

Daily Devotions – 2024



By Pastor Scott Hedegaard



Ash Wednesday February 14, 2024

Check out Joel 2:1-2, 12-17.

It began with death. On Christmas Eve, the night on which we celebrate life and birth, the American Lutheran Church of Turner caught fire and burned to the ground. The loss tore the hearts of the people of the congregation, the parish, and the community. The night of joy became a night of sorrow.



We begin with death. This evening our foreheads will be marked with a sign of the cross. We will hear those fateful words: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. We will grieve and confess our sin, acknowledging that our brokenness means that we are always walking through the valley of the shadow.

It began with death. The prophet announces the day of the Lord, a day not of glory and light, a day of darkness and gloom. Yet in the prophet's words come invitation. "Return to me," God says, "return to me with all your heart." And the anxious voice of the prophet asks, "Who knows? Who knows if God will turn as we return?"

As the fire blazed that Christmas Eve, a confirmation student of mine asked, "Why would God let this happen?" My tearful response was only, "I don't believe God did this. Now we will see what God will do?" Our journey of faith is always one from death to life. We begin our Lenten journey marked with the sign of death, trusting that on the cross the death of Jesus will bring us new life.

We are dust, Lord; lead us to life. Amen

February 15, 2024 (originally composed February 19, 2002)

Life or death

Check out Jeremiah 21:8-10

Normally, as I read through the Bible, I like to find the little gems that suddenly leap from those pages, things that, though you have read them time and time again, suddenly appear anew to you. There is a lot of good news in the Bible.

But it isn't so easy to find good news in the book of Jeremiah. Most of Jeremiah is about judgment, the judgment of God against a people who has refused to walk in God's ways. There isn't a whole lot of hope here.

What hope there is falls even in passage of judgment. God here offers the way of life or the way of death. Death lies in refusing to submit to God's will and God's judgment. Life comes in surrendering to that will and that judgment, even if it means giving up on the beloved city of Jerusalem, even if it means surrendering to a foreign enemy.

Yet, in a way, that's the way it is for all of us. We have set before us the way of life and the way of death. The way of death lies in following our own way, in chasing our own desires, in relying on our own power. The way of life means surrendering to God's will, even though it might mean giving up much of what we love most. The good news is that God's way is the way of life. And God has offered us the opportunity to go in God's way, which is the way of the cross.

Move our hearts, O God, to choose your way of life. Amen

February 16, 2024 (originally composed February 22, 2002)

In the latter days

Check out Jeremiah 30:18-24.

Some years back I spent some time with a couple dealing with death. The man had declined greatly from one of those degenerative diseases that slowly rob your body of its ability to function. He wishes release, but it is slow in coming. We wondered and prayed about this. The big question was, of course, “Why?” Why does anyone have to go through such a thing?

The storms of life swirl around us. We are often left wondering why a loving God would allow our lives to take such a course. Is the pain and suffering we see around us necessary? And for what purpose?

It is often true that, as we are going through these storms, we cannot understand. At the time of the storm, perhaps the best we can do is try to anchor ourselves in God’s love and ride them out. Yet I believe that these words from Jeremiah hold out great hope for us. While we may not understand now, God says, the time will come when we will. “In the latter days,” God says, “you will understand this.”

And what are those latter days? They are days of restoration. For even as the storm brews for Israel, God reminds the people that the day will come when the sun will shine again, when God will bring compassion, honor, healing and life. Perhaps it is in those days, in those latter days, when God brings restoration, that we will understand.

Restore us, O God, when the storms arise. Amen

February 17, 2024 (originally composed February 15, 2002)

Moving day

Check out Proverbs 17:17.

The moving van was being packed. Our best friends and their family were loading up to go to a new place and a new call. It was to a place far away, to another state, another synod. For them, it was a day of excitement as they embarked on a journey of faith, believing that God had indeed called them to this new place and had opened the door through which they now would pass.

For us, it was a day of sadness. Friends such as these don't come around every day. Of course, it takes a while to cultivate such relationships. It isn't always so often that you find someone with whom you can easily share all your tears and fears, your joys and delights, your dreams and aspirations. It isn't easy to find them, and in a world of mobility and transition, it isn't easy to keep them near.

Yet though the miles would separate us, and the times that we will see one another will be far fewer, we will always remain close in heart. As the proverb tells us, "A friend loves at all times." The memories we have and the things we have shared will never be forgotten and can never be taken away from us.

In a children's message one time, I asked the young people, "What is a blessing?" One little girl, undoubtedly filled with the wisdom of God, said, "It's something that can never be taken away from you." God blesses us with life in the deep relationships we have with one another. Love maintains those bonds. Love is God's way of life.

Thank you, Lord, for the blessing of love. Amen

February 18, 2024

Remembered

Check out Genesis 8:1-4, 9:8-17.

Imagine what it was like on that ark. The rains fell for forty days and forty nights. When the gates of the heavens closed, the waters persisted for another one hundred and fifty days. We all know how we long for spring, so we can open our windows and doors and finally let some fresh air into our homes. But we can hardly fathom the aroma in the ark after one hundred and ninety days! Pheww!

I wonder too what was going through the heart and mind of Noah (besides the smell). Did he fully comprehend what God was doing? At some point he had to wonder if God had forgotten. I would dare say that we all have had that experience from time to time, when we long for God's intervention, for God's hand to reach out and rescue us.

The story turns when God remembers. God remembers Noah. God remembers Noah's family. God remembers the animals on the ark. God remembers and the waters subside.

When Noah and his entourage at last depart from the ark, God remembers again. God makes a covenant the whole earth to never again bring such a flood. God hangs God's bow in the clouds as assurance of the covenant.

When it seems that the waters of life threaten to overwhelm us, we are invited to remember that we are never forgotten. Our promise, now and forever, is that when God remembers, salvation happens.

Lord, remember us; save and deliver. Amen

February 19, 2024

My help (originally composed December 25, 2000)

Check out Psalm 121.

My hope for this morning was that I would simply have you read the Christmas story, with no additional commentary of mine. But the world can change quickly and last night it did. Tragedy struck. The church in Turner burned to the ground.

As you can imagine, we are all pretty heartsick. Seventy-one years of memories, of witness, of the gospel proclaimed have gone up in smoke. You lose more than a building when you lose a church. You lose a life, a dear part of you that cannot be replaced. And we are left with many questions, most of which can be reduced to “What now?”

I was asked many times last night why God would allow such a thing to happen. My answer was always the same: This fire was not God’s work. It was a tragic accident, the result of living in a broken world. My further observation was that I don’t believe that God’s work has even begun in this matter. God’s work will begin when we start to pick up the pieces, when we decide how we will continue to meet as church, when we determine what the future can bring for us.

And so, on this Christmas morning, we lift our eyes to the hill. From where will our help come? Our help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. God, who promises to watch over us, to protect us, to keep us, will neither slumber nor sleep as we work once again to rebuild our lives as the people of God.

We lift our eyes to the hills. Protect, keep, and guide us by your grace. Amen

February 20, 2024

The plea

Check out Exodus 2:23-25.

A long time had passed since the days of Joseph. Jacob and his family had been invited to join Joseph in Egypt with the promise that he would take care of them. For a while this was a favorable arrangement for the Israelites. But Joseph died and some of the policies he had implemented would ultimately result in Israel's slavery.

It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a slave, to be forced to do another's bidding, to be subject to all the abuse and neglect that slavery brings. Yet we know that even here, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, people were held in bondage.

Israel raises a plea, one that echoes from the mouths and the hearts of all those who are held in bondage. The people cry out to God. And God remembers. God remembers the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Rebekah, with Jacob and Rachel and Leah. God takes notice of them and God acts. God calls Moses to be God's agent of deliverance.

