have been forced to make such a decision. There are martyrs in today's world, just as there were in ancient Rome and Greece. Often such stories don't make the headlines, either. Can you remember what happened in Algeria, in March of 1996? Seven Trappist monks, best known as the Monks of Tibhirine, were abducted from their monastery in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria. Two months later, their throats were slit by their captors.

For many decades, these monks (all French) had lived in Algeria, expressing their faith and commitment to Christ in whatever ways they could to their neighboring Muslims. They had established deep bonds of friendship with the local Muslim population. They didn't so much as "preach Christ" – instead, they "lived Christ." The country was then engaged in a civil war between groups of Muslims and the army. Foreigners were told to leave, and eventually several Christian missionaries were killed. But the monks chose not to leave, in spite of the threats. Jesus didn't falter, even in the face of death. Neither would they.

In today's verse, we read of the willingness of the disciples to hang in there with Jesus, even if it cost them their lives. Consider what one of the victims wrote about his thinking about dying for Jesus, a year or so before it actually happened:

"If it should happen one day – and it could be today – that I become a victim of terrorism, I would like my community, my Church and my family to remember that my life was GIVEN to God, and to this country. I ask them to accept the fact that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to my brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil that seems to prevail so terribly in the world, even in the evil which might blindly strike me down.

I should like, when the time comes, to have a moment of spiritual clarity that would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down. I do not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. In this THANK YOU, which is said for everything in my life from now on, I include my friends of yesterday and today, my friends in this place, and my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families.

And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing. Yes, I want this THANK YOU to be a 'GOD BLESS' for you, too, because in God's face, I see yours. May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both."

Prayer: Jesus, help me know the depth of my faith and trust in our Loving Father, God. Amen.

Questions: 1. When you analyze the depth of your faith in Christ, what do you see?
2. If circumstances were such, do you feel you would continue to follow Christ, regardless of the consequences?

Thought: Since they couldn't use swords or knives, and guns hadn't made the human scene yet, the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus so they could be rid of him. Questions were basically the only weapons they had, and they used them often, trying to trap him into oblivion. Of course, everywhere Jesus went, he was asked questions by others, too – even by his band of disciples. But the purpose of the questioning was very different.

Jesus said we are to love God with “all your passion and prayer and intelligence” (The Message). As if that wasn't enough to do, he quickly added that we are to love others as we love ourselves. Neither did he say we were to do such things only on the Sabbath – or only when we went to church!

I still find it so exciting that Jesus, nearing the time of his death on a cross, and while being pestered without end about who he was and why he was here, could sum up our relationship with God by talking about love! He told them that God is all about love – and love is a relationship. Jesus invited them to change both their thinking about God, as well as their relationship with God. After all, God is always looking for partners, people who are passionate about participating in the ongoing creation of God's world.

By the way, how did you pass Jesus' test? Rate yourself on the four suggestions of Jesus regarding your thoughts and practices about God. (Use a scale of one to ten, with ten being high.)

Passion _____
Intelligence _____

Prayer _____
Loving others _____

When Rob Bell finishes a sermon at his church, and when the service is over he sits on the edge of the stage and talks with people who stop by. “Every week, the same woman walks up to me and hands me a piece of paper. . . .She smiles, we chat for a moment or two, and then she walks away. . . The piece of paper she hands me is always the same size, folded, with writing inside in the upper left corner. I unfold it each week while she watches, and then I read what she's written.

There's always a number, with a few comments next to the number. Sometimes the number is big, like 174. I remember once when it was a 2. The number is how many days it's been since she last cut herself. She's struggled with a self-injury addiction for years, but now a loving group from the church has been standing with her as she tries to find peace and healing.

She recently told me that every man she's ever been with hit her. She's been beaten, hit, abused, neglected – and then she was told that God loves her unconditionally, without reservation. That's a stretch. Hard to believe, given what she's seen of the world.” But she's learning about God's love because of that “loving others” group in that church.

Mother Teresa told it this way. “Some time ago, two young people came to my house and gave me a large sum of money to feed the poor. I asked them ‘Where did you get so much money?’ And they said ‘Two days ago we got married, and we decided we were not going to buy wedding clothes, and we were not going to have a feast. We would give you the money to feed the poor.’ And I asked them again ‘But why did you do that?’

They said ‘We love each other so much that we wanted to begin our life together by sharing the joy of loving with the people you serve by making a sacrifice. This love is sanctity, and the more we grow in this love, the closer we come to God.’”

How are you doing with the greatest commandments that Jesus gave the Pharisees – and the world?

Prayer: Jesus, forgive us when we are so overwhelmed with, or are enjoying our daily living so much that we don't have time to love you, or anyone else. Amen.

- Questions: 1. What could you do to raise the numbers you placed on the lines above?
2. In no more than ten words, describe your love for God.

Thought: As the Cross loomed ever closer, Jesus continued his emphasis on love, especially love for others. Jesus was speaking to the disciples, but while doing so, he was talking about himself. He was going to do exactly what he was talking about in less than two weeks. Have you ever had the challenge of saying on your personal journey ‘let me take his/her place’?

