

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

February 17, 2010

Matthew emphasizes that the essential Christian practices of giving alms, praying and fasting should be done in a sacred environment between the giver and God. These practices should not be done in a way to draw public attention to the giver. This may be hard to do in the society in which we live. Society seems to expect that deeds good or bad be paraded in the various media.

The apparent purpose is “see me, see what I do.” This may be why it is so difficult for our society to consistently share or care for those less fortunate. We respond well to large tragic events, like the earthquake’s devastation in Haiti, at least for a while. We seem to pay little attention to the day-to-day misery around us, like the plight of the poor and of illegal immigrants.

As we get to Matthew 6:19-20, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” we have staring at us right now a financial depression caused by greed which makes mockery of this passage. The greed of bankers, lenders, and Wall Streeters thinking only of their own profit sacrificed, in the process, the earnings, savings, jobs, and homes of millions of people. The greedy were storing up treasures but not in heaven.

However, I am consoled by knowing that there are many around us who do adhere to the words of Matthew and are quietly giving, praying and building up treasures in heaven. They are functioning above the airways and cyberspace in God’s space.

Doyt L. Conn MD

February 18, 2010

After reading this portion of scripture, I felt guilty of making any outward display of reverence during our beautiful and richly adorned worship service. It was, in fact, the pageantry, years of liturgical tradition, and beautiful music that had originally drawn me into the Episcopal church. What am I to do now when we read and hear, "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow?" I have been so accustomed to bowing my head when Jesus' name is mentioned that it has become an involuntary response propelled by muscle memory.

Is what I think of as "my private worship" within the context of corporate worship now going to change? Should I say my prayer of confession silently, not sing the Sursum Corda, or keep the ashes on my forehead? I have always looked forward to that smudge and visceral feeling on my body when these ashes are pressed into the flesh. These outward signs have to mean something.

What does it ultimately mean "to beware of practicing your piety, to give silently, pray alone, or fast alone?" Are we alone to know what we have done to help others? It's been my experience of knowing people who were willing to help with their time as well as their finances if you needed them. You could call upon them and rely upon them.

And yet we read, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Where are your treasures?

Where is your heart?

I had pondered, questioned, and prayed upon this scripture. My own treasures -- my parents, who are no longer here and for whom I still cherish; relationships with my husband, friends, and family members who need care and comfort. And then, of course, that tiny country of Haiti. They have no treasures, and yet we have seen and heard them sing songs of praise to God. We know where their heart is.

So -- what are we to do during Lent and the rest of the year?

I believe that it is in the honesty and purity of what we do and say on a daily basis that Heavenly Father and Jesus want from us. How do we treat each other? Are we aware of our impact on each other? Can we do something to make someone feel better with a caring voice, presence, or our financial resources? If we strive to live a Christ like life daily, perhaps we will then pray aloud, sing the Sursum Corda, and sound a trumpet!

Beth Chenault

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February 19, 2010

Every time I encounter this passage from Matthew, my thoughts go so many places and countless faces cross my mind. From popular televangelists; spiritual role models I have longed to emulate; larger-than-life tongue-speaking, dynamic characters from my childhood; public posting of pledges; being shamed into bowing my head and holding hands for an extravagant prayer before a public meal; scenes from films of pious and overly self-righteous zealots in the temple; personally struggling to get all the donors' names exactly as they wish to see them in the concert series programs; the endless brass plaques with names of those having gone before and, seemingly more importantly, the names of those who most generously paid for these forbearers to be immortalized by glass, pew, chalice, building or crucifix. Or, even writing a meditation for public consumption. Ash Wednesday-- here we are in church-- praying aloud, bewailing our "manifold sins and wickedness", kneeling - a long time - as we recite or intone Psalms, the imposition of ashes to be worn into the world as a sign of our mortality. None of these seem to follow the pattern the scripture here lays out for us.

