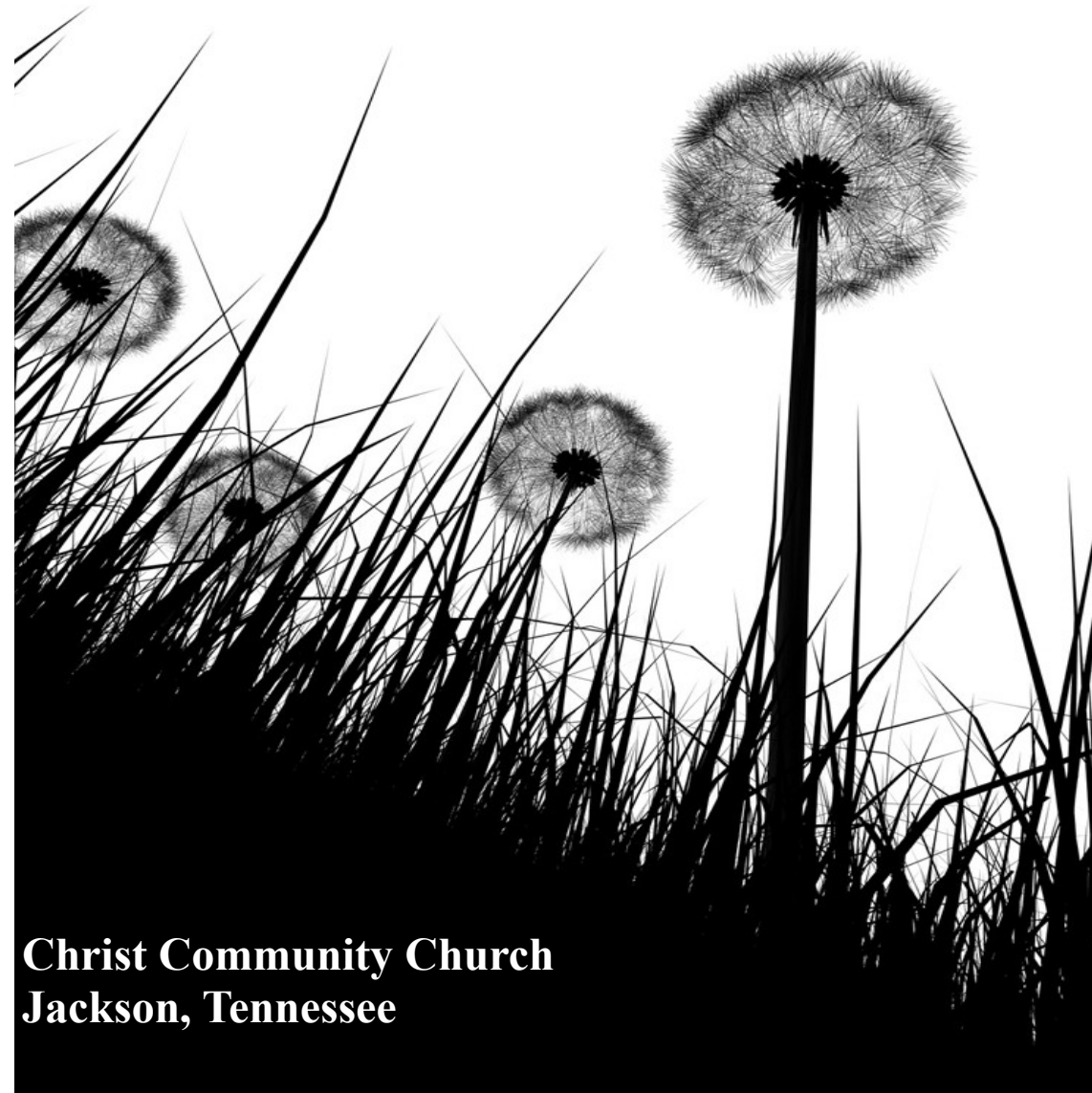


Lent Devotional Guide 2010



**Christ Community Church
Jackson, Tennessee**

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Introduction to this Lenten Season

I love the meaning of Lent. Lent simply means “the spring season.” The Lenten season is the spring season. Lent sounds like a holy name. “The spring season” feels ordinary. I love that combination. Like all things truly Christian, the season of Lent is a mixture of the holy with the ordinary. It sounds holy to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus. It might mean simply giving up our afternoon to sit with an elderly person or ministering to a tired mother by watching her child for a morning. Fasting sounds like holy work. It is. But to do it, we simply give up the regular habit of eating during the daytime hours to occupy ourselves with Christ through prayer and reading. Almsgiving is a holy work. It just seems less glamorous when we serve a homeless person some food at RIFA or when we cover the utility bill of a struggling brother.

There is a verse in the book of Nehemiah that is fast becoming the theme of the Lenten season at Christ Community Church this year. *“Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Last year was a tough year for many at Christ Community Church. If it wasn’t the economy affecting us all financially, then it was some personal suffering, the death of a family member, the struggle to find employment or a spouse, the loss of a home. The air seemed heavy with disappointment and struggle last year.

Things seem to be changing for us though. We may not be completely out of our struggle yet. But it seems that God is stirring us from within our struggle to be the light of Christ anyway. It’s as if we all discovered individually, yet collectively, that we can’t expect things to be perfect in order for us to be useful and alive to Christ. Things didn’t get better for the Israelites in Egypt. God simply and wondrously called them out of it to begin a journey of following him across a desert of difficulty with provision that came from Him alone.

I think that’s where we are now. Like Abraham who was called to take a journey with God, He didn’t quite know where he was going when he started. Many of us are in a time of discerning what God is stirring us to do. But the atmosphere at Christ Community Church is thick with it.

The Lenten season is an opportunity to humble our souls. If we are the least bit insecure in ourselves, which we all usually are, then we attempt to validate ourselves with the proper income level and the certain location of our home and the right kind of clothes and the right kind of influential friends and the certain model of car and our kids going to the right prestigious school. We look forward to the day when a pay raise or a settlement or long-awaited inheritance or an insurance pay-out can help us be in a place we’ve always wanted to be: exalted above our brothers and sisters.

Jesus will soon be lifted up and highly exalted in Jerusalem. All the city will see it and eventually, all the world, throughout all generations, will see it as well. At his exaltation, a sign will be placed over Him that will read, “King of the Jews”. So, like a king, He enters Jerusalem and is paraded through the city. Amid the cheers and the shouting, it had to be noticed that in place of a white horse, Jesus rode the foal of a donkey. “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”...on a colt.

Jesus is always trying to teach us about the kingdom of God. Things are all different there. Leaders are servants. Kings here on the earth simply open doors for others in heaven. The poor of the earth have rooms in a mansion awaiting them. Those who lose their lives here will have eternal life there. According to Jesus, the greatest prophet on the earth, John the baptizer, is the least in the kingdom of heaven.

And as usual, Jesus doesn’t just teach. He lives His lessons out before us. He promised that if He was lifted up, if He was exalted before men, then He would draw all men to Him. I suppose I saw it beginning differently than this. The King rides a donkey’s colt prepared for Him by His entourage of fishermen. At the end of the week, the King will be exalted and nailed to a wooden cross for all to see. He will be highly exalted and lifted up, but not like any of us would have designed it.

Once again, Jesus thinks differently than me. I need the season of Lent each year to help me be Christian again. If I am to be Christian, to live like Christ, then it begins with humility. In our affluent culture, it usually comes down to me choosing humility. Do we really need this? Must I really look like him? Should I really spend time with this person which is awkward, when I could spend time with that person who benefits me? Should I buy one more thing or should I give this instead? In this season of Lent, maybe all of us will be reminded again that following Christ means riding on embarrassingly small animals instead of white stallions. Maybe we will be reminded that death comes before resurrection.

This passage reminds me of a New Testament verse I memorized long ago, 1 John 2:17. “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”... a verse which recognizes that it’s not just the world that needs to go away, but our own desires as well. There’s a lot of comfort in that verse. After all, what good would a new world be without ourselves escaped at last from our own willfulness?

Now that I’m older and less successful than I hoped I’d be at conquering my own desires, passages like these have become more troubling. I had a great uncle, a faithful church-goer, who would gnash his pipe, cuss, and then quote scripture in the same breath. I remember him quite vividly not in spite of, but because of that odd combination. Absent flaws, what’s left of our identities?

The passage in Ezekiel does not deal with us as individuals, but as a body, as the people of God. The chapter before this is one of the most striking in the Old Testament: the valley of dry bones, in which Ezekiel prophesies resurrection. In the second part of the prophecy, beginning in verse 16, Ezekiel binds two sticks together, symbolizing the re-gathering of the separate branches of the nation of Israel. In today’s passage, the reunited group is cleansed and then shepherded by king David, who is called “prince forever”.

The good king sacrifices a measure of himself to lead his people. Any member of a family sacrifices a measure of herself for the sake of the group. Here we see a body, the people of God, resurrected, gathered together, cleansed together, then ruled together. All of us must at last give up a measure of our own fierce independence to live as a member of the family that is Christ’s body, the church.

Despite all this, we do somehow survive as our own selves. I find it comforting that God uses David as an example of the ideal king, faulty as he was. We remain individuals (flaws and all) who voluntarily sacrifice a measure of our freedom for the sake of the whole. All that we are alone, and all that we become together, God redeems for a purpose we cannot wholly see.

To hear it from so many different people and in so many different ways is almost overwhelming for me as a pastor. We need to pray. We need to read our Scriptures carefully and attentively. We need guidance that comes from the Holy Spirit and often through those who have a little more experience in hearing and following Christ. But we should never dismiss these stirrings as restlessness or an overactive evangelical conscience or a zeal that is expected to burn out soon. When it happens to all of us individually with Christ and collectively as a community, then my hunch is that God is doing something unique among us.