It was Germany, and the year was 1941. The siren sounded, and the prisoners of Maximilian Kolbe’s bunker were led out into the summer morning. From the activities of the German guards, it was obvious that something was wrong. Maximilian looked at the guard towers and watched the officers standing stiffly as he and the other prisoners were gathered before them.

The commandant of the prison camp stepped forward. “There has been an escape! As you know, for this ten of you will die. Let that be a lesson to the rest of you – your freedom will cost the lives of ten other men.”

Then ten men were selected from among the ranks and brought to the front. Maximilian watched as Sergeant Francis Gajoniczek was marched forward. He shouted loudly, “No, no, you can’t! I don’t want to die.”

At this, Maximilian stepped forward. “Sir, I am a priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and a child.” The officer looked at him for an instant, then at the young man. He could certainly use the young man more for the daily labors that were required of the prisoners. “All right. You, back in line. Old man, you go with the others.”

The ten men were taken to a cell, where they were left to starve. All the while there, Maximilian comforted the others with prayers, songs, and stories of Christ’s sacrifice for all of them. At the end of two weeks, only four of them were still alive, and only Maximilian was fully coherent. Because they hadn’t yet starved to death, the last four were then executed with an injection of carbolic acid.

Because of Maximilian’s love for another prisoner, Francis was at least free to live another day.

What do you suppose the disciples were thinking when Jesus told them that authentic love could also include giving up your life for someone else? Surely at this point, they were aware of death threats. But probably most of their thinking focused on Jesus as the focus of the threats, not on themselves. Yet there was some reality for them in the moment, even as Thomas voiced the words “then let us go and die with him”. Do you think the disciples truly loved Jesus two weeks before the cross? They still had so many unanswered questions, it was probably difficult for them to be certain of much of anything. Yet they hung in there with him.

In light of the above, consider a prayer offered almost two thousand years before Maximilian gave up his own life for someone else:

“Father, make us more like Jesus. Help us bear difficulty, pain, disappointment, and sorrow, knowing that in Your perfect working and design You can use such bitter experiences to mold our characters and make us more like our Lord. We look with hope to the day when we will be completely like Christ, because we will see Him as He is . . . My passions are crucified, there is no heat in my flesh, and a stream flows murmuring inside me – deep down in me saying “Come to the Father.” (Ignatius’ prayer while in prison just before he was devoured by lions in Rome, AD 111.)

Prayer: Jesus help me love you more, so that I can yet love others more. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways has your love for Jesus Christ been tested on your journey?
2. Is your love for Jesus Christ bigger than your love of life itself?

Thought: It was only a matter of days before they would walk into Jerusalem. Can you imagine the disciples asking one key question: What’s the price tag? Today’s verses state clearly what were Jesus’ expectations – with their respective price tags. Can you hear the disciples talking among themselves about what was going to happen next – and what might be demanded of them when it happened?

Price tags included the cost of building a building, or going to war, or growing a loving relationship with God. The disciples were, daily, dealing with Jesus’ teachings and stories. In the midst of this, they heard many parables, some of which they understood, and many which they did not. They witnessed miracles that bordered on being unbelievable, and the “how” questions could not be answered. Rumors were spreading like wildfire, and ranged from making Jesus their king, to killing him because he was a threat to both Rome and the temple leaders. If either of these things happened to Jesus, what was the respective price tag for the disciples?

Before we wander into Jerusalem, it might be good to pause, and reflect on your feelings about the Lenten journey thus far:

What words would best describe the feelings of the disciples at this point? _____

However long you have walked with Jesus on your life journey, what words best describe your own feelings about your relationship with God? _____

What “price tags” are attached to the disciple’s commitment to keep on following him? _____

What “price tags” are attached to your own relationship with God today? _____

It’s interesting to note that when reading biographies, less than ten percent of the material deals with the death of the person. In the case of Jesus, the Gospels invest over forty percent of their material on the final week of Jesus’ life. But even Jesus’ death hasn’t brought the world into a redeemed relationship with God. Have you ever wondered what people thought after Lazarus came back from the dead? Wouldn’t you think that everybody would want to fall at the feet of Jesus – and believe in him? Yet it didn’t happen that way at all. Neither did it happen after Jesus died – and rose from the dead.

The miracles of Jesus, that broke the chains of sickness and death, give us a glimpse of what the world was meant to be, and give us hope that one day God will right its wrongs. God is no more satisfied with this earth than we are; Jesus’ miracles offer a hint of what God intends to do about it. Never forget that the price tag for Jesus’ miracles was to hang on a cross! In a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded badly, Jesus paid the price to bring hope to the hopeless.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for being my “price tag” into God’s presence. Amen.

- Questions:** 1. What are the price tags to your own faith journey?
2. In a world that doesn’t care, what are the “price tags” for Christ’s church today?

Thought: Jesus is praying for his disciples. He uses words such as “guard”, “protect”, “sanctified in truth” in his pleadings with God on their behalf. He is suggesting that “God is with you – and don’t forget it!” Jesus cared very much for his disciples, even though he knew they would lose their courage in just a matter of days. To Jesus, that didn’t matter – he still loved them. He didn’t want them ever to feel they were all alone. He wanted them to know they had an advocate with God. No emails, texts, online messages or anything else produced by human beings would be needed!!! He and God are one – for us, it can’t get any better than that.

