

February 18 - Ash Wednesday

Return to me with all your heart

By Pastor Sue

Joel 2:12-13

*“Even now,” declares the Lord,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.*

Rend your heart

and not your garments.

Return to the Lord your God,

*for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.”*

During the time of the Old Testament, the people of God were sometimes told to fast in response to national calamity or as a call to repentance. As such, the statement from God in Joel 2:12-13 is preceded and followed by a command to “blow the trumpet in Zion.” The first trumpet sound is an alarm to notify the people that grave trouble is coming. The second is a call to a holy fast. In between we find an invitation from God to return to Him with broken hearts.

A holy fast was something practiced by God’s people as a group. It could be performed like a ritual – one might refrain from certain practices and even act distressed. But God is not looking for behaviors. He wants nothing less than our whole hearts and everything that breaks them.

As we enter this year’s Lenten fast, many of us hear alarms blaring in our personal lives, the lives of our friends and neighbors, and the world at large. This season is an opportunity to allow our hearts to break over these troubles and take time to grieve them. As we bring our hearts to the Lord in fasting and mourning, He promises to receive us and respond to our prayers with *His* whole heart, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Reflect:

What problems, close or far away, are you finding deeply disturbing right now? Take time today to cry out to God about these. What are some physical ways you could express your grief?

February 19

Have mercy on me, O God

By Pastor Eric

Psalm 51:1-4

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*

Psalm 51 isn't new territory for most of us. We know the story. Bathsheba, Uriah, and David's sin with all its weight: adultery, abuse of power, and murder. And Psalm 51 is what comes after the cover is blown. It's David telling the truth out loud. No hiding. No spinning. Just a public confession of where things really are, spoken in the open where it can't be managed or softened.

That's one reason the Church held onto this psalm during Lent. Lent is a season for honesty. It gives us room to face what we usually rush past, and it slows us down long enough to notice what's happening inside us. Psalm 51:1-4 helps with that because it shows us a way to confess that is both clear and grounded. Notice where David starts. He does not begin with a detailed explanation of his failure or a list of excuses. He begins with God. "Have mercy on me... according to your unfailing love." That "unfailing love" is covenanting love. It's love that holds when we don't. It's the love that comes from God's own heart. Then David asks for what he cannot do for himself: "blot out my transgressions." He is asking God to erase what he has put on the record through his choices, to remove the stain that he cannot scrub out on his own.

And then verse 4 lands with a kind of sobering clarity. David knows he has devastated people. He has harmed Bathsheba. He has killed Uriah. He has shaken the whole community, and that fallout doesn't disappear just because he feels sorry. Those consequences are real, and they matter. But he also sees something deeper. Every sin, at its root, is against God. It's a violation of God's character, God's kindness, and God's image in the world. That's why confession is more than regret. It's returning to the One we've resisted. It's agreeing with God about what is true, even when it costs us. And it's asking Him to do what only mercy can do: cleanse what is twisted, restore what has been broken, and bring us back into the light.

Reflect:

As you pray Psalm 51:1-4, where are you being invited to stop managing the story of your life and instead appeal to God's mercy by telling the truth about what is there?

February 20

This is the kind of fasting I want

By Pastor Mark

Isaiah 58:6-9a

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.”

When we think of fasting we often think of control. We seek in our fasting to control our bodies, to control our addictions, to control our experience of the world. We fast video games, because they take up too much time when we could be more productive. We fast sugar or caffeine because we are worried about their impact on our bodies. We fast social media, because screen time is bad for our minds. Then we tell each other how hard the fast has been, but that it's been so good for us.

But through it all we miss Jesus. We're often so focused on ourselves in our fast that we forget that the purpose is to draw near to Jesus, to take on his heart and be more in tune with his kingdom. We fast so that Jesus can pull back the veil of our own assumptions and prejudices and open our unseeing eyes and unhearing ears, to know the world as he knows it. Then we might be able to see the injustice around us and not close our eyes and hear the stories of the oppressed and not have our hearts be unmoved.

This is the call of the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming what the messiah's kingdom would look like. It is in this kind of fast – one that reveals the heart of God for his creation – that the light of Jesus, the King, goes forth into the world.

Reflect:

What are you fasting in Lent? How are you seeking Jesus through your fast?

February 21

He does not willingly afflict

By Pastor Eric

Lamentations 3:31-33

For no one is cast off

by the Lord forever.

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,

so great is his unfailing love.

For he does not willingly bring affliction

or grief to anyone.

Lamentations is not a book I visit often, though it is probably one I should spend more time in. This passage is often linked to Lent because it invites us to face suffering honestly while also paying close attention to God's character. It also comes as a response to the hard exhortation in verse 30, where a person is told to endure humiliation rather than retaliate.

As a pastor, I am regularly invited into people's suffering, frustration, and anger, and there are moments when no answer will make it all make sense. Still, the writer of Lamentations (often associated with Jeremiah) gives three simple comforts in Lamentations 3:31–33: rejection and pain are not permanent, grief and compassion can sit side by side, and affliction is not what God delights in. In just three short verses, we catch a glimpse of how much God wants us to be gathered up in his love, even when he is willing to work through a fallen world and its real consequences

Where in your life right now does grief feel permanent, and what would it look like to bring that place to Jesus instead of numbing it, defending it, or trying to fix it on your own?

Name it in one sentence. "Jesus, I'm carrying _____, and I'm scared it won't change."

Pray the text out loud. Read Lamentations 3:31–33 slowly, then pause and say, "I'm asking You to make this true for me."

Tell the truth to one person. Pick someone safe and say, "I don't need you to solve it. I just need you to be with me in it"

February 22 - First Sunday of Lent

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:1-3

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone. At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

February 23

You were dead in your transgressions

By Pastor Sue

Ephesians 2:1-3

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

As Pastor Eric sometimes mentions, the biblical description of humans without Christ is very similar to how you might imagine a horde of zombies. They appear to be living but at the core are full of death. They can only obey forces of evil and gratify the needs of the flesh.

The Bible is clear that this is the normal setting into which all humans are born, which is why we are in such desperate need of salvation. We are absolutely helpless without God's intervention.

The message here is that each one of us started as part of the zombie horde, so all are on level ground at the foot of the cross. This calls us to engage those who are lost with humble compassion, since we all come from the same place. It also invites us to respond to God with deep gratitude in our hearts and with lives that reflect the reality of our new birth.

Reflect:

Write a prayer of lament at how you once lived in death and followed its ways, helpless to save yourself. Lament before God the people you know who continue to live in darkness in need of His salvation.

February 24

I am miserable! Who will deliver me?

By Pastor Rod

Romans 7:18-25

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

“I used to be...” is an interesting statement. We often use it to describe past accomplishments. I used to be a pretty good basketball player. I used to be able to dunk the basketball behind my head. I used to hold the school record for the most blocked shots in a game. I used to be somebody. As we age we start talking more about what we used to do than what we are going to do. I am pretty confident that no NBA team is going to offer a lucrative contract to a 73 year old even if he is 6’8” tall. Basketball is relegated to what used to be.