No matter how small it is or how great it might become, our sole response for now is to listen to Jesus like the disciples were told to do during Jesus’ Transfiguration. Let’s go ahead and give ourselves in whatever way God says to. You are the light of the world. Whether you’ve got your utility money or your spouse that you’re waiting on or all the other things we think we need to be His disciples, let’s go ahead and follow Christ. Eat of the fat. Drink of the sweet. Send what portions you have to him who has nothing prepared. Beloved, the joy of the Lord is what we seek. The joy of the Lord is our strength. As a community, both individually and collectively, let’s give ourselves out and see if the joy of the Lord follows. This Lenten season is not about grief. It’s about joy. May the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Pastor Ross Guthrie

Have you ever felt like you just needed to scream? Have you ever clutched at your chest and cried out at the anguish of it all? Have you ever felt your heart rending in two? There is something wrong with the world, and nobody can escape these feelings. As we continue in our Christian walk, there are times when we must acknowledge this, when we must consecrate a fast, take up a portion of Christ's suffering in order to be conformed to His image.

On good days we can stretch our bodies, we can feel the sun warm upon our faces and the grass between our toes, or scrunch up snow into a ball and throw it at our sister, or cuddle with our most-loved. These are good things, and God is pleased to allow us these pleasures. But sometimes He asks us to forego even good things, to consecrate a fast, to more fully enter into devotion, dependence, trust, relationship, oneness with Him.

As we enter into Lent, the season that draws us into Holy Week – the approach of Jesus' ultimate suffering on our behalf, the ultimate application of God's awe-full anger against sin — we are reminded of our call to suffer. His suffering has bought our freedom from suffering; let us take up His suffering. Even Paul, as tough as his life sometimes was, recognized he had yet more suffering to do to make up what was lacking of Christ's afflictions within his own life (Col. 1:24). What God asks of us, let us not refuse.

Common grace is granted to all, a gift of Christ; so also is suffering applied to all. Muslims, Hindus, pagans, perhaps most particularly Jews – all have suffered within the confines of life on Earth. But there is a suffering unique to Christians, the suffering that we who believe feel most poignantly at times, and that is that we miss our Beloved. The One whom we most desire is absent, even silent. Our betrothed has left, and we wait with no new word to encourage us.

Let us consecrate a fast, then, to mark His absence. When we lay down some good thing, deny ourselves some common grace, we manifest materially the deep suffering of our spirit. We use the physical absence of food or drink or some vain thing to illustrate the root of our suffering, what is really absent from our lives, our Beloved. We cast aside, for a time, a pleasure of the world to demonstrate what is wrong with the world.

“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” (Jn. 16:16)

The context for the reading today is the desolation that Jeremiah feels in his role as prophet. Jeremiah complains that God has deceived him by making him prophesy. Now he cannot stop speaking for God, but his words are not only unheeded by the people, but thrown back against him with gnashing teeth.

How dark is verse 10. “Let us denounce him.” His close friends are analyzing every word that Jeremiah says in order to trap him. The whole world has turned against him. He is in an impossible situation. He can't move forward and he can't move back. Jeremiah is a type of Christ here. He represents Christ standing before the Sanhedrin and later before Pilate. The whole world has turned against him, and they are analyzing every word in order to trap Him in what he says. No man ever spoke like Christ spoke, including Jeremiah, but the prophet is entering into the sufferings of his Lord in typical fashion.

It is amazing in reading Jeremiah and Lamentations how the prophet has a word of cheer for himself in the midst of utterly dark situations. In Lamentations, as the prophet is looking over the destruction of Jerusalem, he gives us the famous phrases “His mercies are new every morning,” and “Great is thy faithfulness.” Here in verse 11 Jeremiah announces to us (and to himself) that “the Lord is with me as a dread warrior.” Faith produces knowledge, and knowledge produces hope, and hope in the midst of suffering produces love. Somehow, in terrible darkness, Jeremiah knows that God is with him—God is a warrior on his behalf.

Many years ago in Latin America, I asked a young married woman what was her favorite verse in the Bible. She said, “God is with me like a powerful giant.” To which I (stupidly) responded, “There is no verse in the Bible like that.” However, there is such a verse. It is our verse 11 for today. The English Standard Version has it, “But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior.” Spanish has it, “But the Lord is with me like a powerful giant.”

How appropriate! Among our poor brothers and sisters in Latin America the Lord is with them not only as a dread warrior, but also as a powerful giant. The Lord has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. The Lord continues to do work for us, with us, and in us that only a giant can do.

He turns a heart of hate into a heart of love. This, I have found, is a work that I cannot do. He has taken the mountain of the sin of the world and placed it on his giant shoulders on the cross. He continues to take care of us in a hostile world. He places the lost sheep tenderly on His shoulders and carries it home.

The season of Lent makes its inexorable progress toward Holy Week—the week of the passion of our Lord. What a crescendo! The week begins with the entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, fulfilling to the day 69 of Daniel’s 70 weeks of years! The scenes move toward the Passover meal, the institution of the Lord’s Supper with “This is my body,” and “This is the blood of the new covenant.” The Garden of Gethsemane comes into view, then the cowardly arrest of Jesus and the trials before the Sanhedrin, before Herod, and before Pilate. Next we see the blood of Jesus flowing from His body to the ground. His body had literally been opened up by scourging and then crucifixion. The blood of that precious Lamb of God begins to flow like a river “for the sins of the whole world.”

In viewing this tremendous work by the Son of God, our passage for today makes a comparison with the Old Testament sacrifice system. “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The key word is “impossible.” It is absolutely not possible for a system of animal sacrifice to take away sins. It never was. The author of Hebrews is laboring to make this point to a group of Jewish Christians who were in danger of going back into the Judaism of the day.

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;...” The emphasis now is on the body, the physical body of Christ, which God had been preparing through human procreation since the creation. Now, this body has been made manifest to us through the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation. God never took any pleasure in burnt offerings and sin offerings. They were pointers, by faith, to the great blood sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Immanuel, the God who is with us through the Incarnation. However, Christ’s body becomes the source of that “fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.”

Christ bears the blood of God. One of the meanings of Adam’s name is “blood of God.” This comes from the first syllable “A” or aleph which stands for God in Hebrew, and the second syllable or “dam” meaning blood. Adam bears the blood of God until something terrible happens in the Fall and Adam’s blood of God becomes corrupted by sin. All of Adam’s descendants inherit this corruption. This is why, by faith, we need to appropriate the benefits of that precious blood “drawn from Immanuel’s veins.”

Animal sacrifice could never take away sins. It was the established form of worship under the Old Covenant. However, Old Testament man was saved as any and all men have always been saved—by faith in the Redeemer—just like the ancient and venerable prophet, Job. “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

The benevolence of God to all of humanity is evidenced in that He sends rain on the crops of the just and the unjust. In much the same way His love for His children is manifest in times of obedience as well as disobedience. God has blessed the entire world. There are, however, blessings that are conditional.

Moses makes a clear choice to the people of Israel that they can have life and good, or death and evil. The blessing of God is offered, the condition is obedience. The challenge was repeated by Joshua as the people of Israel had fallen into idolatry and they were commanded to “choose this day whom you will serve!” Ultimately the Israelites failed as a nation and through disobedience they lost the land of promise. Still, God has kept His word as the physical descendants of Abraham, both Arab and Jew, reside in a nation that will remain fenced, contested and war torn.

Christ ultimately fulfilled the promise of God as the Word that was “in the mouths” of Israel was incarnated. Jesus is the Land of Promise, and we have become the children of Abraham by faith in Christ alone. More than ownership of prime real estate or citizenship in an earthly kingdom, we have become citizens of the Heavenly Kingdom. We are empowered to live lives that are pleasing to God, and sin can no longer reign as our task master.

Our citizenship comes at a great price as we surrender our entire life to the Lordship of Jesus. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. Sacrifice and lip service are not God’s desire, but daily obedience is His command.

We, like ancient Israel, must choose each day whom we will serve. We are challenged by the Apostle Paul not to be deceived into disobedience and thus prove that we are lost. In deed we are to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” James encourages us to prove our faith by our deeds. We must actively participate in the possession of the promise as we trust God to complete the good work He began in us by faith. The capture of the promise is assured by God and won by Christ, but we must do battle to obtain it. If we continue in the faith, to practice righteousness and abstain from earthly lusts, we will inherit life and good.

What is the idea of fasting, anyway? Have you ever contemplated that question? Is the idea of self-deprivation rational? What a weird concept: deny oneself. Even to our Christianized ears it seems familiar, because we have been around the concept to some extent as long as we have been around our religion. We have known that Jesus fasted and that Christians have fasted. But an odd concept it remains. People rely on food.

I find it interesting that today's Christian teaching of fasting encourages abstinence from things we can, frankly, do without anyway. Television? Dessert? Soft drinks? Web surfing? Chocolate? Facebook? These are things we do not truly *need* to begin with. Originally, fasting was to go without food. It was to go without something that we truly believe we *need*. So no matter how much we may think we understand the concept of Christian fasting, I'm still not sure we get it.

But here in Matthew chapter 9, the disciples were not fasting. And by not fasting, they were bucking the religious culture that surrounded them. It seems the Pharisees were into fasting, and they brought it to Jesus' attention that his disciples were not fasting. When we read the gospels, those dastardly Pharisees are like villains in all the stories we read—they are always what we assume we are not. They always represent what we think we oppose. We cheer for Jesus and his always-perfect answers as we fondly watch him rhetorically slay the bad guys with his replies. Nobody *ever* wants to be the Pharisee. We always want to be the cowboy, not the Indian. The guy in the white hat. But these religious teachers were simply following the religious culture they were a part of. Were they sometimes out to get Jesus? Sure. To trap him? Sure. Jesus represented blasphemy to them, and as such I think they truly believed they were doing the *right thing*. (That's the terrifying thing about theology—end up on the wrong side, no matter how sincere, and one may find himself facing something pretty unsettling, like eternal damnation). And we know Pharisees didn't all end up rejecting Christ—Saul converted, and possibly Nicodemus.