If Jesus cared for the disciples two thousand years ago, Jesus cares for his followers today. Jesus is concerned about your everyday journey, including the headaches, heartaches, joys, disappointments, and sometimes just plain “lost-ness”. What is Jesus saying to us today?

- You who mourn because of the empty chair at your table: God is with you in your loss.
- You who have seen your congregation dwindle to a handful of worshippers: God is still with you.
- You who worry about your teenage son or daughter: God cares with you.
- You who wish you had an authentic friend or companion: God is with you.
- You who watch helplessly as Alzheimer’s takes its toll: God will not leave you.
- You who cannot find a job with which to “make ends meet”: God walks with you.
- You who worry about what lies ahead of you: God is waiting with you.
- You who have no medical coverage or healthcare: God is with you.
- You who are worried about a troubled marriage: God cares for both of you.
- You who can’t get a decent night of sleep and rest: God is awake with you.
- You who have no home: God waits with you.
- You who have more than enough of the world’s goods: God wonders about you, and waits.
- You who don’t have enough time for life itself: God waits patiently for you.
- You who are facing the realities of getting older: God always walks with you.
- You who are discouraged about an evil world: God worries, and waits with you.
- You who have family members who don’t believe in God: God is concerned, with you.
- You who wonder if there is any hope in the future: God waits with you.
- You who face difficult life decisions: God faces them with you.
- You who are bitter with what life has dealt you: God is there with and for you.
- You who don’t care anymore: God still cares about you.
- You who are experimenting with drugs: God hasn’t given up on you.
- You who are in debt that is not manageable: God waits with you.
- You who are worn out at the end of each day: God cares for you.
- You who are worried about our global village: God worries, and waits with you.
- You who are undergoing chemo five days a week: God goes with you, and waits.
- You who hurt because you lost everything in a tragedy: God cares, and waits with you.

Simplistic, you say? Hocus-pocus, perhaps? Jesus surely didn’t think so. He told them, and wants us to know today that God is by our side even when things go wrong, we don’t get what we want, or we break one of God’s expectations. God is a loving, caring God – Jesus is world-proof of that.

Way back in the book of Exodus, there’s a verse that reads: “So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend...” (33:11). God wants to speak to you the same way. God wants you to be comfortable in your love relationship with God. Instead of wondering where God is, admit that God is as close to you as you’ll allow God to be. Then talk – God will listen – and if you listen carefully, you will hear God respond.

Prayer: Jesus, keep on loving me – I need a lot of it. Amen.

Questions: 1. How close do you feel God is to you during the week?
2. How does God love you, when you don’t get what you’ve asked for?

Thought: Tensions were mounting. Many of those who were in the crowds who listened to Jesus daily were convinced he was, indeed, the Messiah. And if not that, he was at least better than a lot of other pretenders on the scene. Lingering in the background or shadows were the Pharisees, Sadducees and temple leaders. They were a worried group, filled with pent-up anger towards someone who would claim to be equal with God. In another part of the background, there were Roman leaders who were increasingly concerned at what they were both seeing and hearing. In today's reading, even the disciples were in trouble.

Do you think the issue of washing your hands before eating was important? The Pharisees who came to question Jesus walked four days in order to raise this concern with him. To them, the issue of ceremonial hand cleansing was at the heart of everything a faithful Jew should value, including both purity for the individual, as well as a distinction from the world around them.

Have you ever seen it done? Alfred Edersheim describes the tedium of the Pharisee's rite very well: "Water jars were kept ready to be used before every meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was a quarter of a log, defined as enough to fill one and a half eggshells. The water was first poured on both hands, with fingers pointing upward, and the water had to run at least as far as the wrist. It must drop off from the wrist, for the water was now itself unclean, having touched the unclean hands, and, if it ran down the fingers again, it would make them unclean as in the beginning. Then the procedure was repeated with the hands held in the opposite direction, with the fingers pointing down; and then finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A strict Jew would do all of this, not only before a meal, but also between each of the courses of the meal."

How did the Jews ever get to this kind of legalism? You have to go back hundreds of years to the time when the Babylonians carried them off to serve the empire in Babylon. Their temple had been destroyed. Their homeland was colonized by other cultures. In this kind of isolation, the Jews looked to the law of God through which to sustain their national identity, and to not lose their distinctiveness as God's specially chosen people. In order to apply the Law to everyday life in a strange land, teachers of the Jewish Scriptures wrote very careful instructions for the people to follow. Over the centuries, these suggestions took on a sacred life of their own, and eventually, they even supplanted the very Law they were intended to uphold.

By the time of Jesus, failure to observe this tradition was regarded as disobedience to the Law of God. As well, the Pharisees maintained the illusion of moral superiority by "enforcing" such a practice. Not only were they motivated by a lust for power, these traditions violated the very Law they supposedly cherished. But Jesus took them on! He blasted them with observations and questions. He didn't let up at all. Finally, the Pharisees had enough, and headed back to Jerusalem, another four day walk! No doubt they seethed all the way, and were more determined than ever to get rid of him.

As well, the disciples were shaken up. They came to Jesus, wringing their hands in despair over what he had just done. The disciples understood clearly the ramifications of what had just taken place. The Pharisees were the epitome of Jewishness to the collective Jewish mind. To publicly offend the Pharisees was to stand against an institution more than four hundred years old.