What is one to make of the contradiction this scripture poses to our very human nature and so many of our worship traditions? Each of us longs to be recognized as good and generous. We want to be admired. We want company on this journey of life. Where is the balance? Perhaps the answer is in our motivation to give, to go to church, to pray. Does our appearance at church become more important than being in church? If so, maybe our focus needs to be redirected. Is having our name in a program or on a plaque more important than the gift itself? If so, maybe we should let the recognition go? Do we act to show-off and diminish those around us, or shame them into some desired behavior? Do we enjoy being the martyr?

I personally struggle with this scripture most as a church musician. Singing a solo in church is a very grand and public display. Of course, I want to do well and have folks like my voice, but I know I am not going about it correctly if the solo becomes more about me and my performance and less about our worship. It's tricky business. Singing is such an incredibly personal art form. It's a challenge to keep feelings and ego at bay. When at my best, I leave no stone unturned in my pursuit to enrich our worship when sharing my particular gift of music. In order to accomplish my goal, some basic preparation has to happen. I read the scriptures for the Sunday I am singing and try to pick something that is liturgically appropriate in mood and text. It should be something that suits my abilities. I have to know my music. I have to be reasonably well, vocally. If singing in any language other than English, I have to know how to say the words correctly and understand what they mean in order to convey them appropriately. As silly as it seems, sometimes I wish I could be totally transparent during the performance. I want absolutely nothing (including me) to distract the listener from the text and the music. If I am struggling for notes, worried about my voice, fatigued by singing something outside of my comfort zone, or the selection is inappropriate musically or liturgically, or becomes an overly grandiose dramatic or vocal display, the focus will be on me, not the offering and I have missed the mark.

So, in many ways, is our life as Christians. Actively working to find a balance between public and private, self and others. If the only time we pray is in the 9 or 11:15 Sunday morning service, we are missing an opportunity for deeper, more personal relationship with God. If we only pray hidden away in a closet and never worship or pray with the larger community of followers, we become isolated and out of touch and don't gain strength and wisdom from rich tapestry around

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us. If we give more for immediate gratification and recognition, we miss the true gift of giving. If we live primarily for the "stuff" we have and want, our relationships suffer. Conversely, if we never take time to enjoy what we do have and give thanks for it, what's the point of having it? Balance. We must strive to live in the now, but learn and grow from our past, while dreaming and working towards a better future: publicly and privately; generously and selfishly; humbly and boldly with authenticity and integrity.

DeWayne Trainer

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February 20, 2010

So far in life, and no I'm not young, I've never "given up" anything for Lent. I guess I've never understood Lent well enough to know why I needed to sacrifice something in the first place. I mean, fasting; really, that hasn't seemed necessary to me in order to be a good Christian. And sadly, as I look back now, that is essentially what Lent has meant to me—giving up something.

So, over the past couple of weeks, knowing I had to write a letter, I did a little Lent re-con. And I learned a lot. I'll spare you the bulk of my education as it was no doubt elementary and most of you good Episcopalians already know this stuff. Here's what I ended up with--Lent is pretty heavy. It is a very holy time for the church; chock-full of special music, special liturgy, beautiful rituals, fasting and purification. But what speaks to me the most, after doing some lay-persons' research, is that it is very much a time of self-reflection. The build-up to Easter is an incredibly potent period for Christ, and us. And while I fear this letter is sounding incredibly self-indulgent, that potency really seemed to resonate with me (I'm still not sure if I have to give up chocolate at this point.).

So, in the spirit of Lent, this letter, and my upcoming period of self-reflection, I have been thinking on the verses of Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21. These are beautiful and direct verses, some of my favorite (even before they were given to me, I swear). If you are not familiar with them, they are essentially about praying, giving and behaving like...a Christian.

And now armed with my new knowledge of Lent, and earnestly wanting to reflect, pray and behave my way into (much) more constant Christian-like behavior, I am looking forward to experiencing my first "real" Lent.