So what can we take away from this? Religious culture is always around us. Maybe ascetic fasting isn't in vogue in today's evangelical pseudo-monasticism, but we have religious hang-ups too. They may show up in the form of pretty much anything we elevate—even things we at CCC champion as *counter-cultural* Christianity. Maybe, for instance, we can emphasize '*community*' (a sort of fasting *unto* our local church and from others) a little too much at times. Jesus gives his detractors the reason for a lack of fasting: it is because the groom is present. He won't be with them forever, and there would be a time of fasting—unavoidable fasting—soon enough. For Jesus had become the bread of life for these disciples. Not only had they found something more precious than religious culture, but even more so than the things they actually needed.

While Jesus walks around claiming to be “the light of the world”, he actually manages to gain some followers outside his circle of apostles. As we read this conversation we must bear in mind Christ is talking with Jews who were already believing in him (v. 30). This was not just a crowd who happened to be in ‘the right place at the right time’. Also, these believers were Jewish. Appealing to their heritage, Jesus explains discipleship in terms of their people's history, although they fail to pick up on it.

By using terms such as ‘slave’ and ‘freedom’ and ‘abiding’ Jesus invokes the Jews' history as a people beginning with their exodus out of bondage and set free to abide in the word of God, the Law. And it is by using exodus imagery that Jesus unfolds for his followers the meaning of following him.

Just as the Jews were slaves to the Egyptians, so is one who commits a sin a slave to sin. And what a cruel master it can be. But only one who is sent in the name of the Father (v. 42) can bring freedom, just as Moses, in the name of ‘I AM’ brought freedom to Israel. But their freedom was not without purpose; God adopted Israel as his son in the Covenant, and by their obedience to it they were to remain faithful. But now Jesus says that abiding in him brings freedom, not the Law. Christ is now the Liberator, not Moses or the Law. If we were to look at this explanation as a 3-step process, abiding in Christ leads to knowledge of the truth, which leads to freedom from bondage, then the Jews get stuck on the basic assumption that all are enslaved to sin.

“Everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin” (v. 34). Instead of reacting quickly with something to say, as the Jews did, let us humbly listen and receive what Christ says, both here and later. In Lent we recognize our need for redemption. And just as we confess weekly together, so we receive forgiveness; we are free. Rejoice that if the Son set us free, we are free indeed. Take courage that though we are confined to *hearing*, Christ speaks according to what he has *seen* (v. 38). Let that joy carry you to doing good works and acts of mercy in the name of our Redeemer, especially for your brothers and sisters. For it is by your love and unity that the world will be convinced—not by fancy arguments but by love—that “I came from God...he sent me” (v. 42).

God hates idolatry. When He gave Moses the Law, idolatry was high on His list of things to avoid. “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...” What’s the difference between a golden calf, the ark of the covenant, an earring in the ear of servant, water baptism, bread and wine, and a bronze serpent attached to a pole? Why does God consider a golden calf an idol and the all the others to be acceptable?

There’s a difference between an idol and symbol. An idol seems to come from the will of a man to replace God as the object of his worship, his allegiance. The Israelites had grown tired of waiting on God to demonstrate Himself and His care for them. They crafted a calf of gold and said, “Now, this is our god.” This god didn’t speak against the immorality they indulged in as they ordained their own celebration around it. The object of the golden calf was the glory of man.

Later, when the Israelites, once again, complained against God and His seemingly lack of care for them, He sent poisonous or fiery snakes among them. As they watched one another die under this plague, they confessed their sin and asked for a remedy. This time, God provided a symbol and not an idol. What’s the difference? God’s symbol is sacramental. It’s mysterious. Not mysterious as in something vague. Mysterious in that there’s actually something to it unlike a golden calf. God’s symbols point to something greater than themselves, deeper than themselves. Instead of deceiving our hearts and blinding us with the glory of man, the sacramental nature of God’s symbols draw us to Himself. A golden calf reminds us of the glory of man and leads to carnality. A bronze serpent on a pole points us to Jesus Christ who is the remedy for the poison of sin that brings eternal death.

Lent is the season to renew your baptism. Remind yourself that in the sacrament of your baptism, you were washed clean of sin by Christ. You clothed yourself with Jesus when you believed by faith in His death on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. If you have been buried with Him, you will surely rise again with Him into newness of life. Remind yourself that in the sacrament of the Eucharist, bread and wine is mysterious. It is the body and the blood of Christ. Nothing else will sustain us for the hard life here on the earth. Feed on Him. If you daily trust in Christ and come back to Him again and again for the bread and water of life, then you’ll be less inclined to follow after the flashy glory of man which only brings misery and death.

“If you spend yourselves for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like mid-day. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places...” (Is. 58.10-11)

This passage is very fitting for our church in this Lenten season. The elders have asked us not to simply focus on fasting – on “giving something up” – but to focus on “giving something out,” to focus on doing acts of service and mercy, to “*spend [our]selves for the hungry.*”

Here in this passage the Lord is telling the Israelites to return to a proper observance of his law, to come back to their God and begin to live according to his direction again. He gives them a wonderful promise IF they will obey him in this way. He says he will turn their “gloom” into daylight and “*satisfy [their] desires.*” What a great teaching this is! God is giving his people a remedy for gloom! As someone who has suffered a great deal from ‘gloom’ and despair, this passage really inspires me. Here God is telling us to shift our focus off of our gloomy selves and onto those in need around us. It is another reminder that God seldom blesses us in a vacuum but rather blesses us when we are a blessing to others. In this way he builds community and allows each of us to be involved in each other’s blessings.

Of course we must not fall into the trap of trying to be Old Testament Law observers who think that our own good works will force God to bless us. We know the end of the story of Isaiah; how the Israelites ultimately failed to keep the law correctly. We know that only Jesus Christ has ever truly obeyed the Father and ‘spent’ himself “*for the hungry and satisfied the desires of the afflicted.*” But now that he has done so we can ‘get in on’ the blessings he receives because of his obedience. We don’t necessarily have to obey these specific commands IN ORDER to get God’s blessings; but now, as we live in Christ, we can participate in the blessed life that God here wants to give the Israelites. And we can do so willingly, even cheerfully.

So let us pray for each other that we will use these forty days of Lent to participate in Christ’s obedience to these commands found here in Isaiah 58. Let us “*spend [our]selves for the hungry*” and, in so doing, discover more of what it means for Christ to comfort us out of our gloom.

Adam disobeyed God. He did the one thing God told him not to do: eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve did not get there by their own efforts. In the form of a suggestive serpent, humanity's first couple was enticed by the devil. They swallowed his verbal lure to have their eyes opened; be like God; see good and evil. One disobedient nibble was all it took. Just as God promised, death entered the human race.

Before God cast Adam and Eve out of the earthly paradise and into the wilderness, God made a promise to the serpent that one day the seed of the woman shall bruise your head (Genesis 3:15). Centuries later Jesus (the Seed) arrived as promised. God sent Jesus into the wilderness for a One-on-one encounter with the same devil.

Luke states: "Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry (Luke 4:2).

Would Jesus, the last Adam, respond like the first Adam and take the devil's bait? The suggestion by Satan to make a meal by turning stone into bread would accomplish two things: satisfy Jesus' hunger pains and confirm that He really is the Son of God. Jesus *is* the Son of God. He's also the Son of Man. Forty days without food has made Him literally, physically hungry. Changing the properties of a rock into a roll won't so much as break a sweat on His brow. Where's the harm?

"Jesus answered him, saying: It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God' (Luke 4:4). Jesus didn't deny that He was hungry. Nor did He debate the issue or argue His identity with the devil. Jesus quoted scripture. The Word of God clearly resided in the heart of Jesus.

Jesus' response to Satan's scheme proves that. "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). When you and I encounter enticing moments to disobey God, do we need only to spout a few verses from God's Word and thereby, experience a similar victory over the temptation to sin? As simple as that seems, could there be more embedded in Jesus' response? Could it be that Jesus affirmed that there is a deeper hunger residing within every one of us? It's spiritual and not physical.

Physical needs, as important as they are, take second place to the spiritual hungers. Life really is lived best "by every word of God." To get there you and I must settle a basic reality in the heart: Like Jesus, *what matters most to God, matters most to you and me.*

Jesus is the light of the world. Light is a central theme of John's gospel, but light representing Christ is not merely symbolic. At the mount of Transfiguration we see that, quite literally, Christ is light from inside-out. As we confess in the Nicene Creed he is 'God from God, *light from light*, true God from true God'. Moses radiated God's glory after meeting with him on Mount Sinai, but Moses' received God's light, it was a light from outside of him. Christ's light, however, comes from within.

"In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1.4); Christ's light is life. "Whosoever believes him shall have eternal life" (3.16); and as we receive Christ's life we receive his light and become 'the light of the world' (cf. Mt 5.14). Just as Israel was led through a desert by a pillar of light in the dark through the desert, Christ leads us toward God through this world and gives us his light that we might lead others along the way as well. This light, which we carry inside, will also one day be revealed as our true identity.

During this Lenten season, remember that the world did not comprehend this light; in fact, the world condemned it. Do not be surprised, nor discouraged, when your light is attacked by the world. We know this will happen and therefore are ready to let our light shine in the midst of darkness. Love your enemy anyway, do your good deed anyway, even when the world scoffs. Be encouraged—"the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1.5).

I hate the thought of adultery. I have been married to Katherine for over twenty years, but we have been together since we were 16 years old. Twenty-five years of my life so far have been spent cultivating a relationship that means more to me than any other thing here on the earth. My early years as a young man were marked by an effort to attain the wisdom and self-control that would keep me pure in this relationship. I took drastic steps to make sure that I would not be tempted in this area of my life. Some were wise. Some were probably unnecessary and offensive to others. I saw enough good marriages broken up by unfaithfulness that I was unconcerned about how others perceived my effort to stay faithful throughout our marriage. Twenty years later, my conscience is clear as I lay down each night next to a woman whom I love, in a minute way, as Christ loves His bride.