In 167 BC, the Seleucid conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Israel and forced pagan worship on the Jews. But in the town of Modi'in, a righteous priest took up the sword and sparked what became known as the Maccabean Revolt. Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights, celebrates the victory when one priest refused to compromise his Jewish purity. This was the heritage claimed by the Pharisees. This was the cornerstone on which they sought to rebuild the nation. The disciples knew that to reject that cornerstone was to risk being crushed by it. Jesus knew this as well. It would happen soon. What are your feelings, Disciple?

Prayer: Jesus, help us to know what it means to stand up for what we, too, believe. Amen.

Questions: 1. What would you have done differently if confronted by the Pharisees as Jesus was?
2. Have you ever confronted anyone with the claims of Jesus? If so, what happened?

Thought: Is God reactive? Or proactive? Your answer probably depends on the kind of day you're having. As you look around the world and see how much wrong/evil seems to be everywhere, one would be inclined to say God is reactive. Yet the very walk to Jerusalem we are embarked on, now two thousand years old, tells me clearly that God is proactive. Jesus is God – in the flesh! I challenge you to stop for a moment, set aside your time pieces, and think about God outside of time. If you can do that, I just know you will find a very active God in history.

Quite frankly, I don't think God is any more satisfied with this earth than you and I are. If you reflect on it, Jesus' miracles offered a hint of what God intends to do about such things eventually. How can I say such a thing? Because Jesus was proactive – a pursuer every moment of his earthly journey. Jesus was active, not passive. Jesus was not immune to human feelings, but was touched by all human feelings. Jesus did not see, and not see reality. Jesus was not blind to human needs, but responsive to those who were hurting.

As God pursued humanity in coming as Jesus, so Jesus pursued at every point of the journey. Consider:

- He reached out and touched a leper in order that he might be healed. (Mk. 1:41)
- Jesus went to the pool, Bethesda, and healed a man paralyzed for 38 years. (Jn. 5: 8)
- Jesus went looking for disciples. (Jn. 1:43)
- He went into the synagogue to find the man with the withered hand, and healed him. (Mat. 12: 9-10)
- He brought back to life the widow's son. (Lu. 7:14)
- He went everywhere to deliver the Good News. (Mat. 8: 1)
- He went to Jairus' home, and healed his 12 year-old daughter. (Lu. 8: 51)
- Jesus walked on the sea, calming both the waters and the disciples. (Mk. 6:48)
- He was walking, saw a blind man, and stopped to heal him. (Jn. 9:1)
- As others passed by, Jesus stopped to talk with the lepers, and sent them for healing. (Lu. 17:14)
- "Get out of that tree, Zaccheus; I'm coming to your house to eat today." (Lu. 19:5)
- He went to dine at the home of a ruler of the Pharisees. (Lu. 14: 1)
- He saw a woman in desperate need, called her to come, and healed her. (Lu. 12: 12)
- Jesus climbed a mountain near Galilee, so people could come and hear, and be healed. (Mat. 15: 30)
- Jesus laid hands on the children, and blessed them. (Mat. 19: 14-15)
- Jesus went to Jericho, and healed a blind man begging on the roadside. (Lu. 18: 35)
- Jesus went to church, and ended up forgiving an adulterous woman. (Jn. 8: 2-3)
- In spite of a cross on the horizon, Jesus went to Jerusalem. (Lu. 9: 51)

You can expand the list. After all, Lazarus was dead. Why on earth would Jesus want to go there when his friend had died? Perhaps the best answer would be because that's what Jesus was about: pursuing the impossible. Not one of us could do what Jesus did. No one else could do what Jesus did. When God pursues, even death has to get out of the way.

Have you ever thought about what Lazarus experienced that day? After all, he was taken away from the very presence of God. He had experienced what a human death experience was and is. He had been ushered into God's presence, something we can hardly begin to imagine because of its completeness, satisfaction, and happiness. Suddenly, he was back home again, leaving behind all of the glory and surprises he had known for a short period of time. But Jesus, in calling Lazarus back from his new world, knew that this one act would seal his fate. In calling Lazarus to life again, Jesus was pursuing the cross. It wasn't so much about Lazarus; it was mostly about the fact that the Pharisees, Sadducees and temple leaders didn't dare to allow Jesus to continue his journey. He had to be stopped. Somehow, he had to be killed. And they were just the people who could pull it off.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your commitment to die so that we could live forever. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what ways do you know Jesus as One who pursues?
2. How does your church reflect a "Jesus who pursues"?

Thought: Today's reading tells the final chapter before Jesus enters Jerusalem. Can you imagine the excitement generated by his return to Bethany? It was only days before this story that he had brought his friend, Lazarus, back from the other world. Word spread like wildfire that Jesus was back in town. Not only did "ordinary" folks get the word, so, too, did the leaders of the temple. Probably just as excited was the band of disciples. The longer they stayed with Jesus, the more unbelievable were the things they were seeing and experiencing.

Jesus had come with his disciples to Jerusalem to participate in the Jewish feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Rather than lodge in the city, they visited Lazarus, Martha and Mary. One evening, they were invited to dinner at the home of Simon the leper, whom Luke says was a Pharisee. Lazarus was one of the guests, and Martha was helping serve the meal. Apparently Mary had not been invited in any capacity.