Dana McKenzie

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February 22, 2010

After two years of teaching Sunday school and preparing young adults for confirmation, this past summer my husband and I went on the pilgrimage to Ecuador with 11 of our students. In preparing for the journey and even while in Ecuador, I was thinking all along the pilgrimage and the experiences offered and gained were for the young adults – it was an opportunity for them to discover themselves and deepen their relationship with God, each other and those who crossed our path. What I did not realize until after the journey and with some reflection was that it was also a pilgrimage for me.

I knew the journey would offer me many memorable experiences, but I did not expect the peace of mind and clarity I had while on pilgrimage. Going into it I felt I had a strong sense of faith and a solid relationship with God, but recognized there would be opportunities to grow deeper in faith and obtain a better understanding on how to further my relationship with God, family, friends and even complete strangers. Each day we had an opportunity for reflection and meditation – a time to slow down, just think and connect with myself and God, which is something I rarely find time for in everyday life in Atlanta. It was liberating, and I never knew how much I needed it or how important that time could be.

When we returned from Ecuador and attended church that next Sunday, John Herring gave the sermon discussing our journey. After sharing several of our experiences, John explained that a pilgrimage is not saved for trips to some remote location, but can be pursued and experienced each and everyday. We can "choose pilgrimage" and live each day with time for reflection and meditation. So that day my husband and I bought a meditation book and promised each other to read and reflect every night -- we chose pilgrimage.

When asked to write this Lenten meditation, I pulled out the meditation book and realized we had stopped reading it a month after starting. Once again life in Atlanta caught up with us, and I was disappointed in myself.

My assigned passage in Luke is about temptation. I recognize temptation is a part of life and, as Jesus had to face temptation to understand us completely, we are tested and tempted daily by what we feel needs to get done and the daily grind, tugging us in all sorts of directions. There is no question after Ecuador I wanted to "choose pilgrimage," finding that time for reflection and meditation. But those everyday temptations that surround us (work, family commitments, social outings) pulled me away. Of course, Jesus used scripture to counter Satan's attacks in the desert, and knowing and obeying God's word is a good weapon against temptation. The difficult part is finding the time to read it and reflect on it. During this Lenten season I am challenging myself to make that time and "choose pilgrimage" once again.

Kelley Mauriello

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February 23, 2010

I know an excellent professor. He possesses a command of New Testament Greek language that allows him to look at the text in a way that is different than many others, to see the texts in many layers and many angles. He then opens that text to the rest of us in new and surprising ways. He is warm, thoughtful and engaging. It is common for many to approach him after a class to tell him what a great lecture he gave, and how wonderful he is, etc. He often replies, "I know. The devil already told me." One thing he understands is the power of seduction and the resulting separation from God.

Just prior to being led to the wilderness, Jesus was baptized and a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:37). Now Jesus is being tempted in the ways that we are tempted. The tempter is assaulting the very gifts made known to Jesus by God. The devil tempts Jesus to triumphantly prove his favored status, to use his gifts in self serving ways. Satan uses the power of seduction to move Jesus away from his mission. But, Jesus remains focused on the loving care of God, revealed in scripture and in prayer. Jesus rejects distorting his own gifts for short-term gains. This commitment and connection to God drives away the dark forces of Satan, and Jesus is sustained by angels that come to support him.

We are known as beloved and marked as Christ's own in our baptism. We all have some God given gifts endowed by our Creator, which we can use for our vocation and for the purpose of serving others. Yet, wherever we find God's gracious work, we will find the tempter trying to undermine that work, even in ourselves. We might fall into the trap of fear and self-doubt. Others might fall for the temptation of seduction. Each way is a path towards disfigurement of God's intention for human beings. However, as beloved children of God, our defense and comfort can be found in God when we reject these temptations and in doing so reject the path of separation from God. We are nurtured and fortified when we say "no" to the dark forces of temptation and "yes" to the light we find in God in Christ.