The plea of the oppressed continues to be raised. Our voices rise with it, hoping, pleading, trusting that God will act, that God will save. And more than that, our hands reach out, seeking to be among those whom God has chosen to offer a hand up to those who are enslaved.

Hear the pleas of the oppressed, O God, and release them from bondage. Amen

February 21, 2024

Memories

Check out Psalm 25:1-10.

Nearly every day my phone will pop up with memories. Most of the time, they are merely things that I have written in the past and I don't pay much attention to them. Sometimes, though, they kindle emotions that deeply touch my heart. The other day I was reminded that it was my granddaughter's tenth baptismal birthday. It was a blessing I had to share with her, her parents, and her sponsors.

We hold fast to our memories. They trigger in us deep feelings of times gone past. Of course, there are memories that we would prefer to forget – those times of pain and heartache, those times when others have failed us, and most excruciatingly those times when we have failed ourselves, when we didn't live up to be the people we had hoped to be.

Along with the poet, we also pray that God won't remember. The poet pleads, "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions." Instead, the appeal goes out to God's character. "According to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness sake, O Lord!" Even as we cry out for deliverance from our enemies, our memories remind us that sometimes we need our loving and forgiving God to save us from ourselves.

Remember us, O Lord, according to your steadfast love. Amen

February 22, 2024 (originally composed October 28, 2001)

No more

Check out Jeremiah 31:31-34.

God remembers. It is such an important part of our understanding of how God works and acts in the world. God remembered Noah and rescued those who floated endless seas on the ark. God remembered Abraham and saved Lot from death in Sodom. God remembered Israel and brought the people out of bondage in Egypt. God remembered Hannah and gave her a son, Samuel. Good things happen when God remembers. Life happens when God remembers.

But what happens when God doesn't remember? Surprisingly, life can also happen when God doesn't remember. That is the good news we hear from the prophet today. God forgets. God forgets our sin. Through the new covenant that is proclaimed in Christ Jesus, God no longer holds the memory of our sin. It is erased, gone, vanished. And because God no longer remembers our sin, we no longer fear death. It opens a passageway to new life, to eternal life with God now and forever.

God remembers. God remembers no more. Either way, with God there is life.

Forgive our iniquity, O God, and remember our sin no more. Amen

February 23, 2024

Save us

Check out Luke 23:39-43.

What did he know? What had he seen? What had he heard that the other criminal had not? What was it about Jesus that helped him believe?

It is quite a contrast, though not one that is unfamiliar to us. Two criminals are crucified with Jesus. One joins in the mockery of the mob assembled at the place called The Skull. He shouts, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" How easy it is to get caught up when the cries around us are so vocal.

The other criminal has witnessed something different, not the crowd but the one condemned with them. Was it the wounds inflicted upon Jesus that moved his heart? Was it Jesus' words of forgiveness as the nails were driven through his hands and feet? Was it his silence in the face of the mockery? What led him to rebuke the other? What moved him to say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"?

How welcome must Jesus' response been to that criminal on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." How welcome it is for us to know that Jesus would remember us when he comes into his kingdom. And how wonderful it is to know that in Jesus the kingdom has already come near.

Jesus, remember us now and forever. Amen

February 23, 2024

Save us

Check out Luke 23:39-43.

What did he know? What had he seen? What had he heard that the other criminal had not? What was it about Jesus that helped him believe?

It is quite a contrast, though not one that is unfamiliar to us. Two criminals are crucified with Jesus. One joins in the mockery of the mob assembled at the place called The Skull. He shouts, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" How easy it is to get caught up when the cries around us are so vocal.

The other criminal has witnessed something different, not the crowd but the one condemned with them. Was it the wounds inflicted upon Jesus that moved his heart? Was it Jesus' words of forgiveness as the nails were driven through his hands and feet? Was it his silence in the face of the mockery? What led him to rebuke the other? What moved him to say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"?

How welcome must Jesus' response been to that criminal on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." How welcome it is for us to know that Jesus would remember us when he comes into his kingdom. And how wonderful it is to know that in Jesus the kingdom has already come near.

Jesus, remember us now and forever. Amen

February 24, 2024

We remember

Check out 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

God remembers. Jesus remembers. We remember.

We come to the table, set with bread and wine. We come in faith, trusting that we are receiving Jesus' body and blood. We come to remember.

We come to remember the night in which he was betrayed. We gather with those who first gathered with him that night – the one who betrayed him, the one who denied him, the others who fled. We join them and we remember that we are them and they are us.

We come to remember his words of grace, "This is my body. This is my blood." We remember his sacrifice of himself, of his very life, for our sake, for our forgiveness. We remember that as we eat and as we drink he becomes a part of us, and we of him. We come, as duty and as delight.

God remembers. Jesus remembers. We remember.

Jesus, remember us as we remember you. Amen

February 25, 2024 (originally composed February 18, 2002)

Who am I

Check out Mark 8:27-38.

Who do people say that I am? Jesus asks the disciples this important question. What are the crowds saying about me? The answers are various. Yet all the responses point to him as a prophet, one sent from God. The people and the crowds recognize Jesus and his ministry as something special. But it appears that Jesus is not really interested in a poll of the multitudes. The question quickly changes. “Who do you say that I am?” After all, those closest to him should have the greatest insight into who he is.

How would we respond to that question? Would we stand shuffling our feet, hoping that someone would blurt something out before we were forced to speak? Or would we be so bold as Peter to announce Jesus as the Messiah?

Peter is right. The Messiah is standing right there before him. And we would be right too, if that is our response. And what would that mean for us? Too often it probably means that we want to focus on the miraculous, just as the crowds did, just as the disciples seem to do. Jesus himself has a different answer. Being the Messiah wasn't as much about doing the wonderful as it is about suffering and dying, about giving his life as a ransom for many.

As we are called to discipleship, we are reminded that his road is our road, too. And this road is a path of self-denial. It is a road of giving up. It is the way of the cross. Jesus offers us an opportunity to travel with him to his cross. There we will find death. But we will also find the fullness of life. For those who lose their lives for his sake, just as he gave his life for ours, will find true life.

Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah. Guide us in your way, the way to life. Amen

February 26, 2024

Who are we

Check out Ephesians 3:14-21.

The Sunday following the fire the crowds gathered – from the Turner church and community, from the sister churches in Harlem and Hogeland, from various other places – around the foundation that once had supported the American Lutheran Church of Turner. We paid our respects, using the graveside service we had so often shared when commending the faithful to God. Then, taking two pieces of charred lumber, I nailed them together in the form of a cross, tears stinging my eyes to the point of not being able to see. I hoisted the cross to my shoulder and we processed down the street, to a small house that had been converted to a chapel. It would be our church home for the next fifteen months.

My message to the people that day was simple: Now we will find out what we are made of. I suggested that there would be several responses. There would be those who would leap into action, who would give their all to whatever course we chose. Others would sit back and watch, waiting to see what would come. Still others would sit back and complain, not willing to lend a hand but certainly a gripe. And a few would just quit, finding an opportunity to jump ship.

But there was a more important message that day, the message of the gospel. For the many whose faith had been nurtured in that place, who had come to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, this was but a new beginning. And we were reminded of those precious words that would impel us forward in the coming days and months: Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

By the power of your love, O God, accomplish in us more than we can ask or imagine. Amen

February 27, 2024 (originally composed January 2, 2001)

What's in a name

Check out Luke 2:21.