Paul tells Titus to remind people to remember. Not remember the “glory days”. Remember the truth. The truth about who they once were. Not a glorified version of the truth, but a sober judgement. The truth about the war that rages inside of us. The war between our flesh and our mind. Paul, the apostle, acknowledges it perfectly. I want to do good. I don't do good. No, I really, really want to do good. I don't do good. And I have to live in the middle of that dynamic.

So we are invited to remember. Remember what we have done. Remember what Christ has done because of what we have done. We join Paul in understanding our wretchedness. But we also join him in remembering our changed mind that longs to please the Father.

What do you need to remember?

February 25*All have turned away*

By Jill Sommitz

Psalm 14:1-3

*The fool says in his heart,**“There is no God.”**They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;**there is no one who does good.**The Lord looks down from heaven**on all mankind**to see if there are any who understand,**any who seek God.**All have turned away, all have become corrupt;**there is no one who does good,**not even one.*

As a sophomore at the University of Arizona, I was a new follower of Jesus and one of the first things I was asked to do was to write down my “testimony” so that I could share my story with others. I was to have a 1-2 minute version and a longer version so I would be ready for any opportunity. This testimony was to emphasize the way I was before I met Jesus, how he had transformed me, and then how another person could also become a Christian.

At that time, I thought this story was so I could have important conversations with others. Little did I know that remembering these details would be part of the raw material God would use to transform me from foolishness, disobedience, deception, envy, hatred for others, and a life of seeking passions and pleasures to someone who could obey even when I didn’t want to, someone who was ready to do good without slandering, someone who could live a life of true gentleness and peace.

Actually, those things are all still in process under God’s marvelous orchestration. Thus, even if you cannot remember how corrupt, how lost you really were before Christ intersected your life, you can remember how you were a year ago, a month ago. Write often about your story so you can look back and remember: this provides the soil for compassion which transforms behavior in a way that nothing else can. The enemy doesn’t want you to remember and therefore this is a battle worth fighting; remembering is a gift.

Reflect:

What are some words that would accurately describe the way you remember yourself before you met Jesus? Or a year ago? Or a month ago?

How does remembering your “old” self connect you to the amazing and elusive behaviors in Titus 2:1,2?

What is one way that you (and others) see God changing you right now?

February 26

There is not a righteous man

By Pastor Mark

Ecclesiastes 7:20

*Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous,
no one who does what is right and never sins.*

We need God.

There is a comic I've come across a few times on social media. It portrays a person settling into bed. In the second panel they say goodnight to their personified brain and close their eyes. In the third panel the brain says "Remember that really embarrassing thing you said in your 6th grade English class?" In the fourth panel the person is laying in bed with their eyes wide open.

Now, the embarrassing thing you said in your 6th grade English class is not necessarily sin, but if we are honest, we know that there is sin in our lives. Sometimes the enemy comes in during the dark of night, or even just broad daylight, and offers us our sin. He does not offer it in comfort, but in shame. "See?" he says, "You need to hide this away so no one ever sees it, or solve it by yourself so no one ever knows." It keeps us from sleep, it isolates us in relationship, it drives us away from worship and into self-contempt and self-reliance.

This is why we need to remember what God has done. He has loved us, even while we were in sin. When we were distant from him, he sent his son, Jesus, into the world to die for our sins. We need to remember that we are his children, called to him in his unfailing promises, unending love, and everlasting faithfulness. We need to remember his stories and practice telling them. In the end, what we need is simple.

We need God.

Reflect:

Where do you feel like you're doing pretty fine on your own?
What area of your life do you not process that you need Jesus?
What are some stories of redemption in your life?

February 27*The heart is deceitful*

By Pastor Eric

Jeremiah 17:9

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.**Who can understand it?*

Lying is an interesting thing. We usually picture it as simple. You know what is true, you say the opposite, and that is a lie. But Jeremiah 17:9 pushes deeper. The issue is not only what comes out of our mouth. It is what is going on inside us. It is deceit. Deceit is more than outright lying; it is the slow corruption of the inner life. Self-justification starts to sound reasonable, selective memory edits the story, moral ambiguity blurs the edges, and half-truths do the rest. Before long, a person can live inside a false reality and honestly believe it is true. That is what makes deceit so dangerous. It does not just hide the truth from other people; it hides the truth from us.

That is why Jeremiah addresses the heart. In Scripture, the heart is both the center of emotions and the core of a person, the inner control center. It is loyalty and desire, conscience and decision-making. It is where we choose what we love and who we trust, where we frame our story, and where we decide what counts as “good enough.” So when the heart is bent, the problem is bigger than behavior management. We do not simply need better habits or stronger willpower. We need rescue. Left to ourselves, we are without a cure, and we do not even have the clarity to fully understand who we are or why we do what we do. That is sobering, and it is meant to be.

Lent invites us into that sobriety. It calls us to slow down and face what is true. Without Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are lost. And yet, for the follower of Jesus, this isn’t a hopeless proclamation. The Spirit of God lives in us. We are new creations with new hearts. Still, we also know how much of the old corruption lingers. It clings in our instincts. It shows up in our excuses. It resurfaces in the way we protect ourselves, rewrite history, and manage appearances. That old self resists surrender, and it does not disappear just because we have the right beliefs. It has to be brought into the light, confessed, and cut away.

So Lent becomes a moment to stop and give thanks for the Son of God. It becomes a moment to feel the weight of the cross without rushing past it, because the cross is where our self-deception finally meets the truth of God’s love. And it becomes a season to live into the hope of the King’s return by joining the Spirit in the surgery of a heart transplant.

Reflect:

As you move through Lent, where are you most tempted to manage your image, justify yourself, or revise the story you tell about yourself; and what specific practice this week is the Spirit inviting you to take: confess it in prayer, tell the truth to one trusted person, or choose silence instead of self-defense?

February 28

He came to his senses

By Pastor Eric

Luke 15:11-17

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

Recently, my drill disappeared. I do not know how I lost it, but I did. It was expensive, and I have searched everywhere; the house, outside, the roof, the shed, even under the bed. Nothing. I could replace it, but I hesitate. I am fairly certain that the moment I buy a new one, the old one will surface. Still, losing something and standing there unsure what to do leaves a hollow space. There is a sense of powerlessness that settles in.

The son who left his family and burned through his inheritance must have felt something far heavier. Waking up among pigs, hungry and exposed, had to be disorienting. He once had security, identity, and a place at the table. Now he had none of it. The distance between where he began and where he ended up would have pressed in on him all at once.

Over fifty-three years, I have learned that moments of loss carry weight beyond the event itself. Death. My own foolish decisions. Circumstances I cannot manage or control. Each one strips away the illusion that I am self-sufficient. Each one becomes an invitation to return home. Not to shame, but to the Father who loves me and holds me in both the worst and the best of times. I have found, sometimes slowly and sometimes with surprise, that He is already waiting and willing to begin healing what has been damaged.