In this passage, it seems that Jesus has gone soft on His views towards adultery. When God gave Moses the Law, He declared that they were to have no other gods before Him for he was a jealous God. God fiercely loves His people and burns with a holy jealousy towards them. Jesus has the opportunity to display publicly, and for all generations who interact with the Scriptures, exactly how He feels about unfaithfulness. He hates it and He forgives it.

This physical act of adultery that the woman was discovered to be involved in is a spiritual picture as well. It exists in the physical realm in order to teach us about our spiritual life. If it's possible to bodily break our covenant with our spouse, then it is possible to spiritually break our covenant with God. Both of these levels occur in this passage. A woman is caught breaking a covenant physically, while the Pharisees are caught breaking their covenant spiritually. They love Moses and the Law, and they hate Jesus Christ. The Pharisees are guilty of breaking their covenant with the greater Spouse.

Jesus, however, does not rain down fiery judgment on any who were gathered. To the woman, Jesus is compassionate and offers absolution. "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on, sin no more." To the Pharisees, I imagine they received a personal note in the sand about their own betrayals.

The Lenten Season is as much about forgiveness as it is self-denial. This is the season to focus on being a faithful wife to our Lord Christ. Fasting for a day can be like a long stare into the eyes of your Lover. Switching off the TV for an evening could be equal to a wink of the eye to your Spouse. Feeding the homeless at RIFA might as well be a bouquet of flowers given to our Great Valentine. Reading the Scripture in place of an entertaining evening could be seen as a deep kiss. And prayer should be seen as consummating your love with Him once again. John 8 teaches us that God is generous to forgive us when we fail. In this season, let us do the things that keep Him as the Apple of our eye.

In today's reading from 1 Peter, the close disciple of Christ is giving leadership directives to those in the Church. As a member of Christ Community Church, these are verses that I have heard taught several times as I have been reminded how our elders are to act before us and how we as a congregation are to respond toward their oversight. Yet it's the verses that precede chapter five that help us to see that Peter is not writing merely to help the church operate more efficiently or have necessary leadership structure, as vital as those functions are to the church. He is writing about leading a people who have suffered and been downcast.

The Apostle is writing to a group of Christians who have been suffering for the sake of the Gospel. In fact, they have been dispersed to several different regions because of their commitment to our Lord Jesus. And there could be few better to write to such a group of believers, as Peter himself was instructed before Jesus' ascension into heaven, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18).

The commands given in verses 1-4 are directives for the church elders, especially during times of suffering. The pastors of the church are encouraged to lead by example with joy, tenderness, and gentleness. During times of great suffering, persecution, and seasons of dryness, the people of God need more than ever leaders who gently and willingly carry the burdens of those who have been put under their care. It's during the times of sorrow and frustration that we, as those under authority, need wise and patient counsel as well as a consoling ear and a shoulder to cry on.

So today, let us pray for the elders of Christ Community Church. Let us pray that, during this special Lenten season of voluntary service and giving, they will be gracious to us when we are short with them, when we break our fast, or lose our temper. Let us pray that they will continue to be able to lead us with eagerness, kindness, and wisdom, when we want to complain and moan about the mess of our own lives. Let us pray that God will give them the strength to shepherd us as Christ would, bearing our burdens and encouraging us all to bear each other's burdens. This is for our good and for their glory.

I was always one of those people who loves bad weather. I love rainy days better than sunny ones. I love the raw power of a good thunderstorm. As a fair-skinned red-head, sunny days usually involve trying to avoid sun-burn. So I love rain. And of course, I love snow and therefore I love the picture of snow and rain in this passage. In fact, as I saw snow the other day, the thought crossed my mind as to whether or not snow fell occasionally in the Holy Land. (After doing a bit of research, apparently it does.) Did Jesus ever play in the snow as a kid? Did he build a snow man? Strange questions, but it's amazing what things one thinks about when stuck at home on a snowy day.

This is one of those passages I've heard a lot, but always in encouragement to those preaching or teaching. "The Word of God will not return void." What a promise! But wait a minute what did it say? "*MY Word which comes out of MY mouth ...*"

That's God speaking, right? (*Why has no one ever quoted it the right way to me before???*) I think there are probably numerous folks at CCC, like myself, who have come to see Christology in Scripture far more than before. God has blessed our church to illuminate Christ in His Holy Scriptures. Could it be that this is yet another such example? That the "Word" that will not return empty is Christ Himself? After all, He accomplished that which was purposed and succeeded in the thing for which He was sent.

There is reason to see this passage Christologically, elsewhere in scripture. In Genesis we see God the Father speaking creation into existence; the creative energy of God is what comes out of his mouth. His Word is present, creating in the beginning. There is the Father, the Spirit hovering over the waters, and the Word being spoken. In Revelation 19:15 we read "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." Once again, the Word from the mouth of God does not return empty. In the Revelation passage, it is justice, but in Isaiah, the Word brings new life and renewal. Like the rains and snow it brings life and growth. But it does not happen immediately. There is first a season of winter—seemingly death, as we see in the skeletal trees and brown grass. But spring does come, and the work of Christ slowly changing our lives bears great fruit in time.

A number of things come to mind when considering this passage. We know from research into earlier chapters that Jeremiah's life is in danger, that he will eventually be martyred. At this moment God gives him the gift of discernment. He is able to see into the depraved hearts and minds of his enemies and know of their plots against him. The first thing he does is the right thing. He prays; he goes to God, his source. He acknowledges God as in control of all situations. It is in his prayer, however, that he reveals his humanity and his feet of clay. This is understandable from the prophet of *God*. He prays for vengeance. Jeremiah is not Jesus. Now fast forward to the New Testament. Now we have the ultimate model prayer and response to dealing with our enemies. Love them. Pray for them.

Today during this Lenten season, make it a point to pray for those you love, as well as your enemies. Love your enemies and pray for them. This is what Christ calls us to do.

Peter uses many allusions to and quotations from the Old Testament in his famous sermon on the day of Pentecost. He speaks of the knowledge and confidence that David had concerning the resurrection from the dead of the Messiah. In fact, the resurrection from the dead of Jesus of Nazareth is the great proof that He is the Messiah. One of the passages that Peter uses is our reading for today taken from 2 Samuel. David's knowledge that one of his descendants would always occupy his throne is taken from this passage.

God speaks to David through the prophet Nathan and turns the tables on him. David wishes to build a house for God, but God says, "I will build a house for you." This, of course, is the house of David—the line of kings. "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." This sounds like a prophecy concerning Solomon who did build the great Temple; and his kingdom, in a certain sense, was established. The key word, however, is *forever*. The line of the Jewish kings lasted for a long time. Their reign on the throne of national Israel ended with the Babylonian captivity and with King Jehoiachin living in exile in Babylon. Their physical reign did not last forever, although heirs to the throne continued to be born until Joseph the carpenter who was the next to the last in this royal line. The last person in this royal line of kings was Jesus of Nazareth. However, David knew that his house and his throne (David's) would be established forever. So (Peter argues) David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah from the dead. This is how the throne of David is established forever. Through the last of the heirs to the throne of Israel who rises from the dead and reigns in glory on the throne of David forever!

There is another darker and more obscure prophesy concerning the future Messiah in our passage. "When he commits iniquity, 'I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him,..." This doesn't sound Messianic because Messiah had no sin. However, when Messiah begins to carry the sin of the world in the Garden of Gethsemane, before Pilate, and on the cross, indeed, He is beaten with rods and scourged with stripes. He cries from the cross, "Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Yet, God's steadfast love is not taken away from Him. How mysterious and wonderful is the great work that Messiah accomplished on our behalf! He pays for our sins and awaits us to join Him in glory where He reigns on the throne of David forever.

We celebrate the advent of the incarnate Word. We celebrate the incarnation itself. We celebrate the revelation of the incarnate Word to Jew and Gentile. Why on earth would we celebrate Jesus' 40 day fast in the wilderness? "Because it was an event in the life of Christ," might be a possible reply. Yet many events in the life of Christ are not celebrated during the Christian calendar. There may be many reasons for celebrating this part of Jesus' ministry. We could celebrate the fact that the Christ we worship overcame the temptation of the Evil One under the most difficult of circumstances. We could celebrate the fact that Christ's suffering on our behalf took place throughout His incarnation, not just on the cross. There may be many other aspects worthy of celebration. However, as we read Jonah 3:1-10, another theme comes to mind: grace.

Poor Jonah. Little did he know that his own hardships, disobedience and repentance would lead to the repentance of a city so large it required three days just to travel through. It was Grace that called Jonah to Nineveh in the first place. It was Grace that tossed the vessel Jonah boarded to run from the call. It was Grace that tossed him into the abyss. It was Grace that swallowed him whole. And it was Grace that vomited him to the shore after three days.

It was also Grace that announced the dreadful news: *Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned*. Forty days. Time enough for a man to change his ways, we can suppose. Time enough to penetrate the hearts of a sinful people. Time enough for a repentant prophet to embrace his own calling and obey the instruction given him. 40 days of fasting, though not exactly joyful, can be redemptive. 40 days of fasting is Grace. Joy may be the last emotion associated with the Lenten season. Surely joy was the last emotion Nineveh felt as the message of Grace fell upon their ears. But if fasting brings about repentance, isn't there a bit of joy? Wasn't there a bit of joy when you found repentance in the waters of baptism? Were you raised from the dead with Christ as Jonah was expunged from the belly of the fish? And with resurrection, isn't there great joy?

This Lenten season, marvel at the grace born from repentance. Celebrate the grace found in warning. Do not despise the 40 hard days. Although the sentence has been announced, the gavel has yet to fall. The Lord is just and is not obligated to give opportunity for repentance. But praise His holy name, for He has risen again and in His rising His grace is imparted to a great city who will, in the end, repent.