But while they ate and talked, Mary slipped into the house unnoticed. She carried with her an alabaster jar of expensive perfume, which would normally be used to anoint a person's head. But something came over her. Perhaps she was filled with heartfelt gratitude for her salvation from her sins. Perhaps, though, she was overwhelmed with grief for the ordeal she sensed Jesus was about to endure. Suddenly she went to where he was reclining, knelt at his feet, and broke the jar of perfume over his feet. It was a lavish gesture of worship. While doing this, her own tears fell on his feet, and she dried them with her hair. The strong aroma filled every corner of the room, and everything came to a standstill.

Almost everyone there knew the value of what Mary had just spilled on Jesus' feet – a year's salary for a worker. Judas was quick to pounce on the woman's foolishness, piously suggesting it would have been better used to feed the poor. We don't really know for how long, but Judas had been living a double life for quite some time. He was the group's treasurer, but apparently he dipped his fingers in the till from time to time.

Needless to say, Jesus put him in his place, as well as anyone else who might have had similar thoughts. What Mary did can best be described as an authentic act of devotion. It was both a testimony to her commitment to Christ, but as well, recognized his role as "Messiah" for the world. It was Jesus who said "She has prepared me for burial."

The last verses are rarely referenced in the telling of the Easter story. Few people realize that not only did the chief priests and temple leaders target Jesus to die, they did the same for Lazarus. History doesn't tell us what happened to Lazarus after this story. But history has never, and never will forget Jesus' story of redemption.

Who do you know today who is as devoted to Jesus as was Mary? Of all the people you know, where do you see such commitment? In this morning's newspaper, there were pictures of a wedding in a hospital. The bride was in a hospital bed, dressed in her wedding gown. The groom was standing by her bed, dressed to be wed. Why in a hospital? They were to be married the next August 14th. But she suddenly became ill, and after many tests, it was determined she had a type of cancer that was incurable. She would live no more than a few months. So they moved the wedding up, regardless of the circumstances. Why? "Because we love each other so much, we just can't let go." True devotion.

Mother Teresa is just as devoted to Christ. A rich American visitor to Calcutta couldn't begin to comprehend her devotion to both Christ and the poor, asked her how she could do it. She said "We are a contemplative order. First, we meditate on Jesus; then we go out and look for him in disguise." This is total devotion. Not only did she "say the words", she "did the acts".

Prayer: Jesus, help me increase my level of devotion to you. Amen.

Questions: 1. What is the greatest act of devotion to Christ you have ever heard or read about?
2. What would you describe as your own greatest act of devotion to Jesus Christ?

Thought: In looking at the world and its history, James Russell Lowell said, “Truth (is) forever on the scaffold; wrong (is) forever on the throne.” This is, perhaps, a most accurate observation of Palm Sunday.

You may not have thought so, but the Pharisees were actually anticipating the arrival of a conquering Messiah. Their tradition said he would come suddenly to his temple. What they didn’t know was that he was already there, and they didn’t recognize him. But surely they could hear him!! Less than two weeks before Palm Sunday, Jesus spoke the words in today’s reading directly to the Pharisees, with the white marble walls of the temple as the background. Eight times he used the word “woe”, which expresses deep, anguished sorrow over something grievous that has happened. Seven times he called them “scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites”. Five times he called them “blind”.

I think you will agree that such a tactic would not be the best way to “win friends, and influence people”. Jesus, the Messiah, had come to take his stand for truth in the very place where truth, for the Jewish people, was being trampled. The Pharisees and Sadducees were so angry with Jesus that they would have seized him right there, but didn’t dare because of the thousands of people who now openly supported him. They knew that if they were to successfully seize him, they needed help from someone on the inside.

By Palm Sunday, at least several hundred thousand pilgrims had been drawn to Jerusalem. To observers, it looked for all the world as if a king had arrived in force to claim his rightful throne. There was a large delegation there from Bethany (remember Lazarus?). Hundreds who knew him well had come from Galilee to support him in the crowd. Many who were disabled in some form were also there, brought by families or groups who cared about them, and who believed that Jesus could make a difference. And there were kids all over the place, having a grand time running in and through the crowd.

Palm branches and articles of clothing were strewn across the roadway. There was shouting, frolicking, and anxiety permeating the air. The center of attention was riding on a young donkey, and as the parade started, they could see that he was crying. Philip Yancey allowed his imagination to run away with him and he jotted down the slapstick nature of the affair. “I imagine a Roman officer galloping up to check on the disturbance. He has attended processions in Rome, where they do it right. The conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Behind him, officers in polished armor display the banners captured from vanquished armies. At the rear comes a ragtag procession of slaves and prisoners in chains, living proof of what happens to those who defy Rome.

In Jesus’ triumphal entry, the adoring crowd made up the ragtag procession: the lame, the blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee and Bethany. When the officer looked for the object of their attention he spied a forlorn figure, weeping, riding on no stallion or chariot but on the back of a baby donkey, a borrowed coat draped across its backbone serving as his saddle.”