Reflect:

If you were honest, what part of you is tired of pretending you are fine?

March 1 - Second Sunday of Lent

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:4

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared...

March 2

He does not deal with us as our sins deserve

By Pastor Mark

Psalm 103:8-13

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.*

*He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.*

*For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him....*

The Lord is compassionate. I love that word. It means to co-suffer. It means that God is familiar with our suffering and even more than that, he suffers with us. He sees us in our struggles and our pain and feels its impact with us. Even when we suffer under the consequences of our own sin he is there with us, not unfeeling or unmoved, but compassionate.

Everything in this passage flows out of that compassion. He is gracious in his gifts, he is slow to anger, he is abounding in love. Even when we sin and deserve repayment he is moved by his love. So deep is that compassion that he provided a way for us to walk out of our sin into an intimate relationship with him through the sacrifice of Jesus. In the brokenness of our sin his compassion moves him to a kindness that we have trouble understanding. We long for that kindness, at our best we try to offer it to others, and – like the Pharisees in Matthew 9:10-13 – we struggle to understand it when he offers it to people we don't like.

But we are his children, still learning his compassion. Still trying to understand the depths of that compassion at each new turn, each time we wander, each time we, through friends, family, and the Holy Spirit, discover new ways that our sin impacts us and others. He is kind to us, as a father with his child, when we run to him in pain or sin he scoops us up, holds us in his arms, and casts our sin away – as far as the east is from the west.

Reflect:

How have you known God's compassion? Who might you choose to offer kindness to today?

March 3

God's kindness leads you to repentance

By Pastor Eric

Romans 2:4

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:4 comes right after Paul warns us about judging other people. We are humans too, and we often practice the same sins we criticize. A lack of consequences does not mean we are in the right. It can simply mean God has been patient. Paul presses this point because moral confidence has a way of hiding what is actually happening in the heart. We can become skilled at naming what is wrong in others while staying unaware of what is distorted in us.

Paul uses a strong word that often gets translated “despise” or “show contempt.” The Greek idea is to “think down on,” to treat something as insignificant. I can see this in myself. Contempt usually feels reasonable. It shows up when I look at people who seem careless, stubborn, or proud, and I assume I see more clearly than they do. But when I slow down, I realize my contempt is also tied to God’s patience with me. When I treat another person as small, I am also treating the image of God in them as small. At the same time, I am missing how much grace I have needed, how often I have been corrected, and how much mercy has been extended to me.

The verse points out that God’s kindness is directional. It is meant to lead me somewhere. It is a current I am supposed to enter, not watch from the side. When I receive God’s kindness, I am moved towards repentance.

Repentance is more practical than we often make it. It is telling the truth when my impact becomes clear. It is dropping self-defense and admitting what I did and what it caused. It is turning toward a new way of living, which usually means specific choices, not general regret. And it includes a willingness to pursue repair, to move toward the person I have harmed with humility, take responsibility, and participate in whatever healing and rebuilding is possible.

Reflect:

Where has God’s patience been giving you time to change, and what is one concrete step of repentance this week, an honest prayer, a changed behavior, or a conversation aimed at repair, that you are being invited to take?

March 4

My loyal love will not be removed

By Trizia Williams

Isaiah 54:10

Though the mountains be shaken

and the hills be removed,

yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken

nor my covenant of peace be removed,"

says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

Living in Tucson has its challenges, especially in the summer months, but I never tire of the beauty of the Catalina Mountains. With their craggy peaks and steep, rocky slopes they are a picture of strength and timelessness.

Isaiah 54:10

Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

The idea that mountains and hills are more shakable than God's loving-kindness towards His people is boggling my mind. That is until I consider that the mountains, too, are God's handiwork.

Perhaps it was with a chuckle that God gave Isaiah the object lesson of the mountains' durability in comparison to His love for mankind. It might be like a contest in one-upmanship. I imagine the mountains saying, "Look at the beautiful colors and the play of moving shadows when the sun is low," and God's unfailing love tells the mountain, "I am the Light." The mountain claims, "I rise above the plains to show which way is north." In reply, God's favor upon us says, "I rose from the grave and I am the Way." ...

These mountains and hills may look solid and permanent, but cannot compare to the steadfastness of the love and loyalty the Father has for His children. His favor upon us meets our deepest need: to belong to Him and to be in good standing with the One who is mightiest.

Imagine ... What else might the mountain have to offer; what will be the reply?

March 5

He delights in showing faithful love

By Lee Sommitz

Micah 7:18-19

Who is a God like you,

*who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?*

*You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.*

You will again have compassion on us;

*you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

Titus 3:4 “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, (5 He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of His mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit)...

God’s kindness has been apparent throughout history, but up to this point, most fully demonstrated when His Son took on human form and suffered the full measure of the cumulative sins of people in all of human history, and He did it in our place! How counterintuitive to human reasoning. Our nature is spelled out in verse 3 and shows how His kindness is so utterly undeserved. Per Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like You? Who forgives sin and pardons the rebellion of those who remain among His people? Who does not stay angry forever, but delights in showing loyal love?”

In 1 Corinthians 4:7 “What do you have that you did not receive...?” Reminds us that everything good is from God. Romans 2:4 tells us that His kindness is extended to us to soften us that we might repent. In 2 Timothy 2:24, we are instructed as follows. “The Lord’s servant... must be kind to everyone, able to teach and not resentful...” Let us then seek to hear from God each day and pray against hard hearts.

Reflect:

Who is my Abba Father prompting me to be kinder to today, that I might be an instrument for reminding them that God delights in being kind? How kind am I to myself when I err?

March 6

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful

By Layne Crawford

Luke 6:35-36

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

In our modern culture it's hard to pin down who our enemies are in our everyday lives. We're not really supposed to have "enemies", right? Looking at some of the alternative phrases behind the Greek word, the phrase "one who distresses" arises. Well, I can think of many people who distress me, or I them. Jesus knows how easily we are distressed and how quickly our hearts turn to rightful judgement, contempt, or malice.

How quickly do we make enemies of each other.

When we see people are making what we think are wrong choices, is our human inclination to be merciful? Most often I'm guessing not.

How do you feel when someone isn't grateful for something you lent? Or forgets to give it back? Or how about when someone treats you poorly or sins brazenly? Christian culture is sometimes quick to pour contempt on the wickedness of those without Christ.

And yet what does Jesus call us to here? Mercy. How unbelievably countercultural mercy is; it sounds so foolish. "Love and do good to your enemies and lend to others without expecting anything back." What? You're joking? Surely we will be taken advantage of! "Be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked"? How will that help them learn? And yet, I think of how it felt to have my own earthly dad figure pour out mercy on me as a child. So many lessons were taught not by giving consequences for my poor choices, but by showing mercy, even when I was being ungrateful or wicked.

I love that Jesus ends with, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Mercy creates right relationship again - between Jesus and the Father, between the Father and us, between us as we distress each other.

Reflect:

Who is distressing you and how could you show them mercy, do good to them, or lend to them?

Who might you be distressing to whom you could show mercy?