My whole life I have struggled with my name. My parents chose to name me after my Dad. I consider that an honor. I love, admire, and respect my Dad. The only problem is that they quickly realized that things might become a little difficult with two Jims in the house. So I wasn't very old before they settled on calling me by my middle name. Great! I love that name too. The problem is that any time I fill out any legal document, or submit an application, or go to the doctor, or about any other thing, I am asked to use my full name. And almost invariably that ends us the name by which I am called. I worked for one man an entire summer and no matter how many times I asked him to call me Scott, my time cards kept telling him that my name was James, so Jim I was. It's not such a big problem, except that when people use that name, I have a difficult time figuring out who they are talking about!

Names tell much about us. They give us our sense of identity. They allow us to identify others. How many people do you know whose nicknames are some sort of derivation of their name, or a name that refers to some physical or personality characteristic? Names are important, and we often bristle a little when our name is mispronounced or somehow misused.

We read today about the naming of our Savior. He is given the name Jesus, which means "he saves." What name could be more appropriate than that? The one who has come to save the world from its sins is given a name that fully identifies him and his mission. When we use that name (or at least when we use it properly) or when we call upon it, we are reminded of the immensity of God's love, a love willing to become one of us in order to save us. What's in a name? In this name, there is salvation. There is life. And we can give thanks that when that name is spoken among us with the reverence it deserves, we are speaking salvation and grace. What more precious gift can we have than that?

Lord Jesus, your name is grace and truth and life. Amen

February 28, 2024

Foolish?

Check out 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

Following my graduation from seminary, I returned to my hometown and home church for my ordination. While I was there, my Dad's neighbor came up to me and said, "I'm glad you're going to do this. I never thought you would ever amount to anything." Thanks, I guess. Years later I had been invited to preach at the worship service during my hometown's all-class reunion. After the service a woman approached me and said, "I really wasn't planning on coming. I figured, 'Why would I believe anything Scott Hedegaard had to say?' But you did a good job." They don't call it Savage for nothing.

There have been times when I have wondered myself. How could God possibly use an ex-oilfield hand with a colorful background to be a servant in the church? Yet I had always been convinced that I had received a call from God for a particular service. How could this be?

Perhaps you have asked the same question. We receive encouragement to use our gifts of the Spirit, but sometimes we aren't certain they are truly of any value. But as Paul writes, the people God has called aren't necessarily the smartest or the richest or the most powerful. In fact, God chooses the foolish, the weak, the low and despised, in order that God's power is known through us. We understand that the gifts we have and the ways in which we share those gifts are given by God, who gives us life through Christ who is God's wisdom and righteousness and sanctification. What we bring, what we give are God's blessings through which we can boast in God's power to work, even through us.

Thank you, Lord, for choosing us just as we are. Amen

February 29, 2024 (originally composed January 3, 2001)

What's in a name 2

Check out 1 John 3:13.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

What's in a name? A name is identity. It tells who we are. How many people do you know whose last names end in –son or –sen? Those kinds of names are certainly names that, at least in their origin, told much about who you were. If you were Johnson, it meant you were John's son. The name identified you with your family group. Other names, like Miller or Carpenter, were professional names. They identify you by what you do. Still others are decidedly ethnic, like Hedegaard. They identify you by where you or your ancestors are from.

We have been named children of God. What does that mean for our identity? As much as some might want to write a formula for our identity as children of God. But rather than being fixed, it might mean that we are in process of becoming what God intends us to be. When a child is born, we cannot ascertain what the child's future will be. We don't know if the child will be tall or short, average or outstanding, bald or hairy. We wait as the child develops. Certainly, if it is our own child, we strive to equip her or him with the best preparation we can give for life ahead. Yet there always remains that uncertainty about what the child will become.

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. In our identity as God's children, we can be secure in the promise of God's love. We don't necessarily know how we will look or what we will be when we become fully grown. We do not know because God's goodness and God's plan for us has not yet been revealed to us. Yet we can be assured that God is seeking to form us so that we might be more like Christ. God is seeking to form us so that we might be love as Christ is love.

We are your children, God. Make us grow to be more like your Son. Amen

March 1, 2024

Same mind

Check out Philippians 2:1-13.

“What then should we do?” The question was asked by those who came to John to be baptized by him in the wilderness. John’s response was specific to those who inquired. Share what you have. Do not take more than you ought. Be satisfied. These were steps in preparing for the one who was yet to come.

Fast forward a couple of decades. Paul too has an answer to the same query. He too points to the one John announced, the one whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension has ushered in a new era, a new faith. Paul now can say, “Be like him. Be like Jesus. Be of the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.”

What is that like? As we identify as God’s children, as Christ’s own, we are invited to put on his humility, to see other’s interests as higher than our own, to be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the other. In other words, we are invited to live in love.

As we work out our salvation, given to us a free gift, even as we do so with fear and trembling, we are encouraged to remember that living in love is not solely by our effort. Instead, it is God working through us and in us that we might live in a manner pleasing to God.

Christ, be our light, our life, our love, our mind. Amen

March 2, 2024 (originally composed January 24, 2001)

Imago dei

Check out Genesis 1:26-31.

I'm only human. Have you ever used that line as an excuse for a mistake you made? It's pretty common, isn't it? In a way, I suppose it is an honest admission of our frailty. To err is human, to forgive is divine, right? And yes, I suppose that is sort of good theology. We admit the power that sin has over us.

But have you ever thought that this might be an insult to God? That's right, an insult to God. Why? Because we need to be reminded that as human beings, we are created imago dei. We are created in the image of God. So then, to be human means that we are made in the very likeness of God. Only human? Imagine the implication of that if we consider it from the aspect of how we are created, rather than from how we have fallen. It opens a whole new way of looking at ourselves.

We can never underestimate the power that sin has over our lives. We can never forget how much we need the forgiving grace God has given us in Christ Jesus. But we also need to remind ourselves of our own possibilities. We are the image of God. As such, we have the power to follow in God's ways. God has created us in a special way and for a special purpose. We have the power to reflect God's grace, God's love, God's goodness to the world. With the power of salvation we know in Jesus Christ, we are remade a new creation, restored by God to be God's own image.

I'm only human. Consider the power of that. Remind yourself the God, in God's goodness, has create you in the image of God. And thing of all that you might do as you seek to be God's image, God's very reflection to the world.

By your grace, O God, may the world see your love as we reflect your image. Amen

March 3, 2024

Zealous

Check out John 2:13-22.

I have sat in council meetings where, upon receiving the treasurer's report, the members sat in dead silence for minutes at a time. The silence didn't really solve anything. God was not going to descend and do some amendments that would make the report better. It was frustrating though because it made it seem as if we existed as a church only because of money.

So I get Jesus here. I get the anger he feels. I understand how his zeal for God's house would lead him to some pretty violent actions. Lord knows I have been tempted to do something similar. Jesus' fury arises from the use of God's house as a marketplace, as an opportunity to make money. I'm sure those who were promoting this behavior would justify it; the temple needs cash to operate, right?

The temple leadership wants answers. "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus' response is less than adequate, as far as they are concerned. But Jesus is pointing to something different. The power of God is the power to bring life, even life after death. The work of God's people, whether in the temple or the church, is to celebrate that life and to share it with the world.

As we journey to the cross, we are invited to consider just how we use what we have been given, not just in the church but in our very lives. As we seek to share the gospel of life and love, may we do so in a manner that reflects our gratitude for what we have received and our willingness to share what we have as God's hands to support and encourage new life.

O God, you give us the means of life. Let us share that grace to your glory. Amen

March 4, 2024 (originally composed January 26, 2001)

Blessings from afar

Check out Acts 11:27-30.