Is it any wonder Americans, in general, have problems understanding our God? Even then, as it is now, people think that God is all about power and winning. We believe in power, don’t we? How about military power? Economic power? Political power? Even ecclesiastical power? Because we’re obsessed with power of all kinds, we project absolute power onto our images of God.

My traveling friends, a question: WHAT IF God is just like Jesus Christ, the lowly, ludicrous man riding on the donkey – the beaten, lonely and powerless man hanging on a cross? WHAT IF the God who made and sways the universe is not a God of prestige and power, but is a God of self-giving love and forgiveness calling us all to a similar way of relating to one another? WHAT IF we’re as wrong today as they were then? Who do you believe God is today? And who was the man riding on the donkey, and why do you follow him?

Prayer: Jesus, you cried two thousand years ago – are you still crying today? Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you know, without a doubt, that God still loves the world today?
2. Have you ever cried because people just don’t “get it” about a God who loved, and died?

Thought: As always, the Pharisees were “stuck” on the law. And as always, Jesus was all about something beyond the law, something called love. He told them as simply as it could be said that for human beings, life is all about love: vertical love, focused on ties with a “forever God”, and horizontal love, focused on our peers, both those known to us, and those unknown.

You have most likely heard many messages about loving God. Have you ever heard a message that focused on how Jesus said it was to be done? “...with all your heart...”; “...with all your soul...”; “with all your mind...”. Just before the cross, what did Jesus mean by focusing on these three areas of life and love?

The heart is the center of the body. When it isn't working properly, the rest of the body experiences a variety of difficulties. Included in Jesus' use of “heart” is everything that is physical about you, including the physical world in which you reside. How do you use your body? How do you care for your body? How do you use your “things”, i.e. possessions? How do you care for your “things”?

Mother Teresa put it this way: “Love has a hem to her garment
that reaches to the very dust.
It sweeps the streets and lanes,
And because it can, it must.”

How often does your head bend – in prayer? How often do your knees bend – in prayer? How often do your hands reach for God's heaven – in praise? How often do your eyes stay open while you pray – lest you miss a chance of seeing God?

You and I have a soul. When was the last time you talked about yours? Neither does it belong to you or me. Human beings became living souls when God, who alone was the Living One, breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. Each of us is accountable for our soul to the Living God. When a person gives his/her life to Jesus Christ, that soul is given back to God – forever!

Lastly, Jesus said we should love God with our minds. God gave us the ability to think, and to choose. Those two functions sum up all that Jesus meant. It's amazing what we can do with our minds – for good – for evil. With our mind, we decide God is, or is not important. With our mind, we choose to seek God, or go on our merry way. We can think good of people and/or circumstances; we can think bad of people and/or circumstances. One of the most summative statements of loving God, using the three categories Jesus gave was found written on a wall of a Nazi concentration camp:

“I believe in the sun
even when it's not shining.
I believe in love
even when I feel it not.
I believe in God
even when He is silent.”

Then Jesus sort of hit them between the eyes when he said “...and love your neighbor as yourself.” If they thought keeping the Ten Commandments was hard, what did they think about this? All of us have neighbors today. The globe is smaller than ever, and we have more neighbors than ever. Injustice abounds, but not only in third world countries; it is alive and well right here in our own country. Jesus told the Pharisees that we need to reach out and touch/love the lives of every person who is hurting, alone, hungry, homeless, hopeless. Jesus was most serious: how's your love life with God? With your family and neighbors?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for driving home the truth of love – vertical and horizontal...help me do it. Amen.

Questions: 1. In what specific ways do you love God through your heart, soul and mind? (Make a list.)
2. In what specific ways do you love your neighbor – like yourself? (Make a list.)

Thought: Gethsemane (an oil press) was a garden east of Jerusalem, beyond the Kidron Valley and near the Mt. of Olives. Jesus and the disciples left dinner, and headed for the cool, spacious olive groves. Spring was in full bloom, and the night air was fragrant with blossoms. Jesus needed to pray. Over the past three years, he usually separated himself from the disciples, and went off by himself to pray. This night, however, he didn't want to be alone. He needed some company. But as they reclined under the moon and stars in such a peaceful setting, the disciples quickly drifted asleep.

Matthew says he was "sorrowful and troubled." Mark describes him as "deeply distressed". Jesus is quoted as saying to the disciples "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Jesus was dealing with several things. First, he was lonely. He was as human as you and I are, and when we're facing significant difficulties, we normally want someone by our side. Second, he knew what needed to be done, what he'd come to earth to do. During the past three years, he had more than once referenced the transformation he would bring to the human race. It's one thing to talk about dying; it's quite another to face the moment of death itself. It's one thing to recognize that death is three or four (or more) years "down the road"; it's quite another to know that you have only a few days left. Third, he had a prayer to make, one which he knew, in advance, could not be answered the way his humanity hoped it would.

During this time of prayer, Jesus was attempting to discern what God wanted, versus what he wanted. Jesus didn't want to hang on a cross any more than you or I would. It's the most natural thing in the world to cling to life, regardless of the circumstances.