March 7

We have seen his glory

By Betsy Crawford

John 1:14-17

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Can you remember a time when you were struck with an awareness of God's kindness toward you?

In Luke 15 we read a series of parables illustrating God's great kindness to us "prone to wander" sinners. In this one, we see a father who generously gives his son his inheritance money, even though he probably knows he will squander it. When the son is in dire straits he remembers the kindness of his father, how he treats the workers he hires, paying them well. The father's love and kindness draws him toward home.

The father in this story showed his love in tangible ways, kindness toward others. The gifts God had given him he shares with others. He generously gave his son the inheritance. We can imagine his misgivings, but he opens his hands toward his child. This is a picture of our Father God, who is so generous towards us, so much that He sent His Son into the world, "to seek and to save [us] the lost." (Luke 19:10) We are recipients of His kindness.

Another picture of God's kindness is shown as the son in his despair and shame, remembers that he has a father who is loving, who has proved it in the kind way he treats even those outside of his family, his hired workers. Thinking back to this kindness gives him confidence to dare to go back, even though he knows he doesn't deserve such kindness. In the same way our Father invites us to come, to confess our sin, and receive forgiveness. He longs to bring our wandering hearts back to Himself.

As I reflected on God's kindness in my life I remembered a time I was alone in a new, strange place and God was so kind to me. As a new teacher, and no jobs available in my home state, I received an offer at a school in England. As my parents and I prayed I sensed God leading, despite my fears. A week later, a Saturday, walking through the village with other new teachers, I saw a sign over a small building, "Gospel Hall". The next morning I entered and was home! For the next two years in the ups and downs of teaching, of being away from home and living in a new culture, God, in His kindness, gave me this little fellowship of believers to encourage and support me.

Reflect:

In what ways have you seen God's kindness recently, or maybe reflecting back on the past? How does His kindness toward you direct your heart towards others?

March 8 - Third Sunday of Lent

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:5a

...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...

March 9*Who could stand?*

By Pastor Eric

Psalm 130:3-4

*If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,**Lord, who could stand?**But with you there is forgiveness,**so that we can, with reverence, serve you.*

Somehow, as a child growing up in the church, I came to believe that when Jesus returned and we were judged, my whole life would play on a giant movie screen. Everything I had done would be shown to everyone, and God would pronounce judgment on me as my works were put to the fire to prove whether they were righteous. It's a vivid picture, and it stuck with me for years, but it also reflects an obvious misunderstanding of what the Bible says about God's judgment, His grace, and His mercy.

Psalm 130 gives us a far better picture of who God is and how He relates to us. If God kept a running tally of our sins, none of us could stand. The holiness of God would undo us; we could not face Him. Yet the psalm insists on something surprisingly hopeful: "But with you there is forgiveness." Forgiveness is part of who He is, and it's the reason we can draw near without pretending. God forgives so we can come into His presence with a right kind of fear, the kind that leads to worship, not hiding.

Reflect:

What picture of God's judgment has shaped the way you relate to Him, and how might Psalm 130 be inviting you to see His holiness and forgiveness differently?

March 10

To the Lord belong mercy and forgiveness

By Lee Sommitz

Daniel 9:9

The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him...

Titus 3:5a “He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of His mercy...”

His mercy... so unlike what we are accustomed to in our personal interactions. Lamentations 3:22, 23 conveys wonderful news in this regard. God’s benevolent affection for us whom He adopted never wanes, there is no expiration date on His faithful, loyal and kind love for us. The mercies extended to us by Him are unending and so inexhaustible that it’s like they are brand new every single day!

He seems to extend His mercy most readily to those who recognize that they are desperately in need. People who never realize that they are hopelessly lost and in need of the salvation God offers us in His Son are the least likely to experience this mercy.

We are also soberly warned to extend the mercy we have benefitted from instead of harshly judging others in James 2:12,13. Abba Father, remind me of my tendency to see the speck in another’s eye and miss the more glaringly large object in my own eye. Freely I receive your mercy, help me also to freely extend it for You are generous!

Reflect:

Am I believing the lie that God’s mercy is limited and that I may be on the verge of exhausting it?

March 11

I want mercy and not sacrifice

By Tom Caylor

Matthew 9:13

But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Titus 3:5-7 provides a full three-dimensional picture of God's saving us in terms of the past, present and future. All through the New Testament, being saved is also referred to as being "called by God". Over my three days (March 11, March 18th, and March 26th), we will be looking at salvation and noting the relationship to calling.

With regard to the past, Titus 3:5a paints a stark contrast, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

After Jesus called Matthew to be his disciple, the Pharisees complained that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. On hearing this, Jesus said,

"But go and learn what this means:

'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' (from Hosea 6:6)

For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13)

Consider the stark contrast Jesus draws.

Before we were called, our identity was based on what we did, at best the "righteous things we had done", our "sacrifice". It never lasted, like the "priests" in Hosea 6 (the passage from which the Pharisees would have "gone and learned") whose "love is like ... the dew that goes early away."

After we were called, our identity was based on a relational and intimate knowledge of him as our source and object of love and lovingkindness, which is the Hebrew word "hesed" translated here "mercy".

Like Matthew, we were saved by God's unmerited, and even unanticipated, call. We were saved by his invitation to dine with him!

Reflect:

Ask God, in what ways have you been basing your identity on the good things that you have been doing? Confess and thank God for calling you and saving you from that old identity. Ask God for his mercy. Ask him for a new measure of knowing his unconditional love for you, and knowing your place in his story and at his table.

March 12

God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!

By Pastor Mark

Luke 18:13-14

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

I’ve been staring at this for about two hours, cycling through ideas [playing a game on my phone], trying to come up with the right metaphor [reading sports stories], and sorting through opening lines [making a bowl of bean dip]. In other words having a full-on ADD meltdown. I called my wife and told her I don’t know what to do and she said (very supportively and encouragingly) “You’ve got this!” I don’t.

I pray, God, I confess, I don’t know what to write. I’m lost in my own brain, in distractions and old ways, struggling to figure out if anything has changed from when I was in 8th grade, playing Tony Hawk Proskater instead of writing an essay. I’ve thought about humility and “right-sized” understanding of self. I’ve thought about the great necessity of mercy on sinful humans and the pride of the Pharisee thinking “Thank you, God, I’m not like that guy.” God, I’ve gone round and round in self contempt for my inability to start writing (it’s only 250 words!), shame for the ways I allow myself to be distracted, and confusion about why I’m like this. I trust that you are good God, that you see me and know me in this place. I’ve tried coping techniques, changing where I’m sitting, doing some physical activity, drinking coffee, and I don’t know what worked but I’m typing now, so thank you Lord.

I don’t know if I should leave everything I just wrote, but I think I will, because all I can think right now is, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

God, thank you for your mercy on me, and on all of us. Thank you for your mercy when we feel we’ve outgrown our old selves, but yet they still occasionally make a return appearance at the least opportunity time. Thank you for your mercy when we fail. Thank you for your mercy when our familiar brokennesses overwhelm and weary us.