News of the fire travelled fast. Within a couple of days, we received a check from a couple in Bigfork. A note accompanied the gift. It read, “We heard of the fire that your church experienced. We have never had any association with the church in Turner, but for much of our lives we attended a small church in Frazer, so we understand the struggles rural churches face. Please accept this gift.”

In the time following, we witnessed a great outpouring of support. People and congregations from across the state and the country offered gifts of money, worship supplies, pews, nearly everything we could imagine. We stood in awe of this enormous generosity and gave thanks to God for the ways in which God moved the hearts of people near and far.

I wasn't really surprised though. Such support for those in need has been a part of the Christian tradition from the very beginning. We read today in the book of Acts how the church rose to the occasion when famine overtook Judea. Paul speaks in many of his letters about the collection made in Macedonia and Achaia to support the ministry of the church in Jerusalem. The church has always been about outreach. Just as Jesus gave his life for us, so we are called to give of ourselves for the sake of others.

Former Bishop Mark Ramseth once told the story of the building of a church. There was no stained glass in the sanctuary. The windows were clear, a reminder that the mission of the church is never in the interior of the church. It is always on the outside. We have been called again and again to be light to the world. In our outreach, in our mission to those in need, we share the light of Christ. May we always be a church that focuses not on our own needs, but the needs of others. For in that mission we will find blessing.

Lord Jesus, may our hands do your work in sharing your love to the world. Amen

March 5, 2024

Not mine

Check out Deuteronomy 8:11-18.

You may recall the seagulls in the movie *Finding Nemo*. Every time they appeared there would be a chorus of “Mine, mine, mine, mine.” Anyone who has raised children can find this humorous because we have already lived it. We know how possessive our young people can sometimes be. A sibling might choose a toy that the other hasn’t touched in ages, but as soon as they make that choice it’s “Mine, mine, mine, mine.”

Unfortunately some never grow out of it. We amass our houses and cars, our furniture and our toys, we fill our pantries and our freezers, then kick back, pat ourselves on the bellies, and proudly say, “Mine, mine, mine, mine.”

As Israel prepares to enter the Promised Land, Moses offers a word both of warning and encouragement. “Life is going to be good there. Houses and herds and flocks and money will be multiplied like you wouldn’t believe. But don’t forget who brought you here. Don’t forget who gave this to you. Don’t think for one minute that it all came because of your own doing. It is the Lord your God who gave you this power and wealth, the Lord your God who promised this to your ancestors and now to you.”

It is easy enough to forget. After all, we have ourselves convinced that we have worked hard for what we have. But when we remember that it wasn’t by our own effort that we have what we have, our attitudes toward it, and indeed our very lives are changed. All we have, all we are, all that we hope to be comes as a gift of grace. And we are invite to share our gifts that others might also be blessed.

Gracious God, thank you for all you give to us. Amen

March 6, 2024

Sowing

Check out Mark 4:1-9.

It seems that Jesus doesn't really know a whole lot about farming. You would think that a man who lived most of his life in a rural area would have a better sense of the process. A farmer doesn't just go casting seed out wherever it might land. I can't imagine any of my friends in agriculture driving down the highway with the seed going every which way – in the road, in the borrow pit, in the rock pile, before finally going up and down the field. It just doesn't make sense.

Now we all know that Jesus' parable isn't really about farming at all. It is about spreading the word. It concerns sharing the gospel. The sower casts the seed everywhere, somehow not knowing the quality of the soil and what it might bring forth. Poor soil yields little or nothing; good soil brings an abundant harvest.

Unfortunately the church has chosen to combine good farming practices with this parable of the sower. Too often we decide that we know best where to sow the seed of the word. We endeavor to plant in the right places, which usually means people just like us, because we're good soil, right? It's no wonder so many churches struggle to survive.

We can be the same way with our money. If we are called to support some kind of ministry or outreach, or even when we question whether we should help the guy with a sign on the street corner, we try to determine how we can get "more bang for our buck." Paul has a better idea. He tells the Corinthians, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Whether with the word of truth and life, or with ourselves, our time, and our possessions, we are called to be the crazy sower, spreading love, grace, and joy wherever we can.

Lord, let our hearts be good soil, and may we be generous with your harvest of righteousness.

Amen

March 7, 2024 (originally composed January 29, 2001)

Consider the ravens

Check out Luke 12:22-31.

At the time of this writing the NFL is marching toward the Super Bowl. One of the teams still in contention is the Baltimore Ravens; no, I'm not asking you to consider them! I want to talk instead about the hype that surrounds this event. I generally make a great effort, after the conference championships are over and the Super Bowl teams are decided, to NOT read any of the articles or listen to anything on TV that has anything to do with the game. In the two weeks before, volumes of newspaper space and miles of videotape will be shot, as reporters and so-called experts analyze and dissect every possible aspect of the upcoming game. Apparently a lot of people get into that. But I don't care. I like to watch the game, even though most of the time the commercials are more entertaining than the game itself.

It's easy enough to get caught up in the hype of life too. The news channels do the same thing as ESPN, with pundits and panels offering all kinds of information, useful or not. In our own lives we can get so involved in worrying about how we will get that or that that it becomes easy to lose sight of what is important. We are reminded today what is really essential. We can fret over what our next meal will be, or we can worry about what we will wear. But as Jesus says, the birds don't worry; the lilies don't fret. The things for which we are so concerned are already promised to us. God sees and God knows what we need.

Instead, Jesus says, strive for God's kingdom. What we have here is only temporary. What God promises us is eternal. All the hype the world gives about income and wealth are nothing compared with the riches of the realm of God. And while striving for that goodness may not get us any airtime, it will give us front row seats as God's reign comes near.

Loving God, let us seek first your reign in our lives. Amen

March 8, 2024 (originally composed February 9, 2001)

The justice of God

Check out Matthew 20:1-16.

Over the years I have gotten lots of questions from people regarding matters of faith. Most often the questions involve the justice of God. Why would God allow my child to be ill? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why won't God provide for everyone? How can we proclaim a God of justice when it seems that God is arbitrary?

There really isn't a simple answer to this. It confounds us, especially because of our own sense of justice. We often have a sense of retributive justice. We believe that one should get what one deserves. Of course, the corollary to that is that one deserves what one gets, which leads to us justify all sorts of inequity. Unfortunately there is no such thing as a level playing field.

But what about God? Is this how God's justice works? I doubt that there are too many who can read this parable of the workers in the vineyard and not say, "Wait a minute, God. These guys are right. The people who came first should get more." That is our sense of justice. But God's justice is grounded in God's love. And God's love desires that everyone be rescued from the powers of sin and death. God's love cries out to share the essentials of life with all people. That love applies to everyone.

The early-bird workers cry out, "It's not fair." The landlord's response is, "How have you been deprived?" Our sense of justice is based on scarcity. God's justice centers on abundance. In the same way, God offers us opportunities to share that God's justice, God's love throughout our whole lives. And if we live in, and live out of, that love, we are blessed. God's vineyard is not toil and trouble; God's vineyard is peace and joy. And if in God's justice we are invited to share those gifts, then the whole world will be blessed as we are.

Lord God, the harvest is plentiful. Let your blessings pour down on all people. Amen

March 9, 2024

Treasure

Check out Matthew 6:16-18.

We have a garage. Do you know what's in our garage? Our cars! How about you? I walk by a lot of places where the resident's \$60,000 pickup is sitting out in the driveway. Why? Because their garage is filled with stuff that is far less valuable.