“Ask. . . seek. . . knock” and it will be “given. . . found. . . and opened.” This should fill us with hope and joy because the Good Father who cares for His children tells us to ask, and He will give. The haunting thing is that we have all asked, sought, and pounded on the doors of heaven only to feel like what we hear is silence and what we find is a locked passageway.

We should be reminded that He hears and loves us because He has given us the ability to love our children and desire good for them. Our love is rooted in the love that He has for us.

Just a few verses earlier Christ told us for what we should ask and seek. “Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Though we face hardship we do not see our deliverance ultimately in money and things but cry out, “Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus and be with Your people. Set right the wrongs on this earth because only then will our tears be wiped away and will we find the true treasure, having the door opened to deep and eternal, face to face fellowship with You around Your table.”

The Father knows our weakness and that we also need provision today so He tells us to ask for daily bread. We ask, though, knowing that the bread we eat today only points to the eternal bread of Christ. We do everything in light of Him. We forgive because He forgave us. We ask for deliverance from temptation and evil by Him who walked through temptation without falling, and bore our evil in His own body on the tree. Our asking for bread and deliverance today is because we ask for the eternal bread and ultimate deliverance of His kingdom come.

Christ does not allow us to ask, seek, and knock without realizing the change that it demands in our lives today. During lent we should especially practice this command of Christ to live as citizens of the kingdom for which we ask, and seek. We must do to others as we would have done to us. We are to lay aside our perceived rights and privileges and grant others the forgiveness and grace we grant ourselves. We should ask for the daily bread and provision of our brothers in need as much as we would ask for our own. This is one of the great lessons of lent, denying ourselves and extending ourselves on behalf of others, as those who do not live from meal to meal and for me and only me. We live for the eternal kingdom, for the one church, who feeds on the eternal bread. Ask, seek and knock for this kingdom today and live as children of a Father who does love His own and will come to our aid both now and forever.

In this famous story of the Israelites making a golden calf, for me, the part of the story that I typically remember most is when Moses throws down the tablets out of righteous anger. If you have ever seen Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* you will know what I mean. The story of the Israelites breaking the commandments as Moses brings them down is one of the most vivid scenes of the Old Testament.

Yet what is notable about this passage are verses 7-14, verses that focus specifically on God’s wrath. The language that God employs here as he speaks of his people Israel sounds like a common voice of frustration heard throughout the Old Testament narrative- God hates sin and he gets very angry when his people willingly engage themselves in sin. So he speaks of unleashing his wrath on his people when one, whom God has appointed, intercedes on behalf of the people, and begs for mercy. God relents, and provides a way for the people to be saved. We see this with the bronze serpent, the judges, and several of the prophets in the Old Testament.

If I am honest, I shake my head when I read this passage. God has done so much for the nation of Israel, and they are so quick to forget! As an objective, non-partial reader of the Old Testament that I pretend to be at times, I am just amazed that the Israelites continue to do the same things over and over. And these are the precisely the times that I forget that I am also part of the Israel of God.

Yet the story of the Golden Calf is nothing new to me or any of us. While we may not be hammering metal images out to worship, we too quickly forget the generosity of God and replace him with tangible, unsatisfying objects and experiences. We who live by faith are the sons of Abraham, and we also make the same mistakes they have for the past thousands of years.

But we have a Prophet and Priest who is greater than Moses. Just as Moses interceded on behalf of God’s people, our Lord Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us (Heb. 9:24). So today, be encouraged dear brother and sister. The wrath of God has been turned away from us because of the One greater than Moses, who is our God and Friend. Take joy today during this Lenten season, that your sins have been forgiven in Jesus’ name. Learn from this famous story and proclaim the wonderful news of your forgiveness in word and service to those around you.

As Christians we often fall too much in love with our own theological arithmetic. Here's the general equation we sell... God is judge. Jesus allows himself to be judged in our place. Now God's wrath is spent and we are free from judgment.

Pretty neat and clean. We speak of these mysteries as if they weren't mysteries at all but a logician's dream. Theology is like a nervous carpenter, always measuring twice and cutting once. We think precision is the road to truth and it often can be. When I was younger I found myself swooning over the exactitude of John Calvin or Thomas Aquinas. I loved leather bound books I bought from CBD and put them on my shelf like trophies stuffed and mounted from an African safari—"yes, I read that book. My notes are in the margins." This is what I often call "the science of God," and it stems from an insecure desire in Christendom to make unknowable things knowable, even predictable. Historical figures in period dress with lots and lots of books... This is how we legitimize this faith in our minds. But we should be careful. Leather bound books can make any idea seem not so ridiculous.

But the Bible is not that way. The Bible is a mess. I remember my first time reading the Gospels. I loved Matthew, Mark, and Luke but hated John. In the Gospel of John Jesus seems out of control and rambling. He seems to rejoice in blowing everyone's mind, especially his most loyal followers. At one point he says that he has *not* come to judge the world but to save the world from judgment (John 3:17). But then, at another time, he says that he *is* judge and threatens that his judgment is looming (John 5:27). He makes an argument that the Messiah would never boast of himself, but then adds that even if they *do* hear him boasting that he certainly has every right to do so and that his boasting doesn't disprove anything (John 8:14). Well meaning people hear this and give up trying to understand. The apostles give up but stick around anyway, because... well, who knows why they stuck around. "You alone have the words of eternal life," is what Peter said which is another way of saying, "I honestly don't get you-- but I think you may be on to something."

For me, this year's Lenten season is all about not knowing, but sticking around anyway. My mind is continually destroyed and remade by my faith in God and Christ. At times I am heartbroken by his sacrifice. At other times he maddens me with his paradoxes and apparent contradictions. But we *are* talking about *God* here. Mind blowing is part of the deal. And, in the Lenten season, the ultimate mystery is put on the table-- the proposition that at some point in recorded history *God damned God*. The thought is honestly too big for thought. Paradox comes standard with this story. What did I expect...?

On the surface this is a simple passage about repentance. It is delivered in a way that is often pleasing to us. Justice comes to the wicked and to the good. Some might see in this passage an implication of a works salvation. If we turn and do righteously, we live. If as a righteous person we turn and do evil, we die. Is this the true walk of discipleship for the believer? I believe we have to look below the surface to gain an understanding of true righteousness. Can I lose what I hope I have by behaving wickedly? I don't think so. Our actions do affect our walk and our relationships, but, thank God, through the sacrifice of Christ we are made righteous. This is accomplished not by our actions, but by God's action on the cross. It is the irrevocable gift of our Father.

Brother and sister, be reminded that it is not your works that save you, but only God's unmerited grace. During this Lenten season though, "let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven."

The book of Deuteronomy begins with “These are the words...” Indeed, it is a book of words from God to the people of Israel—so many word, so many laws. The people agree with God that they will obey. “You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice.” God through the law has us in such a hard position. What can we do—not agree? But if we agree to obey won’t we then be found to be liars when we disobey?

There seems to be a plan here. The law is good, but I find myself always falling short. You may say that I am being a legalist. You may say that the teaching that Christ gave is a teaching about the condition of our hearts. I agree, but the Old Testament also deals with our heart condition. “You shall not bear a grudge against the sons of you own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These are heart matters. Solomon in Proverbs states, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

The law of God and the teachings of Christ get to the heart of the matter. Unless the human heart is in right relation with God, a relation of love with our Father, then the misery of sin will be our lot. Notice again in Proverbs how the human dilemma is so perfect. “Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart.” Notice how God has designed the moral universe so that we absolutely cannot escape. If we dislike or hate another person we have two choices. We can be honest and tell the person that we dislike them, or we can take the path of wisdom and not say anything. Simply “being honest” here does no good without repentance. To let someone know what is in our hearts doesn’t provide a cure—only repentance and healing from God provide a cure. The wiser course is to keep silent. However, in this case we are still in the trap. We are lying with our behavior and covering deceit in our heart. Only a recovery of a loving relationship with our Father can heal the problem of hatred in the human heart.

Hatred—dislike of others, hinder our prayer life. The psalmist David states, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, God will not hear me.” Prayer—problematic human relationships—the law, they are all designed to bring us back into a loving relationship with God. This is His way with us.

Ezekiel was shown a vision of the temple by the Lord being led about by the mysterious man from God. After being shown around the temple and the different walls and courts, Ezekiel was shown the vision we read today.

There are a few other portions of scripture which may help our understanding as we look at this passage. We remember when Christ was sacrificed on our behalf and cried out, “it is finished,” the veil in the temple was ripped in two (Luke 15:33-38). This veil that had separated the holy of holies, the place where access was limited because of the presence of God, was now torn from the top to the bottom. The presence of God was now granted to flow among the people allowing them to soak it up like trees by the banks of the river. Men are now able to enter through the veil of Christ’s flesh into the holy place of God (Hebrews 10).

In Revelation 22 we see almost an identical picture to the passage in Ezekiel 47. John is shown a river of life that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. There is a tree of life, fruit, and leaves that are for the healing of the nations. The difference here is that the river is flowing from the throne of God and is not starting as a trickle from the temple. What took place that changed the revelation of this source of water from being behind a closed door for the Old Testament prophet to being from under the throne of God and the Lamb before which all nations worship for the New Testament apostle?

Looking back to Ezekiel 47 we see that four times the man measured a thousand cubits, each time wading deeper into the water until it became a river. Four is the number of God’s work on the earth. We see that from the beginning of time God was redeeming for Himself a people through faith in the Redeemer. Early on God spoke through the fathers and the prophets, through the sacrificial system, through the nation of Israel, God was revealing Himself in a hidden way. Then finally “God spoke to us through the person of His Son. . .” (Hebrews 1:1ff). As God revealed Himself and worked on the earth, the river of His grace grew deeper and deeper until the coming of the Son. His river of grace now flows in all the earth and is causing His people, as trees, to bear good fruit and not wither away (Psalm 1). He has caused us to be salt and light, bringing His healing to the nations (Matthew 5:13-16). We look for the day when we behold the Lamb on the throne from whom the river of grace flows. Today, in this season of lent, drink deeply of the living water which is flowing to us and bear forth much fruit that the nations might abound in Christ.