We cannot get it right enough apart from you. We cannot save ourselves.

Thank you for the cross.

Reflect:

Where has God poured out his mercy on you? Spend some time worshipping him, outside if possible.

March 13

Approach the throne of grace with confidence

By Julie Brunson

Hebrews 4:15-16

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Those who know me know that I really love the idea and experience of grace in the gospel. I think I also tend to lump mercy in with grace. However, I often go about in my life with a vague sense that I’m not doing enough. Enough of what? It’s a good question. Or sometimes I remember with shame sins of long or recent past and find myself reluctant to acknowledge them to others as a part of my story. However, Paul tells us:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

[Titus 3:4-5a NIV]

Despite God’s promise that he has rescued me while I was a yet a sinner and not for any of my good deeds, I am apt to reject this gospel truth and try to live in an unspoken balancing act of good v. bad actions. This can inhibit my willingness to confess my sins and share the story of my salvation. The writer of Hebrews encourages us:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. [Hebrews 4:15-16 NIV]

This means that in Jesus’ weak human form he didn’t breeze through temptation but suffered under it in a way that gave him a special compassion for us as we sin. As we come to receive mercy, let us live out our acceptance in confidence and in community.

Reflect:

1. What is an area of your life that you are tempted to hide from God’s mercy?
2. What might it look like to share the gift of God’s mercy in community?

March 14

Compassionate and merciful, abounding in loyal love

By Karen Lefevre

Psalm 86:15

*But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*

Honestly, I have to take it on faith that God is compassionate. Scientists tell us that our animal brains are wired to absorb negative experiences over positive ones. They explain that this tendency has helped us to survive in a scary, unpredictable world. I seem to have more sensitivity than most people to seeing and hearing about painful things; it's not just the ones that affect me personally, but all of the big and little sufferings around me as I go about my day. Most of that pain, I don't see resolved; I can't actually claim that most of the trouble isn't dealt with in some way; it's just that I often don't get to see it myself.

In my job as a middle school teacher, I'm in direct contact every day with 148 seventh graders whose safety I'm legally responsible for while they're assigned to my classroom. That's in addition to their reading and writing improvement. How can I possibly even hope to take care of them? They roll loudly into my room, brimming not only with positive energy and longing, but also hunger, thirst, bruises, cuts, and general hurt feelings, and meanwhile there's that constant push for control and manipulation. Often even before the bell, I've fielded multiple requests to go to the nurse, to fill up the water bottle at the station they already passed on the way, to go retrieve their forgotten (translation: confiscated) phone in another class. Can I? Can I? Can I? --- Does a compassionate adult say no or yes? Is maybe an actual answer...?

One day as the seventh period bell rang, I tried to take attendance while eyeing the 28 students for leftover passing period edginess. A boy came to my desk: "I've been coughing; it was getting better, but now it's worse." (Please... don't... cough...my...way... ?) As I reached for the carbon-copy nurse pass (talk about endless paperwork: our nurse for over 850 kids can barely keep up with it), a girl asked: "Can I go to the nurse to see if she has any socks? My feet are burning in these shoes."

Her shiny black shoes looked like patent leather but were probably cheap plastic. And I sighed on the inside, as she probably wasn't old enough to know better about cheap plastic shoes without socks on a warm afternoon.

The nurse didn't pick up the phone; I left a message for her in a tone that suggested that asking her for a pair of socks was a hail Mary pass. I didn't even expect Nurse Bertha to have a chance to listen to the message before the end of seventh period. I felt nagging frustration that I hadn't been able to do anything for the girl except take her seriously (although in reflection, maybe that's actually something). Yes, she was dumb enough to wear shoes without socks, but kids do dumb things all the time; let's be honest, adults, too. Yes, I have to admit it: doing questionable things (rather accidentally or on purpose) is a central human tendency.

What does God's compassion look like when we have done, when we are even continuing to do, questionable things? Asking for a friend: how does God's mercy show up in our messy, complicated lives, and when it does, are we even able to notice it? Compassion doesn't usually mean the erasure of consequences. But maybe when it's hours before we can go home, and we still have to walk around in our burning shoes in the meantime, is there any cushion available to us?

Fifteen minutes after my voice message, a student arrived in my room with a small manila envelope with a note on the outside: “For the student—Bertha.” Inside was a new pair of no-show black socks.

I was stunned. Yet again, I was reminded that God had my back, almost always showing up through other people.

I just had to feel weird about asking.

Reflect:

When is it hard for you to feel compassion for yourself or for others? What would it look like for you to let go of the compulsion to make the problem go away? How could you instead focus on acts of compassion, regardless of “effectiveness,” regardless of what happens next?

Ask God to show you a concrete example of his compassion in your life, or in the life of someone you care for. Ask God to show you an example that you may have overlooked until now.

March 15 - Fourth Sunday of Lent

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:5b-6

...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior...

March 16

I will give you a new heart

By Trizia Williams

Ezekiel 36:25-27

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Wherever I go, I try to park in the shade. By habit, I look for a spot under a tree. As a result, my windshield needs to be washed often. It may seem obvious that it requires clean water to make anything really clean. My standard here may be in question, as I frequently use the gas station squeegee to wash my windshield... I suppose it does the job because the impurities are on the surface.

With the human heart it's not that easy. It doesn't just get soiled on the surface by birds on overhanging branches. It is porous and soaks everything in. The way I seek a shaded spot, the heart seeks out that which ultimately sullies. It clings to it, loves it, elevates it. A squeegee won't do.

In fact, there is nothing anyone can do to clean up this kind of a mess. All that can be done is to turn to Him who has the living water to be cleansed. He will wash off the grime left by sinful habits. He will transform the constitution from a heart that is self-serving, cold, and hard to one that is grateful for the costly gift of His saving grace, willing to yield to His will, and alive with His Spirit.

Reflect:

Do I still seek out shaded places for my car? For my heart? Do you?

March 17

You must be born from above

By Pastor Eric

John 3:3-8

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 has a kind of complexity and simplicity that still takes my breath away. Nicodemus comes with a category for how God works. It's a serious category. It's religious, thoughtful, and rooted in what he has been taught to trust: birth, lineage, and the covenant markers that have defined God's people for generations. And Jesus looks him in the eye and says, in essence, that the doorway into the Kingdom of God is not secured by your family line or your religious badges. It is opened by the Spirit. You do not manage this Kingdom by controlling outcomes or mastering the rules. You are born into it by the Spirit of God.

Then Jesus presses even further. The Spirit is not something you can tame. The Spirit is not a tool in your hand. The Spirit is more like the wind. You hear it. You feel its effects. You can see what it changes - you cannot predict it, contain it, or direct it. The Spirit goes where the Spirit wants to go, and people who are born of the Spirit start moving in a different direction. They get carried into a larger reality. They begin to be pulled, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully, toward the life of the Kingdom. "Get ready, Nicodemus," is almost the tone beneath the words. "The adventure is about to start, and it's going to be bigger than your categories."