Those who know me well recognize that I strive to live simply. Over the years that has meant a lot of downsizing. When we moved to seminary, we had so much stuff in the largest UHaul one could rent that we had to hold in the last of it in order to get the door shut. When we returned to Montana, we had one-third less stuff. When I moved to Glasgow, I discovered a box that hadn't been opened since we left Savage. That box never moved again.

We take a lot of pride in our stuff. Honestly, though, we should keep in mind that nothing we accumulate will last. Our things wear out, they break, or they just deteriorate. Or they may get replaced by something with a little more sparkle than what we have. Sadly, we sometimes hang on to those old things: Oh, I might be able to use that sometime. What this means is that we no longer possess our treasures; instead, they come to possess us.

The best wisdom we can get regarding our "treasures" comes from Jesus. Don't store up treasures on earth; store up treasures in heaven. Our true treasures are the relationships of love we build, the gratitude we have for what we have received, our willingness to share out of our abundance, and the ultimate gifts of peace, hope, love and joy we have found in Christ Jesus. All these treasures we have been bequeathed from our God in heaven. Could we not also go and do likewise?

Jesus, priceless treasure, you are our source of purest pleasure. Thank you. Amen

March 10, 2024

In the light

Check out John 3:14-21.

Most likely, this is the first Bible verse that many of us learned. For God so loved the world – we can repeat it by heart. It reminds us of the vastness of God’s love, that God loves the world, that God sent the Son, that through the Son we have eternal life. I often wish that we had been asked to memorize the corollary – that the Son was sent into the world to save it, not to condemn it.

We have been blessed to be people of the light. The Light of the World shines upon us. We know the truth, and the truth has made us free. But somewhere along the way, we seem to have forgotten that seeing the light and living in the light is not merely for our own sake. God so loved the world. Jesus brought the light to shine in the darkness. And we, like the Baptist, have been called to bear witness to the light.

How might we do that? Certainly we do so in sharing the good news that God so loved the world, and especially sharing it with those who don’t feel particularly loved. As the Light of the World shines in us and through us, we bear witness to the light by letting that light shine before others, reminding them that the Light is for all people. Our words can bear light, and our loving hearts and caring hands can bring light to this world God so loves.

Lord Jesus, let your light so shine through us. Amen

March 11, 2024 (originally composed December 27, 2000)

Resurrection hope

Check out John 11:17-27.

I would like to share with you two visions. Some women were standing on the road, watching as their beloved church blazed. Suddenly, one of them said, “Look at how the flames light up the picture of Jesus in the stained glass window.” But another quickly responded, “There was no picture of Jesus in that window.” “Do you see it?” the first asked. Yes, they all had.

A couple of days later I received a call from a dear friend of mine. She said, “I have to share with you what I just saw. As I was praying for your people, I saw a vision of Jesus hovering over the Turner congregation. He was dressed in all white, and he was beautiful.”

Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Most of us, when hearing this, take the narrow view, the view of Martha, as a promise and a hope of life beyond death. Jesus, however, is quick to counter that: “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” That is the fullness of the resurrection, a fullness Martha quickly acknowledges, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Though we may aspire to eternal life with God on our passing from this earth, we also are given the strength and hope of rising here and now, from the little deaths and the great deaths that plague us in our pilgrimage here on earth.

Two visions. Both are reminders that our Lord is with us and that our Lord is raising us to life now. Eternal life is ours and it is ours in the present. Let us bask in this hope, filled with the certainty that the outstretched arms of Jesus are surrounding us, and that he is breathing into us the Holy Spirit of life. And let us boldly proclaim to the world with Martha, “I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Give us the vision, Lord, of the resurrected life you offer, now and forever. Amen

March 12, 2024 (originally composed February 2, 2001)

For the saints

Check out Luke 2:36-39.

When I was growing up, we had a Sunday School teacher we all knew as Grandma Tombre. She was indeed one of my classmate's grandmothers, and she really was a Grandma to all of us. Grandma was definitely old school. She was a firm disciplinarian who demanded our attention and our participation. Because we were a rowdy class, she followed along with us throughout most of our Sunday School careers. If anyone could keep a class in focus, Grandma Tombre could.

Grandma Tombre was also one of the most faithful and most gracious people I ever knew. She love to fish and rejoiced over everything she caught, no matter how small or what species. They were all gifts from God. I remember on time in particular. It was Palm Sunday, when our beloved dog Peaches ran out in front of her son's pickup and was run over, just before it was time to leave for church. I came to Sunday School that day with deep, deep grief. And I will never forget the comfort and compassion she showed, knowing how heartbroken I was. She came as an angel to a little boy who so needed words of consolation.

We read today of Anna, one of the great devoted saints, who at last saw the redemption of the world, presented in the temple. She had faithfully abided in that temple, praying and worshipping. Her faithfulness was rewarded when a child, Jesus, was brought by his parents to be dedicated to God. In her old age, she finally beheld that for which she had hoped.

We give thanks today for saints like Anna and Grandma Tombre. It is by their won faith that we ourselves have found faith. They received the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. And the have offered their praise to God by passing that good news on to the next generations. Somewhere in your memory, you too hold dear one of the great saints of God. Give thanks for their witness. And pray that one day there may be another generation that will give thanks for you and for your witness to them.

We give you thanks, O God, for all your faithful witnesses. Amen

March 13, 2024 (originally posted December 28, 2000)

In clay jars

Check out 2 Corinthians 4:5-12.

I recall the day of my installation as pastor of the American Lutheran Parish of Harlem, Hogeland, and Turner. The Associate to the Bishop at the time presided at the service. He used this text as the basis for his sermon and talked about the ministry I had been given – a ministry in clay jars. At first, I was offended. I thought, “You don’t know me that well.” But then I thought, “You know me too well!”

It doesn’t take much to reveal our weaknesses, does it? It doesn’t take much to remind us that we are mortal and that the plans we lay for ourselves and for our lives are subject to instant change. It doesn’t take much for us to learn just how fragile we are. And I suppose it would be easy enough to lose heart in the face of that realization.

Yet we have been entrusted with an enormous gift. We have been entrusted with Jesus Christ and the power of his word. We have been given Christ as a gift to bear to the world. But as we are reminded today, that gift has been given to us in clay jars. We are mortal. We are human. We are weak. And we are weak to show that God is strong. We are weak in order that God’s extraordinary power might be revealed.

And we are encouraged. We are encouraged in that we know that weak and fragile as we are, God is able to use us. Though the world around us might seem to be crumbling, we are not beaten down. We are assured of the presence of Christ. And we carry with us the trust that in the death of Christ, God has made possible life. Even as we suffer deaths for the sake of Christ, we are filled with the possibilities of his life working through us.

And so, by the power of God, life rises again, from the ashes of our pain and the depths of our losses, God remains faithful. Therefore, we remain committed. And though we sometimes face incomprehensible tragedy and enormous grief, we move on, filled with the certainty that just as Christ died, we must die also, and that just as Christ lives, we too shall live forever.

Though we are but clay, Lord, let your life be known through us. Amen

March 14, 2024 (originally composed March 21, 2001)

The witness of joy

Check out Psalm 30.

Back when I was on internship, I was dealing with a particularly difficult situation that caused me a great deal of pain and a lot of sleepless nights. This went on for several weeks. One day I was telling my internship supervisor John about how things were progressing (actually regressing would be the better word). He listened patiently as I described what had been taking place. When I had finished telling him my whole sad tale of woe, his response was “Better you than me!” I couldn’t help but laugh. With that little joke, the whole burden of what had happened was lifted. John was the kind of person who really could bring great joy, even with a little remark like that.

It is easy to get caught up in the tough situations of life. It is easy to feel overwhelmed when it seems that your foes march around you. It is easy to be burdened when we feel we are being led down into the Pit. But our God is a God who brings joy. In the midst of our sorrow, God can give what we need to lift us up out of our despair and into God’s loving embrace. God can truly turn our mourning into dancing.