This morning you may arise to find clouds obscuring the sunlight. You may find that you ran out of coffee grounds yesterday and forgot to buy more. You might wake up with a headache or to a screaming child. You may have found yourself in bed alone for the first time or for the last time. You may have woken from a dream you didn't want to end. You may roll your windows down on the way to work because it's a beautiful morning. You may be reminded of a disturbing phone call you received late Saturday night. You might walk into work only to face an onslaught of new challenges. You might roll up to your desk to face the same challenges you left there on Friday. You might be washing that same load of laundry you forgot to transfer to the dryer Saturday morning. You might walk into class and take a pop quiz. You might be prepared for it. You may be opening an email from a long, lost friend.

Today you might hug a stranger. Today you might win the lottery. Today you may get some bad news. Today you might have your photo taken. Today you might try to hula-hoop. Today you might find a hair in your lunch. Today you might remember your locker combination. Today you may eat a Honey Bun. Today you may gain a pound. Today you may ask who Christopher Cross was. Today you may forget to do your homework. Today someone may yell at you. Today you may raise your own voice. Today you might accidentally let a balloon go into the sky. Today you may lose a hero. Today you might pray for a loved one. Today you may read your Bible. Today you may forget to read your Bible. Today you might file for an extension. Today you might share the gospel. Today you might get a flat tire. Today you might step in something you wish you hadn't. Today you might be someone's girlfriend. Today he might break up with you. Today you might be beautiful. Today you might jump into a puddle. Today, you'll probably find something humorous. Today you'll get on the Internet. Today you might say something you shouldn't. Today you might look at something you shouldn't. Today you may not do something you shouldn't.

Today you might think of the Ash Wednesday service. Today you might remember your own mortality. Today you may hear *weeping* and *crying*. Today an *infant may die*. Today an *old man may not live out his years*. Today a *youth will fail to reach 100*. Today, he'll be *considered accursed*.

But tomorrow...

Tomorrow is a different story altogether.

The former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind.

Life can change drastically when God enables you to see in Jesus what has previously gone unnoticed by you. That happened to three men in particular after they hiked up a mountain with Jesus. Obviously exhausted from the trek, they napped. Jesus took the time alone to pray.

“As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe *became* white *and* glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him (Luke 9:30-32).

Peter and the others awoke to the sight of Jesus aglow and talking with holy men, heroes of the faith long since gone from the earth. Moses represented the Law; Elijah the prophets. The Law and the prophets looked to Jesus. All were speaking of the “decease” – the exodus – of Jesus soon to occur in Jerusalem.

Peter later described the experience: “We...were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). John eventually wrote, “We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father...” (John 1:14b). Witnessing majesty! Beholding glory! On that mountain the three disciples had seen more clearly what already existed within Jesus. What's interesting is that Jesus had been gradually showing the glory to them.

Remember the time when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding. Of the experience, John later wrote, “He revealed His glory” (John 2:11b). When Lazarus stepped from death back into life, there was one primary reason why the sickness occurred in the first place. John preserved the quote of Jesus: “it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it” (John 11:4b).

Whether He was altering the properties of water, resurrecting a man from death or radiating a glow from within while atop a mountain, in each case, Jesus was revealing the essence belonging only to the Divine - Glory. What about you and me? Can we see the glory now?

Let's consider another prayer request from Jesus. “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me...may behold My glory which You have given Me...” (John 17:24). All saved by grace through faith in Jesus are the ones the Father has given to His Son. By the same grace through faith we can look to Jesus and see God's glory. “For God...has made us understand that it is the brightness of his glory that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

Maybe today God will answer Jesus' prayer and enable you see a little more clearly what Jesus has been showing all along: His Glory!

Daniel was an upright Jew forced to live in gentile servitude, a man to whom no wickedness is ascribed. Although he was of the tribe of Judah, he lifts up the type of intercessory prayer that a priest would rightly make. He had just learned, through his reading of scripture, the length of Judah's time of imprisonment by the empires of the world, Judah's captivity away from the promised land, and his response was grieving and confession. Daniel presents a picture of the Church in sojourn, a kingdom of priests stuck in a world where we do not belong.

The Babylonian captivity was to last 70 years, and Daniel understood that the sentence would soon reach its end. Far from being cause for rejoicing, instead this realization led Daniel to drape himself in sackcloth and ashes, to weep and repent over his people's sin, his family's sin and his own sin. He knew that in the greatness of God's faithfulness and mercy, still He was to be feared. And so he prayed, confessing that God's grace was in no way deserved by him and his people. God sent an answer to him even as he was still praying over the end of Judah's captivity, and that answer was a peek into the end of our captivity upon Earth, the time of Christ's Second Advent.

We do well to follow Daniel's example. Christ has made us a promise that He will return, but we don't have an end date like the Babylonian captivity had. He purposefully left the date of His return open, that we might believe it to be tomorrow; but still we wait. Like Daniel, we must be faithful to pray, even as Jesus instructed: "Thy kingdom come." Is this our greatest desire, our most urgent prayer? Or will Jesus' other saying receive a different answer: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on Earth?" (Lk. 18:8)

When it is hard to believe in what He says He will do, remember what He has already done. When it's hard to believe that He will come a second time, remember that your only hope is in what He did the first time. Weep and rejoice over the mercy you have received. Live lives of confession, always offering thanksgiving for His unmerited grace. And pray without ceasing, "Thy kingdom come."

Weep with those who weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice. In Christ, that's probably the mature response when we see others in whatever state of their life. I still struggle with having the right response sometimes because I am desperately concerned about me. And in the story of the Prodigal Son, I understand the other brother's response. I get it. Why should someone be recognized and celebrated because they have lived a sinful life even though they have repented of it? We love a dramatic conversion story and we celebrate people who have done their "own thing" while the most upright and God-honoring people I know have quietly served God since their childhood and have gotten little recognition from it.

As a pastor, I can really depend on the second group. They are quiet, obedient, faithful, non-dramatic brothers and sisters who have loved God their entire lives. They know how to respect those put in charge of their souls. They seem content to do the little things to show love towards their brothers and sisters. They are eager to teach children or fix a meal or sit with the sick. They can be given a task and simply carry it out. They don't have a great conversion story. They hardly have a conversion story at all. All they have ever done is to love God, serve their parents, do their homework, do their chores. They have usually left a wonderful Christian home to establish their own wonderful Christian home. Most of these folks have entered the peace of Christian marriage and have worked through the usual bumps and kinks in a peaceful manner. Some have even seen their own children begin to grow up much like them. Peaceful, quiet, obedient, faithful. No drama. Just a quiet life in Christ with contentment.

If I have just described you, then you need to sit down at the end of the day with your Chamomile tea in all of your blessing and understand that God is standing over you and applauding and saying, "Well done, My good and faithful servant. You have always been with me, and all that is mine is Yours." Receive this word for you because Christ has ordained your days with His peace. And then begin to pray and rejoice for your prodigal brothers. Peace is difficult to find. Joy is difficult to maintain. Bad habits are hard to lay down in exchange for Christ's cross which you carry with the same joy that He carried it. Learn to weep with them and learn to rejoice with them. The prodigals need all the help and prayer and love that they can get. God sees you and any who are wise see you.

In this spring season, let us learn to rejoice in our brothers and sisters who have been lost but have now been found; who were dead, but now have resurrected with Christ. Let's even see if we can journey out of a place of peace and light into the chaotic darkness in order to welcome other prodigals who come by faith in Jesus into the church.

Lent is a time of affliction to remind us of the affliction of our Lord and His glorious resurrection. The prophet Hosea follows this order in our passage for today. “Let us return to the Lord.” “He has struck us, but He will bind us up.” “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, ...” The Apostle Paul mentions that the Old Testament scriptures refer to the third day resurrection of the Messiah. This is that passage in Hosea—resurrection on the third day. We also participate in the resurrection of our Lord (Romans 6) that we might walk in newness of life.

The prophet encourages us, therefore, “to press on to know the Lord.” We can know Him better—how? “His going out is sure as the dawn.” The faithfulness and character of the Lord are things that we can count on—like the rising of the sun. We mark our days by this regularity. In a similar fashion, God enlightens our days by his constant character—his constant good will toward us. The image of the rising sun is also used in the Psalm 19 in which the sun is compared to a bridegroom leaving his chamber or a strong runner who rejoices to run his course. As the sun runs its daily course, it spreads its beneficent heat on the earth. And so our risen Lord is faithful to spread the joy of His presence upon us. The joy of this sun-like God is my strength.

Hosea further expounds that the Lord will come to us like showers and the spring rains. The images of rain, springs, rivers, wells are used frequently in scripture. A famous passage is the beginning of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. “May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God!”

God continues to teach us just as He taught Israel. The love of Israel, says Hosea, is fickle. It passes away like a morning cloud. So, God sends the prophets to blast away at Israel. He sends judgments of various kinds to get the attention of His people. What is the purpose of all God’s patient dealing with his people? The final verse of our reading tells us. “I desire mercy [steadfast love] and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” God is love and He is working to produce love within us. May it be so. After times of affliction may God’s words fall upon us like rain and moisten the ground so that it produces love. We, along with Moses and the church of all the ages joyfully ascribe greatness to our God!

Repentance is a funny thing. It requires an acknowledgement that I am doing wrong. It also requires that I cease doing wrong. It requires that I stop moving toward doing wrong. If the definition of repentance is so clear, why is it so difficult to do? Perhaps it is because that when I desire to do good, sin is right there with me (Romans 7:21). This makes for a difficult battle for sure.

However, Isaiah 1:16-17 gives us a little antidote to this predicament. *Stop doing wrong.* Of course, how could we be so ignorant! *Learn to do right.* Sure, doesn’t the one imply the other? Not necessarily.