Most who are reading this page today will admit that, almost daily sometimes, we often wrestle with trying to figure out "what God wants". It's the old battlefield of "God's wants", and "my wants". Jesus was involved in the most important decision-making moment of his life. He needed to talk with God about the issues. He needed to be heard. He needed an answer. Jesus gave us some clues about how to approach making major decisions in our journeys. Consider these:

- Casual versus intense conversation – Jesus was as intense as anyone could possibly be in his conversation with God about the decision he faced. Luke describes the intensity of Jesus as "...sweat like great drops of blood falling to the ground". Have you ever "sweat" during your prayers when facing major decisions or issues?
- Prostrate on the ground, vs standing or sitting. Few of us, even in our full lifetime, ever lay on the ground or floor to pray to God about a difficult or challenging decision we face.
- Take friends with us. Jesus had all of the disciples near him, and three were very close to him. Have you cultivated friends who will be prayer partners with you when life is threatened? Have you offered to be a prayer partner with someone who is facing difficult decisions, or perhaps life-threatening circumstances?
- Have you ever prayed three times at such a deep level about any of life's circumstances? Jesus came back to talk with God three different times – at the same level of intensity. He wanted to be absolutely sure what was the will of God.
- Do we love God enough to do what God wants us to do, even if we don't want to do it? Jesus didn't want to die; there is no doubt about that. Yet to Jesus, what God wanted super-ceded what he wanted for himself.

For Jesus, the greatest agony that he would now have to face can be called God-forsakenness. At its core, Gethsemane depicts, after all, the story of an unanswered prayer. The cup of suffering was not removed.

Prayer: Jesus, teach us how to honestly discern God's will for us. Amen.

Questions: 1. How do you pray, when facing difficult decisions or circumstances?
2. What are your feelings when one of your prayers is not answered as you wanted?

Thought: Have you ever felt you had anything in common with Pilate? He's the fellow who asked Jesus the question: "What is truth?" At this moment in his life and career, no doubt Pilate didn't have a clue.

Pilate, at that moment, was a man in fear of his own career, yes, even his life. Tiberius was the Roman Emperor during Jesus' time of ministry. However, he retired to the island of Capri, lived in luxury, and delegated the workings of Rome to Sejanus. It was Sejanus who appointed Pilate procurator of Judea. Sejanus began to undermine Tiberius' reign in a variety of ways, with an eye to becoming Emperor. However, he was found out, and he and his family were executed. Suddenly Pilate found himself at great risk since Tiberius was questioning anything Sejanus had done, and any appointments he had made. The last thing Pilate needed was an uproar of any kind in Judea. If it happened, he was gone.

Josephus details Pilate's hatred and baiting of the Jewish people. Sejanus was also anti-Semitic, and planned to destroy the Jewish race completely. Tiberius, too, was anti-Semitic, but he realized that many of the charges brought against the Jews were fabricated by Sejanus. In 32 AD he issued a decree throughout the empire not to mistreat the Jews. Pilate was then even in more jeopardy of his career. (Only a few years after Jesus' death, Pilate was sent back to Rome, and never heard from again.)

During the trials of Jesus, consider how some of the main characters dealt with the matter of truth. Are they any different from us today?

Pilate was completely convinced by the truth, yet terrified to admit it or act upon it for fear of what other people would think. Such persons recognize the truth about Jesus, and perhaps even acknowledge it. But cultivating a relationship with Jesus would disrupt the plans they have for their own lives. The search for truth can be put off – there'll be time for such later.

Herod was so distracted by superficial pursuits that truth had long ago become irrelevant. Belief in Jesus is for fanatics or people who take themselves too seriously. The truth about Christ is lost in the pursuit of the next good time.

Pilate's wife was easily persuaded, and carelessly undiscerning so much that truth and fiction commingled with ease. She probably accepted Jesus' claims as authentic, along with every other passing philosophy or religious belief. Religion is a lucky charm to ward off guilt and other negative experiences. However, superficial or sentimental belief has never transformed anyone.

The religious leaders were willfully unconcerned with truth, because it frustrated their personal agendas. To them, the truth was inconvenient. They rejected Jesus because he was not the messiah they were looking for, or had prescribed for themselves.

The more Pilate tried to wiggle out of his predicament, the more entangled in the political web he became. He was convinced Jesus was innocent. But he was fearful of the bad omen given him by his wife, and he was well aware of the career dimensions of his decision. Pilate tried one last time to release Jesus. But the religious leaders held the ace in their hand "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar!" (John 19:12)

That did it. Pilate needed to hear nothing else. Now that his ally, Sejanus, had been executed for treason, he didn't have a friend in Rome. He didn't dare let the religious leaders send a bad report to Rome. Jesus, innocent or not, had to die.

Prayer: Jesus, give me the courage to witness to truth, in every corner of my life. Amen.

Questions: 1. Where would you have been, and what do you feel you might have done if you had been one of the disciples at the time of the trials?
2. Have you ever experienced suffering with Jesus during your journey with him?

Thought: Jesus' experiences leading to, and hanging on the cross were much too brutal for words. Over the centuries, no one has been able to capture in words the horror of dying on a cross. By the time they had Jesus on the ground, pinning him to the cross that would be dropped in the waiting hole, one would think nothing yet to come would be worse. But it was.