It pains me sometimes to hear and see people whom Christ has redeemed act as if the weight of the world is crushing them to death. Bad times can come; there is no doubt about that. But the light of Christ has dawned on us. The poet reminds us that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Joy is ours because we are God’s people. Take time to witness to joy you have been given in Christ Jesus.

Make the joy you have given be a witness to your love, Lord Jesus. Amen

March 15, 2024 (originally composed February 22, 2001)

He is our peace

Check out Ephesians 2:13-18.

How do you think of peace? For many, peace probably means the absence of conflict or war. If our nation lives in a time of peace, it means that we are not involved in a dispute over land or resources or ideology. If we are at peace with our neighbors, it means that we are living harmoniously with them.

But if that is our definition of peace, how often do we truly find it? It is probably rare that we are in circumstances where we are getting along with all people at all times. Disputes arise, in our families, in our communities, in our nation, in our world. If our definition of peace is only the absence of conflict, we probably don't experience that too often.

We speak of the peace of Christ, but what is that peace? The peace of Christ does not simply mean an absence of conflict. In a broken and fallen world, conflict is inevitable. It will arise, whether by our own doing or not. Conflict will come. The peace of Christ is a peace that allows us to continue to live peacefully in a conflicted world. The peace of Christ reminds us that all we have and all we do is ultimately in God's hands. Our reconciliation with God in Christ Jesus has given us the assurance that we are loved and that we are in God's eternal care. That assurance allows us to live peaceably with one another without fear. Fear more than anything creates barriers. Those barriers are broken down because we have peace with God. God's peace is a welcoming peace. God's peace is a forgiving peace. God's peace is a loving peace. In other words, God's peace is an active peace, offering peace in our hearts so that we might have peace with one another.

O God, may your peace that surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

March 16, 2024 (originally composed April 22, 2001)

Sent

Check out Matthew 28:16-20.

Apostle. It means one who is sent. It is a name given by Luke to those whom Jesus sends out to proclaim the kingdom of God. It is a name received by the disciples here (although Matthew doesn't use the word), as Jesus gives them the Great Commission. On the brink of his ascension, Jesus instructs his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. They are sent out to bring all nations and all peoples into God's fold.

Apostle. It is a name given also to us. We are sent by God to proclaim the kingdom as well. We have received the same Great Commission that was given to those very few who first followed Jesus. Indeed, it is a calling to which God's people have always responded and continue to respond. There is hardly a corner of the globe to which the gospel has not been carried.

Apostle. It is a difficult task. Yet we are not sent without great promise. We are given the assurance of Jesus' presence with us as we go out into the world bearing the good news. Jesus will be with us always. We might be tempted to use our inadequacies as an excuse, but filled with the presence of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit we have the power to be Jesus' apostles. We have the means by which we can carry the good news to those who need it most.

Apostle. It means one who is sent. It means you.

Here I am, Lord! Send me! Amen

March 17, 2024

Common good

Check out 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

We are looking into a home improvement project. We were surprised by the overall cost. It turned out to be less than what one might have anticipated. It may save us some money in the long run, or it may not. Regardless, it would serve the common good.

We are reminded of the many gifts poured out upon God's people through the Holy Spirit. There are varieties of gifts and no one person is blessed to receive all those gifts. We are given them to share. We are given them to serve the common good.

We may sometimes forget that other gifts we receive - gifts that might not fall under the category of spiritual gifts - are also given to serve the common good. As we often pray when we give our offering, we bring "ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of [God's] gracious love." We bring not only our spiritual gifts for the sake of the body of Christ, but we give of our other gifts as well, for the sake of the body, for the common good, for the sake of the world God so loves.

Gracious God, we thank you for the gifts we have received. May we use them to serve the common good. Amen

March 18, 2024 (originally composed January 14, 2001)

Brand new day

Check out Romans 14:5-9.

The day had finally come. For many of us, it would be impossible to consider that this was just another day. We gathered to decide the fate of a church. It was no small task. It was no small day. While there would be many decisions that would be left to the future, we would undoubtedly set the tone for whatever would take place. All days alike? We were certain that this day would be like no other.

We might have expected that there would be some, at the end of this day, who would be pleased with its outcome. Others would feel slighted and believe that their opinions and concerns were ignored. Unfortunately, that was inevitable. We ought to know by now that we don't always get our way and that things don't always go the way we would want them to go.

Nevertheless, as we began that day, we looked for assurance. And our assurance comes in this: We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. No matter what the outcome of the day, or of any other day, we remain under the gracious watch of Christ. While the course of the day might at its outset be enshrouded, we were assured that Christ was going with us. That is our promise. That is our hope. Salvation comes not in what one day or another might bring; salvation comes in the cross of Christ as a gift that cannot be taken away.

Two decisions were made that day. The congregation was unanimous in its desire to rebuild. The second, whether to try to replicate the old church or to create something new, a building on one level, was more controversial. We wisely chose one level. And there was one more decision made by the council later that day – that all our choices would be made not by majority vote, but by consensus, trusting that by the Lord's guidance we would see all things, and days, the same.

Lord, though we may not see in the same way, remind us that we are one in you. Amen

March 19, 2024

Help

Check out Matthew 8:35-9:4.

He moved through the cities, the towns, the countryside. He taught. He healed. He cast out demons. He had compassion for those who came to him. But he couldn't do it alone. So he appointed the disciples to be his helping hands in the world.

It seems that we often have a hard time with Jesus' humanity. He is, after all, God incarnate. But sometimes his divine side has a tendency to overwhelm the human. With all the miracle stories, the healings, the exorcisms, the feedings, walking on water, we tend to forget that Jesus truly was one of us. He had a body like ours. Like us, he was limited in space and time. Jesus truly did become one of us. And he knew it. He knew that as long as he was in human form, his ability to bring comfort and hope to the harassed and helpless was constrained.

But if Jesus found limits in his humanity, he knew too that the power of God has no limits. He conferred upon his disciples the power to cure diseases and cast out demons, to be his helping hands in the world. His compassion had no limits either. The more laborers there were, the more good could be done, and the more the gospel of the kingdom could be shared. Whether we know it or not, we too have been called as laborers in the harvest. We too have been given the power of God to reach out a hand of compassion to the harassed and helpless. Jesus has poured out upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit to bring goodness and life to those around us, and especially to those in need. The Spirit moves in Christ's people so that together we might proclaim the good news not only in what we say, but in what we do as well.

Lord, make us faithful workers in your harvest of love. Amen

March 20, 2024

Sewn together

Check out Ephesians 4:7-16.

They come together in churches all over. They gather to make quilts. It is a labor of love. As long as I can remember, women of our congregations give of their time to make gifts of warmth to be shared with others. Some are sent overseas, others help more locally. I have seen quilts offered to fire victims, people devastated by floods, the unhoused, and occasionally to someone who just needed to be wrapped in love.

It is a gift, this quilting and the desire and ability to do it. It is a gift not only for those who will eventually wrap themselves in them or shelter themselves from the elements. It is a gift also for those who participate in this labor of love. I have often chuckled at the conversations I have heard while our quilters did their work. The quilters do more than sew fabric together. They themselves are sewn together by their activity and fellowship.

It is a gift, this quilting. It is a gift from Christ. There are various gifts that are poured out upon the church by Christ. Though they may not get mentioned, those who engage in this ministry are included as well. Their gift of stitchery helps knit the whole body together. Their work of love proclaims Christ's love. We give thanks for the quilters and for all those who labor in Christ. It is by our fruits that we are known, and if our fruits are fruits of love, then we have truly proclaimed our Savior to the world.