Though we take time in Lent for penitence and time to reflect on how we have given in to the tempter, we can also take comfort in knowing that we are beloved; we have gifts given by God; and, these gifts will be strengthened if we stay connected to God through Christ.

The Rev'd John Herring

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February 24, 2010

As Christians we may feel the presence of God is with us body and soul but the devil is constantly trying to distract us from our belief and wave us on to that which is ungodly. We must work to be aware of these distractions. Thought and prayer are essential ingredients in understanding Jesus' teaching and applying them to our daily struggles. The 40 days of Lent give us time to set aside and refuel our commitment to God's word. But, as we see in this passage of Luke 4:1-13, the devil is always around to confuse us about God's Wisdom.

The Devil vs. Jesus

Satan tempts us on many levels and is not easily discouraged.

The devil appealed to a basic need – food: “turn this stone into bread.” Sometimes the devil tempts us with things that are not necessarily evil, like changing stone into bread. But he is working up to sin, “if you worship me.”

The devil then tempted Jesus with status and power, an emotional need: “I will give you all these kingdoms.” In this passage, we see the devil taking Jesus back to his home Jerusalem. We may feel strong in our home territory but often it is the place where we are the weakest and where the devil will tempt us the greatest.

Finally, the devil tempted Jesus with a human desire for immortality – “jump off this cliff and have God's angels rescue you.” The devil knows God's word and tries to use it against us.

The passage opens with the Holy Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness where the devil was waiting. Often we come out of church service feeling good and full of the spirit of God and almost immediately we run into temptations. What did Jesus do when he was in the wilderness? He fasted and responded to the devil's temptations with God's word.

He set the example for us, and the lesson here is to follow Him.

Anne Berg

Lenten Meditations

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February 25, 2010

Lent is a kind of spring cleaning. Once we set out with the idea that we are going to tidy up our spaces, we first make more of a mess. We have to pull the couch out from the wall, get the clothes out of the closet, and pick up the shower mat from the bathroom. Before you know it the space looked quite a lot nicer before we fumbled around trying to clean.

The season of Lent is something like this. We decide that we are going to pay attention to our space, our very person. Through fasting, prayer, worship, and devotional reading we set out to take stock of where we really are...you know, where we really are. Where are my fundamental allegiances? In what do I ultimately trust? How committed or obedient am I to the truth?

So we find Jesus in the desert. Recently baptized, committing himself to do the will of the one who sent him into the world. In order to run the race set before him, one that ends with the costliness of the cross, Jesus goes into the desert to take stock. We remember that Israel, as God's chosen people, were brought across the Red Sea by the power of God and spent 40-years in the wilderness putting God to the test. Jesus, as the representative of God's people, spends 40-days in the wilderness.

The voice he encounters is the same tone in our heads that lobbies for our trust, one that suggests that short circuiting our faith in the living God of love can produce results. Instead of opening ourselves up to the depths of God's life we can escape the gaze of God and scurry into cheap power, lust, money, and the sense that we are the creator of ourselves. Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, is offered all the kingdoms of the world. He could implement his ideas of public policy as the one in control. However, this is a kind of different sorts; his policy is inextricably wrapped up with his obedience to the Father. Jesus is tested while sharing in our humanity and he perfects it where Israel falls short. It is through his personal humility to live out the will of the Father that he becomes the light of the world.

The asceticism of Lent is not to deprive us of certain crucial elements of our humanity but to put to question what we deem to be the true nature of our very lives. Opening ourselves up to stand in the place where Jesus Christ stood in the desert, we create the possibility of becoming human beings fully alive. Humans that are participating in the life of God and healing the world by who we are. We don't suppose that the Church has all the social programs and policies outlined perfectly, instead our trust is that aligning our will to the will of the Christ brings truth to life in us. As Christ's followers- Christians we call ourselves- pursuing the path set forth in history by God's Son, we enter into true humility which is life before our creator, and in so doing we become fully human. Let us put our trust to the test in this season so that we might be opened up to depths of God's love.