Of course, Nicodemus is baffled. He wants clarity. He wants a diagram. He wants Jesus to explain it in a way that fits inside his existing framework. But his paradigm for how God operates is too small. It is a flesh paradigm. It assumes that the main things are measurable and manageable. Jesus is inviting him into a Spirit paradigm, where God is personal and unpredictable, and where the only sane response is surrender and trust the Spirit.

Reflect:

This Lent, where might Jesus be exposing a small or manageable picture of how you think God works, and what would it look like to loosen your grip and let the Spirit lead you into something you cannot fully control or explain?

March 18

A new creation!

By Tom Caylor

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Titus 3:5-7 provides a full three-dimensional picture of God's saving us in terms of the past, present and future. All through the New Testament, being saved is also referred to as being "called by God". Over my three days (March 11, March 18th, and March 26th), we will be looking at salvation and noting the relationship to calling.

What does God do when he saves us? And in the present, what does it mean to be saved?

"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior," (Titus 3:5b-6).

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

When we are saved by God, there is a contrast from before to after, from being spiritually dead to being alive, from being dirty to being clean, from being broken to being whole. God breathes new life into us; he fills us with his Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit, generously poured out, is our continuing life. We are able to hear his voice and continue to respond to his call.

The Greek root word for "call" in the New Testament is used not only in the sense of "to summon or invite", but also to give someone a name, as in "he will be called John."

God not only calls us to rebirth as his child. He gives us life and calls us to follow him in our daily lives. And when he, the Shepherd, through the Spirit, calls, he calls us by name. He relates to us as the new unique identity that we are in his kingdom. We continue to be enlivened, washed, forgiven, healed, made whole, and made ministers of reconciliation.

Reflect:

Jesus called Levi, or Matthew ("gift of God"), from his former place of comfort using other people, and Matthew got up, left everything of his old self, and followed him. (Matthew 9:9) In your relationships right now, what ways are dishonoring to God, others, or yourself? Ask God who he sees you to be. Ask him to fill you with his Holy Spirit to bring to life, or more to life, the new person you are.

March 19

Create in me a pure heart

By Keith Brunson

Psalm 51:10

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

King David wrote Psalm 51 right after he had been at his worst - as a king and a human. Having been confronted by the prophet Nathan about his dealings with Bathseba, this psalm is David's response of confession and repentance. David came to God openly with his guilt – sins including adultery, abuse of royal power, deceit, murder – and he came without excuses. His conviction of his own unworthiness was complete; he knew he was in need of total transformation, yet what he displayed in the midst of this was not hopelessness, but the opposite.

That's because he was not only a terrible sinner, but also a man after God's own heart. He knew that he could prostrate himself in confession before God and ask Him to do what only He could do: purify David's heart and renew his spirit. It was God's mercy and love for David, not David's righteousness, that allowed this renewal to happen.

True spiritual renewal isn't about self-improvement or moral reform; it's about God's radical mercy and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This same tenderness toward mankind is now available to us, thanks to the grace of Jesus.

March 20

United with him in his death

By Pastor Mark

Romans 6:3-5

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

I don't remember exactly when I was baptized. I think it was sometime in 7th or 8th grade. We were at a family camp in Mexico, I remember that. Javier Orozco baptized me, a fact I honestly wouldn't remember if there wasn't a picture of it. I've baptized many people and watched many others be baptized. I've watched the lives of those people go in so many different directions over the years. For myself, I know it was at least two years before God really took center stage in my life.

There's beauty and frustration in baptism. The beauty of going down to the grave with Jesus and being raised up to new life in him carries a wonder and genuine, good, romanticism with it. To take up our new life in Christ is exciting and hopeful. The frustration is in the reality that things often don't change right away, at least not in the way we might hope or expect. We still struggle with sin, with the labor of this life, with our relationships.

I am secure in my faith, rooted in the love of Jesus, but those two years and my ongoing cycle of confession and repentance give me so much hope. I have hope for those I have seen wander and fall away, because we have the same baptism and security in Jesus. The same death and resurrection. So let us strive to live in the new life proclaimed in baptism, no longer chained to the old ways of sin, but in full hope for the glory of the Father revealed in Jesus our king.

Reflect:

What are some of the stories surrounding your baptism? Share one of those stories with someone close to you today.

March 21

You were also raised with him

By Russ Lewis

Colossians 2:12-13

...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins...

In one of my favorite fantasy stories, a queen stands in a tavern filled with aging merchants who were once soldiers. Their swords hang at their sides, but time has dulled their memory of how to use them. She calls out, "My husband rides toward the Last Battle. Will he ride alone?"

Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal and then, at a single threat from Jezebel, runs into the wilderness and cries, "I am the only one left."

Jesus, knowing the cross is hours away, takes Peter, James, and John into Gethsemane and says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

None of these moments are simply about fear. They are about isolation. Will the king ride alone? Will Elijah stand alone? Will Jesus pray alone?

We chose to follow Christ years ago. We confessed our sin. We trusted His death and resurrection. That would have been enough mercy for a lifetime. But the cross was more than payment; it was participation. When He died, He carried our debt. In baptism, we confess that we died with Him. The old self was put to death. We were raised into new life, lifted up by grace we could never generate on our own.

That reality is not locked in the past. It presses into today.

Today you are called to forgive when it costs you. To love when you are tired. To restrain a desire that feels urgent. To choose obedience over comfort. Each of those moments carries a question: will Jesus hang there alone?

He has fought for you. He has carried you. And now He invites you to remain with Him, to share in His life, even in the hard places. There is room at the cross, not only for your forgiveness, but for your fellowship.

March 22 - Fifth Sunday of Lent

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:7

...so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

March 23

Abba, Father!

By Pastor Eric

Romans 8:15-17

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Sonship is a big deal. In the ancient world it was more than a role handed out by gender. It was the place of honor. It was the standing that carried inheritance, authority, and belonging. So when Paul says that those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God and even uses the language of adoption as “sons,” he is making a point that lands on everyone, men and women. He is saying the full privilege of the family belongs to all of us in Christ. We are not visitors who got invited over for dinner. We are not servants hoping to stay in good standing. We are the family, and God is our dad.

That’s why “Abba, Father” matters. It carries affection, but it also feels ordinary in the best way. It’s the word a child uses in a normal home. There is familiarity to it. There is closeness. Paul ties that kind of closeness to the Spirit’s presence in us, and the implication is weighty. Having the Spirit is like carrying the King’s signet ring. What you seal is sealed as if the King Himself said so. It’s borrowed authority, but it’s real.

I’m often amused by the kids at the Village when they grab a drink out of the fridge even though the sign clearly says you have to be over eight. When I say, “You’ll need your parent if you’re going to get a drink,” they look at me like I’m the one who is confused and say, “My mom said it was okay,” or “My dad said it was okay,” as if that overrides the sign and the pastor. And in their minds, it does. They are secure in their place. They believe their parents carry a kind of authority that gives them privileges that outrank the general rules. In a strange and holy way, that’s a picture of what it means to be led by the Spirit. We can look the darkness in the face and say, “Begone,” not because we are impressive, but because our Father has spoken, and we belong to Him.