Use our gifts, Lord Jesus, for the sake of the body and to your glory. Amen

March 21, 2024 (originally posted June 10, 2001)

Together in faith

Check out Acts 2:43-47.

Following worship one Sunday, we prepared to head over to Chester for a benefit that was being held for the Turner church. We looked forward to a great time, with lots of music and a steak fondue to follow. It also was a good reminder of who the people of God are and what they are called to be for one another. The Chester and Joplin parishes sponsored this event. What made it unique was that their area had been it harder than any other during the past few years of drought. The people there had truly been suffering with horrendously poor crop yields. Yet their suffering from drought had not dried up their generosity of spirit. They were willing to do for others because of what God has done for them, sharing their gifts even in times of trouble.

As the church grew following the Pentecost, the people, bonded together in Christ, spent time of fellowship, prayer, praise, and sharing. They helped those in need and they praised God not only in what they said, but in what they did to witness to God's love. Because of their solidarity of faith, this community thrived and grew. God saw to it that their numbers increased daily.

In a single afternoon, the people of Chester and Joplin raised over \$8000 to help their siblings in Christ from Turner. God's people have from the beginning been endowed with a generosity of Spirit. We give thanks for all God's gifts, especially those that give us a willingness to share, to help others that they might see the goodness of God and find hope in God's salvation.

Bind your people together, Lord, in the spirit of love. Amen

March 22, 2024

Building the house

Check out Ezra 3:10-13.

The project continued. It was very interesting to discover what all needed to be considered in building a house of God. We learned a lot about insurance policies and building codes. We found some things that were a little controversial, but most were beneficial (Yes, we would be better off with two stalls in each bathroom!). We had carefully evaluated the financial status of our endeavor. Perhaps most important was a question put to us by an ELCA consultant. He asked, “What kind of ministry would you like to do in this building?” We settled on three priorities: Worship, space for the education of our children, and providing a venue that could be used by the whole community for meetings or other gatherings. We had poured a lot of hours into our building. Still, in four months, not one stone had been turned, not one 2X4 had been nailed. It’s hard to see progress when everything is going on behind the scenes.

What would we have when we were done? We hoped it would be a beautiful building that gives glory to God. That was our chief objective. Would it satisfy everyone’s desires? Not likely. But as we see in the story from Ezra, as the people of God set about rebuilding the temple, not everyone was satisfied. There were vivid memories of the old house. And while voices of praise were raised up as the foundations were laid, there was also weeping over what had been.

Yet the call of God was clear. Build me a house. We would forge ahead. We would forge ahead with God’s blessing. Even as we waited, with the plans in the architect’s hands and as other decisions were to be made, we could give thanks to God. We gave thanks that God had entrusted us with such a bold mission. We gave thanks to God for the opportunities we were given to serve. And we could pray that when the foundations of our new house were raised, our joyful shouts would overwhelm the weeping, so that people might hear of the immeasurable goodness God had given us.

Gracious God, let us give thanks for what is not yet seen. Amen

March 23, 2024

One

Check out Galatians 6:1-5.

Our first year of college was a struggle. We didn't have a whole lot of resources and got by as best as we could. One day, just before the season of Lent began, we received a letter from a great aunt of mine. She wrote that she really didn't have any bad habits to give up for Lent, so she decided to give us a gift. Enclosed with the letter was a check for \$300, a princely sum in the mid-seventies.

As this season of Lent winds down, I wonder. I wonder what kind of commitments others have made this season. Perhaps there have been bad habits to give up, or maybe something that wasn't really bad but seemed like a sacrifice to us. I wonder how many might have instead been challenged to do something good for others. I'm afraid that often the disciplines we choose for Lent are self-serving – Give up chocolate? For what? – rather than serving our neighbor.

“Bear one another's burdens,” Paul says, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” At the same time, we are encouraged that “all must carry their own loads.” This two-fold admonition reminds us that as the body of Christ, as God's people in the world, we are all in this together. We are responsible for each other. We also are called to avoid being a burden to others, as much as we possibly can. We help one another, we lift each other up, we carry each other's burdens. We also recognize that there will be those times when we ourselves need help, a loving gesture, a compassionate embrace. Our lives, in this season or any other, are intricately bound together, just as we are bound together with the whole creation, just as we are bound together with Christ.

Blessed Trinity, make us one as you are one. Amen

March 24, 2024

Unforeseen

Check out Mark 11:1-11.

With the plans finalized and the foundation of the church being laid, it seemed that all was well. The time had come to deliver my oldest daughter to college, so my son and I embarked on a road trip. On our return, disaster struck. Coming down Fourth of July Pass, the transfer case in the pickup went out. We were able to find a tow service/mechanic who could do the repairs for us. Since it was Saturday, we would have to spend the weekend in Post Falls.

When we awakened on Monday morning, our issue suddenly became less important. We turned on the TV to see live footage of the attack on the first tower at the World Trade Center. We watched in horror as the second tower was struck, then one by one the two buildings collapsed. We joined our nation and our world in shock of this unforeseen event.

The crowds gathered along the path from the Mount of Olives. They brimmed with excitement at the coming of Jesus. They spread their cloaks and leafy branches on the road. Shouts of “Hosanna!” echoed on the way. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”

What they could not have known, what they could not have seen was that this moment of triumph would end in tragedy. What appeared to be a march of victory would be for Jesus a funeral procession.

We join these crowds on Palm Sunday. We join them, knowing how this story goes, how Jesus will soon give his life on the cross. But we also join them assured that Jesus’ story does not end on the cross. And as we make our journey of faith, often in the shadow of death, we can be confident that we, walking with Jesus, will find life.

Lord Jesus, we welcome you with joy. May we faithfully follow you from death to life. Amen

March 25, 2024 (originally composed April 9, 2001)

Plotting revenge

Check out Mark 11:15-19.

If they hadn't been convinced before, they were now. It was time to get rid of this guy. He had gone just too far. It is an interesting scene, this cleansing of the temple. We see a Jesus who doesn't quite fit into our picture of who Jesus is supposed to be. We like the Jesus we see holding a lamb or a blessing a little child. We aren't used to a Jesus who is angrily overturning tables in the temple and driving out animals and people alike.

But perhaps we should be less concerned about this picture of Jesus than we are about the religious leaders. By now we are used to Jesus breaking the mold, stirring the pot. But these other guys? How can religious leaders seriously object to someone wanting to return the house of God to a place devoted to prayer? How can they plot to kill someone who has tried to restore the right worship of God?

One would suspect that the chief priests and scribes aren't in the business of religion purely for the sake of worship. Chances are good that they are making some serious cash here too, renting space and skimming profit. And Lord knows, the way to a man's heart, whether for good or for ill, is through his pocketbook.

Still it raises the question for all of us about the motives for our faith and our work for God. For what are we in it? I imagine not many of us are in it for the money. If we are, we have made a bad choice. Perhaps we are motivated by prestige or social standing. If so, we are no better off than the greedy religious leaders of Jesus' time (or some in our time, for that matter).

As we journey with Jesus to the cross, perhaps our central question should be "How do we continue to seek to make our houses of worship houses of prayer?" That, after all, is our calling. We in our buildings, in our gathering, in our very lives are called to be "a house of prayer for all nations" and all peoples. Let us never lose sight of that.

Lord Jesus, drive out of us that which would separate us from you. Amen

March 26, 2024 (originally composed April 10, 2001)

God of the living

Check out Mark 12:18-27.