Imagine the driver who misses his exit. As sinners, we can certainly relate. We miss the mark, don’t we? The driver, at some point, must apply the brakes. He may do so immediately or he may delay. He may assume there is another exit ahead, a way to do right without admitting the wrong. He may deny that he’s missed his exit. After all, how can he be so sure that was really his exit? He may simply be ignorant of the fact he missed his exit but eventually, he will realize it and apply the brakes. Imagine our driver coming to a stop and beginning a conversation with himself. After weighing the pros and cons of continuing his course, he decides to turn the vehicle around and face the direction he needs to face to get back on course. This is usually the end of the analogy. I know I must stop doing wrong. I know I must repent and turn around. The part I forget is to *learn to do right.* I assume that the application of the brakes and the turn of the wheel is the work of repentance. I sit idle and begin to roll backward as if on a hill and to spin as if on ice. The work of repentance remains incomplete.

Repentance requires me to be active, not idle. But how do I do this? Isaiah 1:17 tells me to *seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, and plead the case of the widow.* The work of repentance now involves others. It would seem that for Sodom and Gomorrah (and myself), repentance required a cessation from navel-gazing and an initiation of ministry. This is not just turning from backward to forward, but also from inward to outward.

This Lenten season let us repent together. Let us not only cease from our wrongdoing, but let us, together, learn to do right. Together, let us seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, and plead the case of the widow. And together, *let us eat the best from the land.*

It's easy to get distracted. We bustle about our daily lives, planning the next meeting or meal, thinking about market strategy, seeking the best parking place, trying to squeeze one more errand in before retrieving the kids from playschool, maybe even wondering what we'll teach in Sunday school this week. Certainly people are lining up everywhere to thank and praise us for this great work; certainly God will be pleased with our efforts. But maybe God thinks something else is more important.

In today's passage James and John were distracted; Jesus was not. Jesus opens by reminding His disciples of His eminent suffering and death, and the following resurrection. The reaction He gets was these two brothers (through their mother) seeking a self-serving favor, leaping ahead in time to exact a privileged place for themselves in Jesus' kingdom. In a way they make the same error as Peter when he told Jesus that He must never suffer: They all are denying the Suffering Servant, the mission of the Cross, the very reason creation was put in place. Though cloaked in the context of Jesus' kingdom, still the brothers' desire to sit in an exalted place, secretly sought over their fellow disciples, was a thing of the fallen world.

Jesus patiently answers their question, but He will not be knocked off track. Not only does He refer again to what awaits Him, but He emphasizes to the two that they too must take part in His suffering. One of these men, John, will see with his own eyes the cup that Jesus drinks. John will see with his own eyes a man at Jesus' right hand, and a man at His left, drinking of that cup. Then he will know what awaits him.

What did these brothers write later of such things? "Do not love the world or the things in the world ... -the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life ... the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." (1 Jn. 2:15-17) And also, "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" (Jas. 4:4-6) They indeed learned to turn away from the distractions of the world, and instead sell themselves to the will of God, to the spirit He has made to dwell in us; they learned to reject the pride of life, and instead to sell themselves out to grace and humility, the things of their crucified Savior.

What is the chief, first, primary, most important, and most fundamental thing God has to say to mankind? "Love Me." Not "I Love You" or "Please accept me into your heart" but "Love Me." That is the answer Jesus gives when he was directly confronted with the question, "What is God's foremost command?" The scribe explicitly asks Jesus this question and Jesus does not dodge the issue. God's initial, primary, foundational word to all people everywhere is, "Love Me." Of course we are told that we can only love God because he first loved us, but that does not change the fact that "Love Me" is his first command.

Notice that he does not begin with, "Let me love you" or "receive my love." We sometimes make the mistake of believing that God is simply hoping to find someone who will LET HIM love them. Just stop and think about what we are saying there – the All-powerful Creator of the universe asking his creation to *let him* do something. No, this is not where God begins. He begins by commanding us to love him and then ultimately enabling and inspiring us to do so.

I think this is an important idea for us to consider during Lent. We are preparing ourselves to deal properly with the celebration of Holy Week and Resurrection Day, so it is appropriate for us to try to go back to the very start, to the beginning, and ask ourselves what is the first, primary, and most important thing. It is not evangelism or missions, it is not our jobs or our families, it is not even our own happiness or well being. It is the question of whether we are functioning as the creatures God created us to be. Are we "working right?" Are we fulfilling the role for which we were created. Notice here that we were not primarily created to be happy or even holy but to be giving love back to our owner, creator, and ruler.

But you might say, "I don't want to simply comply with the design for which I was created." Certainly you may be feeling this way. But in a similar way my hand can say to the rest of my body, "I don't want to pick things up or hold things." The brakes on my car can say to the rest of the parts, "I don't want to stop the wheels anymore." But notice that, within the very protests these parts might make lies a guarantee of their eventual demise. If the hand does not do its job or the brakes do not do their job, each will eventually be destroyed – literally – simply because they refused to work according to their design.

So for our own good and for the sake of the good of the kingdom that God is building with us, let us stop asking the wrong question. Let us not ask "What do I want?" or "What will make me happy?" but instead "What was I made to do?"

There is an aspect of Lent that we all forget sometimes. It is the fact that Lent comes about due to our own sin and actions. We sometimes face Lent like it is a brave act, ready to stalwartly deny ourselves. But from Ash Wednesday throughout the season, it is really about our own sin and failure before God. 'From dust we come and to dust we will return.' We are haunted by those black ashes, the words, and more so by the reality behind them.

This reality still applies even with an emphasis on Lent that is more focused on service to others. It is because of this fallen world that people are hungry, sick, parentless, and lonely.

Jeremiah reminds us that God has given us every recourse. He sent to His people prophet after prophet and word after word, all to no avail. They were still stiff-necked and would not change. They would not repent. It turns out that the greatest reason for our wilderness and season of despair may be ourselves. It is a harsh reality because to suffer to begin with is hard enough; it seems almost to add insult to injury to think that we may be to blame. But how can this be when we can't even point to some bad decision or tangible action that set us into the desert? We can't even take a grain of satisfaction in knowledge that our predicament comes from some other source than ourselves. We speak of election, but I'm not sure any of us ever get to the point where it all seems truly fair. Even that is an exercise in faith.

Many people don't want a Lent. But even fewer still want a Lent of their own fault. To *choose* a Lent—a valiant fast or self-induced suffering of some sort—at least affords us the illusion of some freedom. But this? This is not what we thought we were getting into! God just won't let us off the hook it seems, for the aura and romance of monastic asceticism is long gone now and we are faced with the cold reality that God may simply not be pleased with us. We rejected God, not the other way around.

So is this the great lesson in it all? *Give us our penance, God, and let us do our time.* For we are like the confessing sinner bowing before a seemingly mute Confessor, only to hear frustrating continuous silence, longing to finally hear an absolution. No, this is not a direct cause-and-effect scenario. There is something far more 'other' to all this, for we find ourselves in a wilderness of which we cannot ascertain how we possibly brought it on ourselves. Somehow our sin has something to do with this. There is some deep, unknown mysterious in-the-heavens connection to it all, and we may spend our whole lives wondering what it is. But let us at least be honest and ask what Lent requires of us--are we *really* walking with God? Are we *really* so blameless in all this?

The beginning of this passage says that those who trust in others (or themselves) will not ultimately prosper or succeed while those who trust in God will. Yet the end of the passage is about the deceitfulness and wickedness of the human heart. What is the connection between these two ideas? I think it is this: that the deceitfulness of the human heart can easily cause you to falsely and self-deceivingly assume that you are in the camp of those who trust in God, when in actuality you are trusting in others or yourself without realizing it. But how could this be? Surely we each know where our own trust lies. This is precisely the point: we DON'T know ourselves very well. We deceive ourselves often about our motives, passions, and true priorities. God is not surprised by this, but we often are.

One situation where this truth often comes to light is related to acts of service or ministry. I have many times observed this in people who are approached with a request to perform some outward act of serving God, whether it be public prayer, teaching, doing missions, etc. Often the response is, "no, I don't really feel worthy or good enough or clean enough to do that. I'm not holy enough or disciplined enough to be the right person for that work." God's response to this is, "Of course you're not good enough, of course you're not worthy enough or clean enough or holy enough. Did you think that those who do this all the time actually are good enough, or clean enough, or holy enough? Does this sound familiar? Are you deceiving yourself about your own worthiness before God? Perhaps Lent is a good time each year to remind ourselves of precisely what we are NOT. We are not worthy, or good, or holy, or disciplined. That is a significant part of what Christianity is all about. Martin Luther described it this way: *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and sinful). Be encouraged that you are God's workmanship...not your own.

"When we take the history of a child of God ... mark what flaws, what imperfections, what fickleness, what dereliction in principle, what flaws in practice, what errors in judgment and what wanderings of heart make up that brief history — how we are led to thank God for the stability of the covenant, that covenant which provides for the full redemption of all believers, which from eternity secures the effectual calling, the perfect keeping and certain salvation of every chosen vessel of mercy!"

Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul* (1962).

What matters is "*not our performance but Christ's performance for us. Not our sacrifices but his sacrifice for us. Not our superiority but only his worth and prestige. The good news of substitution. The good news that our okayness is not in us but exterior to us in Christ alone. Climbing down from the high moral ground, because only Christ belongs up there.*" — Ray Ortlund, Jr. *Christ Is Deeper Still*

Joseph is one of the few Old Testament characters about whom nothing bad is reported, except perhaps his lack of discretion in reporting his dreams to his brothers. This further inflamed their hatred for him. Joseph was the favorite of his father. In many ways Joseph reminds us of Christ. He was Jacob's "dearly beloved son." He was sent from his father's house to minister to his people [his brothers]. While he was a long way off his brothers said [in effect], "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance" (Matthew 21:38).