Zachary Thompson

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February 26

In Luke 4:1-13, Jesus says “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” That statement has always caused me to wonder what is so wrong with asking for proof of God. Children test the limits of their parent’s love. Why can’t we test God? Why must we have blind faith?

By tempting Jesus to test God, the devil is attempting to erode his faith. Testing any relationship requires deception – the person testing the relationship creates a fictional situation in order to evaluate the one who is being tested. To intentionally deceive or mislead a person with whom you are building a relationship seems at odds with the desired outcome. Manipulation erodes trust which is the foundation of all relationships.

When I read this passage the first test always stands out as being the hardest one to resist. But perhaps the third and final test is the hardest one. Hunger is something we can all understand, but the struggle to have faith in others affects me more on a daily basis. This struggle occurs not only with our relationship with God, but also with friends and family.

Relationships are not always equal. There are times when we feel we are only giving and getting nothing in return. We sometimes allow artificial and contrived moments to define our relationships. A gift on a holiday or birthday can take on too much importance and becomes a test of how well someone knows or loves us. But if you allow yourself to trust those you love, you can have faith that the love you show will be returned. Perhaps what Jesus means is that we are meant to mirror God’s love of us, like a parent’s love for their child, a love without question.

Kelli Taylor

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February 27, 2010

As a young child growing up in Atlanta, our family attended church at Northside United Methodist Church. As a third grader, my wonderful Sunday school teacher was Julia Bridges. She had a fabulous voice and loved singing beautiful hymns. She had a great talent and a true gift from God, the ability to lift the bible stories straight off the page and translate the scripture into stories and lessons that kept us on the edge of our chairs. Her gift made us feel like we were part of the story and when class was over, we could hardly wait for next Sunday to be a part of her magic again. We were third graders, she kept us focused and involved – actually, we were captivated - and she was the best!

I can only imagine what her lesson of this scripture according to Luke would have told us. She would have described the glory of the baptism of Christ and how soon after, the Holy Spirit would lead Him into the wilderness. The wilderness would have been really cold and rugged and barren with high rocks and blowing sand; when Jesus was alone and without nourishment, forty days and forty nights would have seemed like an eternity; the devil would have been a super-sinister individual; the holy city and the temple and the mountains and the kingdoms of the world would have been beautiful, filled with flowers and high peaks and luscious green valleys and beautiful architecture and candlelight and people rejoicing and bright, bright stars; the angels would have been comforting to all and celebrating being with Jesus. The temptations would have been huge and still are huge.

Reading this passage as an adult, its message is more vivid, perhaps more sobering than hearing it as a child. At some time or another, we have all been in a wilderness. Our wilderness may be related to employment, loss, being alone in a new city or estrangement from people we love. Our temptations are also greater and more numerous. The consequences of choices and actions are more daunting and more severe. Our testing is much harder.

But the message hasn't changed.

The devil offered Jesus wealth and power and pride. Three times he refused him with the power of scripture – “it is written”. Our continued wilderness experiences, the testing and the temptations create opportunities for us to resist them and grow with each step deeper into a faith filled journey with the one who has walked ahead of us. Jesus' victory over the devil reminds us of the triumph of good over evil and that we must still be responsible and submit to the will of God. It reminds us who we are and leads us to the commitment of who God wants us to be.

Dot Miller

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2010
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March 1, 2010

"You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" What is it about us that could lead Jesus to make such an exasperated statement?

In this passage Luke tells us of Jesus' miraculous transfiguration before Peter, John and James. How humbling it must have been to have been able to bear witness to such a miracle. Yet instead of giving thanks and praise, Peter offers to build three dwellings. Why? In a moment of profound and absolute proof of both the existence of God and Jesus' connection to Him, why would Peter offer to build three huts? Perhaps Luke's statement that Peter made this offer "not knowing what he said" begins to answer this question.