Jim Bishop, a scientist, combined science, historical information and his own imagination to describe what Jesus' experience must have been like while hanging on the cross. "His arms were now in a V position, and Jesus became conscious of two unendurable circumstances; the first was that the pain in his wrists was beyond bearing, and that muscle cramps knotted his forearms and upper arms and the pads of his shoulders; the second was that his pectoral muscles at the sides of his chest were momentarily paralyzed. This induced in him an involuntary panic; for he found that while he could draw air into his lungs, he was powerless to exhale.

At once, Jesus raised himself on his bleeding feet. As the weight of his body came down on the insteps, the single nail pressed hard against the top of the wound. Slowly, steadily, Jesus was forced to raise himself higher and higher until, for the moment, his head hid the sign that told of his crime. When his shoulders were on a level with his hands, breathing was rapid and easier. Like the other two, he fought the pain in his feet in order to breathe rapidly for a few moments. Then, unable to bear the pain below, which cramped legs and thighs and wrung moans from the strongest, he let his torso sag lower and lower, and his knees projected a little at a time until, with a deep sigh, he felt himself to be hanging by his wrists. And this process had to be repeated again and again."

At the same time this was happening, something was taking place within the trinity on that day at Calvary. No theologian has ever adequately explained what took place between God and Jesus while he hung on the cross. All we have is a cry of pain from the son of God who felt totally forsaken. Do you suppose it would have been a bit of a help if Jesus had anticipated his mission on earth would include such a death? Well, do you suppose it helped Isaac to know his father Abraham was only following orders when he tied him to the altar? What if no angel had appeared and Abraham had plunged the knife into the heart of his son, his only son, whom he loved dearly? That is what happened on Calvary. But no angel appeared to stop the cross; and to Jesus, that had to feel like abandonment.

Because crucifixion was so ugly, a most despised way to die, it took hundreds of years before the cross was recognized as a symbol of victory over death. It was Constantine, who had seen a vision of the cross, and banned it as a method of execution, who authorized it for use in art, worship, whatever. C. S. Lewis observed: "The crucifixion did not become common in art until all who had seen a real one died off."

Today, even as on that afternoon so long ago, people view the cross in opposite ways. One thief taunted him while the soldiers helped themselves to what few possessions the prisoners had. He hurled abuse at him, daring him to save himself, and them, too. He mocked Jesus' powerlessness. The other thief, however, saw a different kind of power. Taking the risk of faith, he asked Jesus to "remember me when you come into your kingdom." This thief is unique in another way. He is the only person, except in mockery, who addressed Jesus as a king. The dying thief saw more clearly than anyone else the nature of Jesus' kingdom.

Look around you today. There is no choice for humanity than to choose as the thieves did. Either you deny – or you believe authentically that Jesus is the only Savior for an evil world. There are no other choices.

"It is finished", said Jesus. Our walk to Jerusalem with Jesus is now complete, as well. But while we wait for the coming Kingdom, let's wait a day or so to celebrate His coming in triumph over the grave.

Prayer: Jesus, we never cease to be amazed at your willingness to suffer on a cross. Thank you. Amen.

Questions: 1. When you think of the brutality of the cross, what are your feelings about what happened?
2. Have you ever felt abandoned, or forgotten by someone you loved? What were your feelings?

Day Forty Six

Saturday, April 4, 2015

Silence!!! Scattered!!! Afraid!!! Worried!!! Alone!!! Disappointed!!! Angry!!! Wondering!!! Hopeless!!!

These, and many other similar words probably describe some of the feelings of the disciples that Saturday after the crucifixion. But what about other people? As you've walked with Jesus and his Disciples the past forty-five days, you met a lot of people along the way. What do you suppose they might have been thinking when news of the crucifixion reached them? Words similar to those listed above? Or perhaps some other words that might better fit their experience with Jesus?

As you remember their stories, reflect on what they're thoughts and feelings might have been on that Saturday.

Lazarus _____

The Lepers _____

The Adulterous Woman _____

The Rich, Young Ruler _____

Nicodemus _____

Zaccheus _____

The Shepherds _____

The Blind Man _____

The Child Who Sat on His Lap _____

Mary Magdalene _____

Mary, His Mother _____

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 5, 2015

Jesus said, "It is finished." And, indeed, it was.

But that finish gave birth to a host of new beginnings. And they are still going on to this day.

One day, I met Jesus. I was a poor, hungry, wishing kid. Jesus told me he loved me. I believed him. That was the beginning of my new life...not when I get to heaven!

There are more of the world's hurting and unlovely being cared for today than at the time of Jesus...because his ever-expanding band of followers are loving the lovely wherever they find them.

If we are to love the world as Jesus did, including the cross, then we must find new ways of loving the unlovely and including the excluded without being judgmental.

Joyce Meyers said "The native environment is not the church; it's the world – not the comfortable pew, but the dangerous ocean. We were born to thrive in adversity and hostility of a broken world. Like fish, which do better in water, we do better among a lost world because, like fish, we were designed to always stay in that native environment. Remove a fish from the water and it dies. Remove a flower from the soil and it dies. Remove the church from the world and we die. Fish don't ever feel wet because water is their home, and yet many Christians have a huge allergic reaction to their native environment. We act like fish, toweling ourselves dry on the beach!"

After Easter, please consider new beginnings for yourself...loving the world as Jesus did...outside of the church!!!

"HE IS RISEN, INDEED!!"

YOUR REFLECTIONS





Lenten Devotions 2015

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