Reflect:

This Lent, where do you feel the pull to prove yourself or ask permission that God has already given, and what is one concrete step you can take this week to live as someone who belongs in the Father’s house?

March 24

No longer a slave, but a son

By Pastor Sue

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Do you remember being a kid and lacing your fingers together to give someone a boost over the wall? Usually it would be someone older boosting the smaller person to the top and then climbing over themselves. Then everyone could land on the other side together.

This verse reminds me of that experience. Think of it this way – Jesus was living in the backyard of sonship, with the full experience and inheritance of the things of God. To save us, he had to jump over the wall into the backyard of our orphanage. In doing so, he became fully human, born of a woman under the law. He became like us. This allowed him, our beloved big brother, to boost us over the wall into sonship. He joined us in our place so he could share his place with us.

The result of this for us is all the benefits of adoption. We are freed from slavery to sonship, with all the privileges given freely to God's children. Not only that, but the Spirit in our hearts responds to God's love with a bond of affection that tells us we belong.

Reflect:

What are some ways that you still experience life as a spiritual slave or orphan? How is God calling you further into the experience of His big hug of sonship and life in His beautiful backyard?

March 25

An inheritance kept in heaven for you

By Jill Sommitz

1 Peter 1:3-4

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you...

Imagine that you received word today that you had unexpectedly inherited a large sum of money because of the death of a distant relative. How would that impact you? Would it feel like you had just won the lottery? Granted, you haven't received the money yet because the estate is not finalized but you expect its arrival into your bank account some time in the future. Would anything change about your life today as you take on this new identity as an heir?

Let's think for a minute about the cash you will be inheriting. This money is linked to a financial system that is volatile, at the mercy of rising and falling economies. How you invest this money requires many decisions on your part: Will you use it to shore up the areas in your life that are currently uncomfortable? Will you give some of it away? To whom? How could you best glorify God in how the money is used?

Paul tells Titus that followers of Jesus also have a huge inheritance in the imminent future except that this inheritance is of things that cannot spoil or perish or even fade. You don't have to worry about future economic catastrophes because this inheritance is kept safe in heaven for you.

Reflect:

How does taking on the identity as an heir to eternal life impact you today?

How can you make the reality of your future life as a person who will soon inherit great riches as real as if you were to inherit earthly treasures?

March 26

Those who are called may receive

By Tom Caylor

Hebrews 9:15

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Titus 3:5-7 provides a full three-dimensional picture of God's saving us in terms of the past, present and future. All through the New Testament, being saved is also referred to as being "called by God". Over my three days (March 11, March 18th, and March 26th), we will be looking at salvation and noting the relationship to calling.

For those of us who have been saved by God, what does it mean, not just in this present life? Is there hope for a life, an age, an earth to come?

As Jay Kelley said in the movie by that name at the end of his life, "I'd like another one."

We have a big clue back in Titus 3:5, where the word for regeneration is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Matthew 19:28, to refer to "the renewal of all things", the new heaven and new earth. Our salvation, our new birth, and new life, is the preparation for the next life.

"...so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:7)

By being born again, through Christ's death and resurrection, we become heirs of eternal life.

"For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." (Hebrews 9:15)

The word here for "called" is used only two other times, both referring to the wedding banquet of Jesus! (Matthew 22:8, Revelation 19:9).

We have been invited and guaranteed a place in the future kingdom!

Not only that, our rebirth and new life now is a foretaste of the future!

"What will you do in the coming kingdom?... You will do everything you were born to do." -- John Eldredge, "All Things New"

Reflect:

Would you like a "do over" for anything in your life? Ask for forgiveness if you haven't. Thank God that you have been justified, made righteous, and regenerated. Ask God how he is working his life in you these days to prepare you for his "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

March 27

You make my future secure

By Julie Brunson

Psalm 16:5-6

*Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.*

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.*

After a full discussion of the mercy and grace of God through Jesus, Paul tells us it was

so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. [Titus 3:7 NIV]

Honestly, my tendency is to think in the moment and not the future. This can be good at times because I can focus on what God has for me in that moment. However, sometimes I end up lost in moments of suffering and the effects of this broken world on me and the people and world around me. The writer of Hebrews tells us that:

For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [Hebrews 2:2b]

In my small human mind, I can't fully conceive of a joy that would make the intense suffering of crucifixion worth it. That joy is our inheritance nonetheless through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the mercy and grace therein. David calls out to God:

Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance. [Psalm 16:5-6 NIV]

As heirs we have this beautiful inheritance with Jesus where we can look to God for security and fulfillment. In the midst of brokenness we can stand with Jesus and say this joy in communing with God as our Father in the eternal life of his kingdom is worth everything.

Reflect:

1. What areas in your life make it difficult to remember your delightful inheritance?
2. Spend some time bringing one of these to God as a loving and merciful Father who is leading you on a path to joy.

March 28

The one who conquers will inherit

By Pastor Mark

Revelation 21:7

Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

My 4-year-old and 3-year-old have discovered the joys and sorrows of competition. They sprint out of the car to the door loudly proclaiming “I win” much to the dismay of the unfortunate child who was unbuckled second. I confess I have used the game to my advantage by declaring that when we get into the car the one that wins is not the one who touches the car first, but rather the one that gets their car seat straps buckled first.

Luckily, there is not one victor in the kingdom of God. We are all victorious together if we persevere to the end. In our victory we receive our prize, which we taste in part now, but when we stand before Jesus we will know in full. We are God’s children and will receive the inheritance. We don't have to worry about our place – as long as we remain in Jesus, our place is secure. We won't lose it because someone else got there first.

However, there is one thing I long to take from my children’s competition into my own walk with Jesus – their whole body, full on, headlong exuberance for victory. There is a full-throated cry that goes up when my son crashes into the front door that I can’t help but admire. I long for the day when I will crash, Lord willing with all my children, through the gates of the city of God and loudly cry out with them “Yeeeeeeaaaahhh!!!! We win!!!!”

Reflect:

How might your life look different if it was oriented around victory in Christ and childlike joy in his kingdom?

March 29 - Sixth Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

Titus 3:8

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

March 30

Let your light shine

By Pastor Eric

Matthew 5:14-16

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Putting your light under a bowl. As a kid, I thought that was one of the most ridiculous things I’d ever heard. The bowl would burn, or the light would go out. Who would ever do that? It turns out, I would. I can’t count the times I’ve had an open door, at the grocery store or with friends late at night, to turn the conversation toward Jesus; who He is to me, and what He might mean for the person right in front of me. And I’ve chosen not to. Sometimes it’s fear of being awkward. Sometimes it’s fatigue. Sometimes it’s the subtle desire to be liked. Either way, the moment passes, and the light stays covered.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is talking about what we do, and I think we often misunderstand what “good deeds” are. Yes, it includes kind things and courageous things for people who need them. But it’s not really about one heroic action as much as it is one deed stacked on another deed, and those deeds have “realms,” so to speak. Picture it like this: your family is a realm, and it’s the first place your light is meant to shine. You can’t skip them and jump straight to your work realm or your friend realm, because each light builds on the other. The faithfulness you practice at home becomes fuel for the faithfulness you practice everywhere else. Over time, it turns into a larger flame that is hard to ignore.