Joseph is thrown into a pit by his brothers, which in a symbolic way represents the death of Christ. He is resurrected by being pulled out of the pit. From there he goes away to prepare a place for his people. Eventually Joseph is able to tell his brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." This also applies to us as participants in the death of Christ through our individual mountains of sin that we have heaped upon Christ. We have done evil to Him, but He meant it to us for good.

The work of our Savior is so great that the New Testament recounts it, and the Old Testament prefigures it. This Christological way of reading the Old Testament is really not too big of a stretch. Sometimes the parallels are striking. For instance, in today's passage, Joseph had some prophetic dreams that still speak to us. He was in the field binding sheaves. Joseph's sheaf stood up and the brothers' eleven sheaves bowed down before it. Clearly this came to pass when the brothers came before Joseph, the second ruler in Egypt, to seek grain for bread.

With respect to Christ, this dream can be seen this way. Christ is the living bread which comes down out of heaven. All of our attempts to save ourselves, to produce spiritual food for ourselves will be seen for what they are—vanity. We will throw all these bread-making attempts at the feet of Christ and worship Him.

Again Joseph dreamed of the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down before him. Is it true that all Israel will bow down before Joseph? Yes, this happened when the whole family moved to Egypt to escape the famine. What of Joseph as a type of Christ? Will all of Israel worship him? Indeed, all the Israel of God will fall down and worship Christ. It is also the teaching of the Apostle Paul that eventually many of the descendants of Abraham will come to faith and worship Christ. This is not a fanciful interpretation. Our Lord has said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,..."

In the reading for today, Moses gives instruction and encouragement to the people of Israel. Moses also outlines the dilemma facing the Christian Church throughout the ages. Moses' discourse begins with an exhortation to follow all the statutes and judgments that God has given them. This, says Moses, is the way of wisdom about which the Scripture has much to say. The book of Proverbs is a lengthy exhortation and teaching about the way of Wisdom. The early Church Fathers viewed Christ as the Wisdom of God as did the Apostle Paul. "...but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). This Wisdom of God the Fathers applied to the long passage in Proverbs 8.

"The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established....When He established the heavens, I was there,..." (Proverbs 8:22-23, 27). In light of the great praise of wisdom and recommendation of the way of wisdom, we should, at least, be familiar with it and give serious attention to it. This sets up the typical problem for the Church. In following the way of wisdom there are certain beneficial results that occur—better family relationships, better child-training, better relationships at work, stronger marriages, and last, but not least, better income. These are good things, and there is not an exact scriptural guarantee that all of these results will accrue to every individual all the time. However, it makes sense to think that a group or a society that is characterized by the way of wisdom will eventually prosper—and that is the problem.

"Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons" (Deuteronomy 4:9). Prosperity tends to bring forgetfulness of God's mercy. Prosperity produces the Laodicean Church. Prosperity tends to produce spiritual shallowness. So, let us listen to Moses and take heed to remember all the great things that God has done on our behalf. Let us continue to meditate on the scriptures and be grateful for the great salvation that God has revealed to us in His Son.

John Wesley was aware of this problem in his followers. He spoke of the dynamic of poverty, trust in God, prosperity, and forgetting God. Wesley's dictum on this problem was, "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." Wesley was a prototype of the evangelical entrepreneur—much money passed through his hands. However, when Wesley died, a couple of pence were found in his pocket. He had given it all away.

I'm not sure if I really understand the concept of an idol. On the Discovery Channel, I saw Hindus worshipping idols. I've seen pictures of people in the Far East going to temple and bowing to Buddha-like statues. I've read about such things in books, but in everyday American life, I simply don't encounter it. Isaiah 46 describes a people who take gold and silver and make things with their hands and exalt it. Now, I get that. I really don't see people fashioning gold and silver into a statue for worship. The man of Isaiah's warning uses the tools of a craftsman, a measuring tape, a chalk line, a square, a planer. I use these tools when I help remodel a home.

The man takes half of the wood and warms himself and takes the other and crafts an idol. He uses one half for necessity and the other for a misguided pursuit. I suppose that is what idols do to us more than anything. Our allegiance is given over to a vain pursuit that takes up our resources and time. Instead, with a little forethought, we could have been using our time and resources to honor God in some way. Isaiah says that the man who uses his skills and resources to craft an idol usually doesn't know or understand what he is doing. It's like he has stuff smeared over his eyes. His heart has been deceived by someone else and he can't seem to deliver himself.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were young men who saw through what the crowds chase and stood firm in their faith in God. Idols were forbidden and out of the question. They were willing to undergo the burning of their bodies in order to be obedient to God. They couldn't have delivered themselves, but they cast their hope on God and were not disappointed. I don't want to be involved with idols. I know that. But, I'm not sure of what an idol would look like in our culture. Maybe it's not a definite statue, but I suppose it could present itself to us in different forms. I suppose an idol is anything we spend too much of our resources and time pursuing outside of God's permission. It's garnered our allegiance and we honor it by spending our time and resources pursuing it. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (mammon)."

Mammon is riches, avarice, and worldly gain personified as a false god in this verse. Material wealth has an evil influence on us when we spend all our thoughts and energy pursuing it. We might even see God's favor with us directly dependent on whether He provides for us. If that's the case, it is a sure sign we need the Lenten season to snap us back into Christian reality. Our culture smears stuff over eyes and we justify all that it justifies. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego can help us understand that when our culture plays its music, we need Jesus in all of His simplicity to deliver us. I hope that what was declared over them will be declared over us: "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God."

As we learn in John 10, Christ is this Good Shepherd who has purchased the flock of His inheritance with His own blood. He has taken us out of the forests and wildernesses where we formerly were scattered and alone. He has taken us into the fold that is led in His garden land, into His Carmel, where He shows His mighty hand to the flock. By His kind balm He is restoring us to the garden of rest and abundance which was closed at our fall.

Verse 15 is more than just recalling when the children of Israel were called out of slavery and saw the mighty hand of God being shown in one miracle after another. In Matthew 2:15 scripture tells us that Christ is the Son who was called out of Egypt. Through His obedience to the call and will of the Father we have been given the salvation of our God. Christ is the true Israel and because of Him we are now called the Israel of God. We are named as the sons of God and have been called out of slavery to this world, allegorized by Egypt. Being the Israel of God, ours is the joy of knowing that as we travail through this wilderness returning to the garden, He is feeding us with the true bread which has come down from heaven, and He has promised that He will never leave or forsake us in our years of sojourning.

Verses 18-19 serve as a reminder during the season of lent of the great mercy of our God. As we focus on putting to death the flesh, denying ourselves, and maturing in Christ, we should remember that our God delights in steadfast love. All the fasting of a lifetime cannot earn God's favor, but because of His great love and mercy Christ has delivered us. Who is like our God? Our God took our sins upon Himself, trampled them under foot and cast them away into the depths. He has declared us righteous and has compassion upon His flock. As we fast, work, and pray remember that this is for our benefit not to earn favor with God. You are the righteousness of Christ and the unmerited favor of God already rest upon you.

In verse 20 we see a great hope that God will remember His covenant and will fulfill His oath from the days of old. We, with John the Baptist's father, Zachariah, can say; "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He *has* visited and redeemed His people and *has* raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouths of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. . ."

Tragedies...complexities...uncertainties...How sad it is that many varied and difficult life experiences can be described in so few words?

Tragedies...Individuals on mission for God are attacked. A death sentence is carried out. Complexities... A President signs an order. Soldiers are sent to war. The death count grows with the passing of each day. Uncertainties...A school building in Georgia is crushed by powerful winds. In each event, parents, spouses, family and friends undergo the grieving process.

Every generation wrestles through dilemmas in life. Many may cry out to God in frustration. They want Him to be accountable:

- ✦ For allowing the tragedy.
- ✦ For ignoring His responsibility to protect.

Or to at least explain His whereabouts when the tragedy occurred.

At minimum, God should supply answers to the questions of the heart. However, there may be times when we're knowledgeable about a tragedy but not too close to be caught up emotionally in it. We often mix enough theological thought in the matter and rationalize that God exercised His judgment option. That appears to be the mindset of those discussing two tragic events with Jesus in Luke 13. Jesus first told of the Galileans who had been murdered at the command of Pilate. To heighten the horribleness of the dreadful event, the wicked leader had ordered the blood of the victims to be "mingled with their sacrifices." (Luke 13:1)

Jesus then described the time when there were "those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed..." (Luke 13:4). In both situations Jesus uprooted a common belief: Because they suffered those horrible events they "were worse sinners" than all others. Paraphrased, Jesus said, "You think that God got fed up with them because they were obviously sinning far more than anybody else. In His holiness God not only judged their sinfulness but executed a punishment that was righteous and just. They must've had it coming!"

Processing tragedy through a judgmental filter is common. Job's friends did it. They believed Job acted up, messed up and received deserved punishment from his God. Jesus had no reason to speculate about either of the familiar tragic situations. As God in the flesh, He had full knowledge of the facts. He then drew a line in the sands of their flawed theological thinking: "I tell you, no (*they were not worse sinners**); but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3, 5)

Tragedies, complexities and uncertainties are more than just a part of life. They can be cue cards held in the hand of God. As cue cards they point our look inward- so that we might recognize our own sinfulness; and upward- so that we see the kindness of God calling us to repentance.

*Author's insert

Naaman, a valiant soldier with a problem--leprosy. First, we notice God uses him to bring victory to Aram, his king. One of these victories involved defeating Israel where the servant girl was captured who eventually shares information about Elisha that ultimately allows the healing of Naaman. What can we make of all this? Thank God Naaman, first of all, listened to the servant girl. No matter how valiant, no matter how God is using us, we all have a problem. Leprosy has always symbolized sin and this is our problem. It is a sin problem. In this case Naaman finds his healing by washing in the Jordan River, a seemingly simple but illogical act. Our healing also comes in a similar way. We, too, can wash in the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized—that is, find the simple solution; come to Jesus. Don't make your cleansing too difficult. Don't make your healing too logical. Keep it simple that even a child can do it.