In the past few decades, some biblical scholarship has challenged the resurrection. Some argue that since we have never seen a resurrection, there cannot be one. Others might say that Jesus' resurrection was merely a spiritual one, that the disciples, through sharing the story of resurrection, in effect created one.

It is an old argument really, the same one that the Sadducees brought before Jesus. Using their "logic" of marriage, they seek to prove that there is no resurrection of the dead.

Jesus counters. His contention is not based on physical evidence, but on God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." In those few words, we are reminded of what God's intentions are and what God's modus operandi is. Our God is a God who brings life. From the very first words of creation, God has sought to bring forth life. God's intentions for life abound throughout the scripture, bringing children to the aged Abraham and Sarah, rescuing the people Israel from slavery, bring about new life and new hope through the cross. Indeed it is there, in the cross, where God's intentions for life are most fully revealed. In the cross, by death God has taken away the sting of death. And God's will for life is so great that death could not hold Jesus in the tomb.

Nor can it hold us. We have been baptized into Jesus' death. We have been baptized into his resurrection. With the God of the living on our side, we can never truly die, for our God is always in the business of life.

Living God, bring to life in you. Amen

March 27, 2024 (originally composed April 11, 2001)

Anointed for burial

Check out Mark 14:1-11.

The drama intensifies. Jesus has become more than an irritation. The religious leaders have decided that he must die. Still there is fear. Jesus' popularity with the people runs high. They must find a way to arrest him secretly. But how? At last their opportunity arises. Judas, one of his closest companions, comes to them. He is willing to betray Jesus.

Sandwiched between the religious leaders' plotting and Judas' act of treachery is a marvelous little story about a woman who come to anoint Jesus. She uses a jar full of very expensive ointment, worth a year's wages for a common laborer, to give homage to her Lord. It is an act of pure devotion. While the disciples grouse about the waste, Jesus applauds her action. "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." Jesus' death is just around the corner. The timing of his death, just hours prior to the Sabbath, means there will be no opportunity to anoint his body before it is placed in the tomb. This is truly a prophetic act.

We can think about this in terms of our baptism. In our baptism we are in a sense anointed beforehand for our own death. The waters of our baptism plunge us into the death of Christ. Our sin is buried there with him. We also are baptized into his resurrection. New life becomes ours. This is a present reality for us. Our sinful self dies and a new self arises. It is also our future hope. We will not realize the fullness of the promise until our physical death. In a way, our baptism has anointed us for our burial. It has also anointed us with the promise of eternal life. If we die with Christ, we will also live with him forever.

Anoint us, Lord Jesus, with your spirit of life. Amen

March 28, 2024 (originally composed April 12, 2001)

This is my body

Check out Mark 14:12-25.

We have come to that day when events will transpire to precipitously hasten Jesus' death. Judas has made his deal with the religious leaders. He now awaits the opportunity for betrayal. In the meantime, it is the day to celebrate the Passover, the remembrance of God's deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. As Jesus gathers his disciples around him for this celebration, for their last meal together, Passover suddenly takes on new meaning.

The first Passover, and all subsequent Passovers, had been celebrated with a lamb. At the time of the Exodus, blood from the lamb was daubed on the doorposts, a sign to the angel of the Lord to pass over the houses of the Israelites. But today a new Lamb comes forth. This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His body, his blood will become the once for all sacrifice. His body, his blood will be given for the forgiveness of sins.

We celebrate this day often. We eat the bread; we drink the cup. And we are reminded of the perfect salvation that comes from this gift of life. Jesus has given himself up for us. In his body and in his blood, we have forgiveness and salvation and life. There cannot be a more perfect gift.

Lord Jesus, we remember. Amen

March 29, 2024 (originally composed April 13, 2001)

Torn in two

Check out Mark 15:25-39.

Deep inside the temple laid the Holy of Holies. It was the most sacred place. In the times before the Babylonian exile, it housed the Ark of the Covenant, the ancient symbol of God's presence among the people. Only the high priest had access to the Holy of Holies. Once a year, he would go in to make a sacrifice before God on behalf of the people. A heavy, dark curtain surrounded it, keeping out all others and reminding the people of their separation from God, a separation that could only be bridged by God's most holy servant.

But at the point of the death of Jesus, when he breathed his last, the curtain surrounding the Holy of Holies was torn in two. From top to bottom, this barrier was ripped open. Suddenly what once had separated the people from their God was removed. In Jesus' death, we gain full access to our almighty God.

Today we have reached the end of our journey to the cross. Good Friday, the day on which God has accomplished our salvation in the cross of Christ, has arrived. Because of the forgiveness of sins we have received from Jesus' death on the cross, we can approach the throne of God without fear. What had been impossible has now been made possible in the death of Christ. God has torn the curtain in two. We have been set free and now can gaze with wonder and love and praise on the face of God. In death, we have been given life. Thanks be to God that we now have full access to God's grace.

Thank you, Lord, for your life-giving death. Amen

March 30, 2024 (originally composed April 14, 2001)

In between

Check out Psalm 6.

We have come to that in-between day, the day that is lost, the day of death. I have often wondered about this day, the day between Good Friday and Easter. As the women waited on this Sabbath day, resting as was the custom, they must have felt the strong emotions of the psalm: I am languishing. My bones and my very soul are shaking with terror. My bed and my couch are drenched with tears. Those of us, which includes all of us, who have mourned one we love, know these feelings of despair, of numbness, of disbelief that the one we loved is gone. For the women and for Jesus other followers, it was that sort of day.

And what about Jesus, lying in that cold stone tomb? Death is death. As the poet cries to God today, "In death there is no remembrance of you." We cannot imagine the darkness of death. What would it be like to be, as we often profess, "descended into hell"?

We hear too today of God's commitment to life. The poet laments, "In Sheol who can give you praise?" Yet with words of trust in God's steadfast love, the poet expects deliverance. God, the source and giver of all life, stands watch even over death. If the universe is a holy sanctuary, a place intended for the praise of God, then God will continue to fill that sanctuary with voices of praise. Yes, even our voices of praise. Yes, our voices of praise will be heard even after our earthly sojourn is complete.

We stand today between the cross and the empty tomb with a promise. We stand with a promise of God's commitment to life. As we cry out over the tragedy of Good Friday, we trust, trust that the Lord has heard our supplication, trust that in God's steadfast love we will be delivered, trust that as dawn breaks tomorrow, we will know life again.

Watch with us in our waiting, Lord. Give us hope for the morrow. Amen

March 31, 2024

Christ is risen!

Check out Mark 16:1-8.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

On March 30, 2002, the congregation of the American Lutheran Church of Turner gathered for the first time to worship in its newly completed building. The months of labor, the months of planning, the tears and fears and hopes and joys were celebrated on Easter Sunday, the Day of Resurrection. So much had gone into making this a reality. But we knew on that day that it was only possible because Jesus had gone ahead of us.

“He is going ahead of you.” What wondrous words! They should have been no surprise to the women who came to the tomb that Easter morning. They should have been no surprise to the other disciples who, at some point had heard the resurrection story, even though the women rushed away, to afraid to tell anyone. These words should be no surprise to us.

His whole life Jesus had been going ahead of those who were with him, leading, instructing, encouraging, showing the way. Now Jesus goes ahead of us, bringing us to eternal life. What better news could we receive than that Jesus goes ahead of us. It makes it so simple. We do not have to find our own way. Jesus will show us. We do not have to pave our own path. Jesus has done it. We do not have to worry about our life. Jesus has given it to us.

Jesus has gone ahead of us to show us the way to resurrected life. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! And in his rising we shall rise too. Alleluia!

Praise to you, O Risen One! Alleluia! Amen