But if you start in the furthest realms, like “the larger world,” while neglecting the people closest to you, something gets out of order. It may look impressive from a distance, but it often feels hollow up close. And that’s what it means to put a bowl over your light. You’re shining where it’s safest or most visible, while avoiding the places that require you to love, listen, repent, forgive, and stay present. Jesus is inviting us to a different kind of brightness, one that starts nearby and spreads outward, one relationship at a time.

Reflect:

Who is in your closest circle right now, and how might Jesus be inviting you to shine His light there through patience and kindness this week?

March 31

Do not get tired of doing good

By Pastor Rod

Galatians 6:9-10

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

My father figure growing up was among the kindest, most generous men I have ever met. He and his wife had no children of their own but “adopted” my siblings and me as kids they would look after. Pete would come over on a Saturday morning and work on my widowed mother’s old Buick. He would solicit my brother and I to help him. He took care of Mom’s taxes for her. He fixed a leaky faucet or did some roof repair after a storm. He did good works. Lots of good works. Unsung and unheralded work. Which is as it should be. It is what Paul has in mind when he instructs the Galatians to do good to everyone, especially those who are believers.

But Paul’s instruction comes with a caveat. The caveat is to not grow weary in well doing. We grow weary when we have improper motives for doing good works. When we do things to draw attention to our righteousness. When we do good works to gain advantage. It’s easy to slip into bad patterns and in doing so get exhausted.

Paul warns against that in his instructions to Titus. He tells Titus to not get wrapped up in controversy and dissensions and arguments and all that sort of foolishness. Those things are all about winning and losing and will tire you out. Paul actually tells Titus to avoid people who are playing that game and have nothing to do with them.

Instead, do good works. Be like my friend, Pete. Do good works in a way that draws people to Jesus. You won’t ever get tired of doing that.

April 1

Faith, if it does not have works, is dead

By Pastor Mark

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

I love the book of James. It is very directly practical. This passage is a good example, but it does seem at first to contrast Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." How are we to reconcile these two ideas, one seeming to say that faith is not works and the other seeming to say faith requires works?

It is built up in our understanding of faith. I used the metaphor recently of a frozen pond. I may believe that the pond is frozen enough to walk on, but unless I take a step out onto the ice I have not shown my faith. It goes like this: we are not saved by our works, but by faith, but as we live out our faith what naturally happens is good works! Our faith in Jesus teaches us to not live for ourselves but for others – to not seek to lift ourselves up, but to give up of ourselves to serve others. If we proclaim faith in Jesus with our mouths, but then live isolated, self-seeking lives, how does that faith show the love of Jesus to the world?

This is the challenge issued by James and by Jesus in Matthew 25:35-40. Go out and live your faith in the world. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give clothing to those in need, invite in the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned and in the end the King will say "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Reflect:

What are some ways God might be calling you to step into more good works to serve the kingdom?

April 2

Bear fruit in every good deed

By Karen Lefevre

Colossians 1:10

...so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God...

What makes me think I've got a chance at a good life? People have been asking this question for millennia. Here are some answers I've tried on for myself:

- Is it self-improvement? (Setting goals for myself and working toward excellence, including being a more effective and thereby more respected teacher...)
- Is it the pursuit of contentment, if not full-on happiness? (Chasing after my own longings, or perhaps even living vicariously through someone else's...)
- Is it knowing I'm loved by the people I love? (This one is the most alluring, but honestly, even this healthy longing has betrayed me.)

If my life's purpose is more about doing good than how I feel about it, if my reason to be here is more about loving others than being loved, I would still rather avoid things that I know are going to hurt. Because of this tension, in the middle of challenging circumstances, I need God's help to reset my GPS in this direction: "Live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God."

Reflect:

What gets in the way of your enjoyment of *being* good? What stops you from resting in God's goodness? What can you do during Lent to dial down the volume on the Enemy's messages that your life isn't good enough?

April 3

He was wounded because of our rebellious deeds

By Pastor Mark

Isaiah 53:4-6

*Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

Today is Good Friday and considering what we remember today, it is hard to call it good. Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends, then the rest of his friends abandoned and denied him. He was arrested on false charges, accused by false witnesses, convicted by biased judges, and condemned by a corrupt leader who literally washed his hands of it all. Then he was beaten, mocked, and made to bear his cross, then was nailed to it and endured further ridicule from his executioners and from the very people who had falsely accused him for their own gain. It is a brutal truth that his death was excruciating by design. Slowly read again the Isaiah passage above. How can we call that good?

It is all in the significance of the work of Jesus. It is the culmination of a plan set in motion thousands of years before by God himself. There on the cross, bloodied and beaten, is Jesus the King, crowned in glory, splitting the veil that hangs between heaven and earth. There on the cross is our victory, even in death. The resurrection on Sunday proclaims the truth of what Jesus achieved on the cross, the redemption of our sins and reconciliation of the creation with its Creator. Even as God proclaimed over his creation in the beginning, "It is good."

Spend time today contemplating the glory of the cross. The necessity of the sacrifice. Jesus the King, enthroned even in his suffering on the cross. Stop and consider the sin in your life. Confess the ways you walk that are covered by the blood of Christ. Turn and repent at the foot of the cross, proclaiming with the Roman centurion, "Surely, this man was the Son of God." Seek to walk in obedience with the King, taking up your cross to follow him.

April 4

It is good to wait quietly for deliverance

By Pastor Sue

Lamentations 3:22-26

*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

*They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

*I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."*

*The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.*

This final day before Easter has sometimes been called Black Saturday. It was a day of bewildered waiting by the first followers of Jesus who had watched the One they placed their hopes in die on the cross the day before. They did not know how the salvation of the Lord would appear.

Their quandary was not unusual. God's people have hoped for His salvation without knowing when or how it would come since trouble first entered the world.

If we join God's people throughout the ages in understanding Him as our portion, then we will be able to confidently speak these words from Lamentation with them. Let's think about this a little bit. A portion can be the sum total of what we possess or an expected inheritance. If God is our portion, then He is everything we have in life or in death. Regardless of specific outcomes in the moment, He promises to meet us with His goodness and life. And so we wait for Him and for His salvation, however it might come.

Reflect:

What do you usually place your hope in? What would it mean to place your hope in God instead? As you fast on this final day, take time to wait quietly and attentively on God.

April 5 - Easter Sunday

Read the passage aloud three times, pausing in between each reading to consider the text. Use the space below to write any thoughts or questions that come to mind as you read. Close with prayer.

John 20:19-22

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Happy Easter! He is Risen! Thank you for journeying with us through Lent.

– The Village Pastors, on behalf of all our wonderful writers