When confronted with something I do not understand, fear often sets in. To regain a sense of control I grab for something familiar and hold on just long enough to get my feet back on solid ground. Peter's offer to build these dwellings may have been just such a crutch in the face of the fear he most certainly must have felt at that moment. In that same manner, when Luke tells us of the clamoring crowds yelling to Jesus "I beg you to look at my son," they too had great fear and were asking for His help to return their lives back to a familiar state.

What does this need to hold onto the familiar tell us about ourselves? Intellectually we may know change is good, but emotionally, to face fear we need to hold onto something solid and sure. The real question quickly becomes – what are we holding onto?

God tells Peter "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Where once Jesus stood planning his departure, where Peter was offering to build the dwellings and where clouds were gathering overhead, the moment God tells Peter to stop and just listen, everything disappears and Jesus was found standing alone with just them. The message seems clear: God sent his Son to live amongst us to show us the way to His will for us. If we clear out our self will and listen, we will find something truly worthy of holding onto.

When Jesus asks "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you" He may just be asking how long are we going to hold onto our self will and not trust Him enough to show us the way to God's will for us. His harsh words may be strong but so is His profound love for us and His pain in watching us cling to the crutches of our self will.

May we find a strong foothold in our faith and let go of self will.
May the greatness of God's will for us astound us all.

Ralph Engelberger

March 2, 2010

Transfer – Transform - Transfigure

Peter, James and John went up a mountain with Jesus as a community of faith to pray. As they sat upon the mountaintop, Jesus was transfigured before the disciples' very eyes. Moses and Elijah are there, the Law and the Prophets, the past knowledge and faith passed on to that very moment, passed on to Jesus and those with him. And in that passing their lives are transformed as the three disciples see Jesus' transfiguration and hear God's proclamation. Transfer of knowledge leads to the transformation of lives.

One of the key ways knowledge has been transferred is through books. I was looking through the books of the shelves in my office recently and specifically at what might best be described as the historical section, where the books from the more distant years of my life are tucked away for an occasional nostalgic glance.

Among the books from my childhood is one titled *Our Prayers and Praise*, copyrighted 1957. This hardback book contains both the office of Morning Prayer and The Holy Communion service from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. I remember using it as a child when I was beginning the journey of faith that continues for me until this very moment. This little volume was a means for transfer of knowledge and a means by which I was introduced to formal liturgy.

But it was not this book that transformed me into a Christian. It was those who gave me this book that affected the process of transformation. Sunday School teachers, my parents, the choirmasters of my childhood and youth, priests who taught me the Catechism, youth group leaders, mentors and professors during my adult life and now a myriad of fellow Christians all around the northern half of Georgia with whom I have worshiped, prayed, celebrated new life and grieved the end of the earthly life of faithful servants of the Risen Lord.

These words are on a now discolored and somewhat tattered piece of paper affixed to the foot of my monitor on my desk: "Transformation Rather Than Just Transfer Of Knowledge".

This small reminder calls me to remember the work that we are about as Christians. The knowledge we have is very important; it is the foundation of the faith we proclaim and live out in our words and in our lives. But if those words and actions are simply backed up by the transfer of knowledge rather than the transformation of our lives, we become "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." If we expect those around us to believe and embrace the knowledge we have been given, we must be willing to show forth the transformation not only with our lips, but in our lives.

Lent is a time for us to be transformed by prayer, fasting, and acts of repentance. Find a mountaintop and invite Jesus to be there with you, to transform you, then you too may help to transform the world.

The Rev'd Chuck Girardeau

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March 3, 2010

I don't often think of God getting frustrated, but in this passage, we see both God and Jesus exhibiting irritation and annoyance. When the sleepy disciples ask an incongruous question, God's booming voice chastises them to listen to Jesus. When a man in the crowd begs Jesus to cast an evil spirit out of his child, Jesus harshly responds, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" Oh my! That certainly doesn't sound like the benevolent Christ we know and love! On one level, I find it somewhat heartening that Jesus can lose his temper. It is a reflection and reminder that he was indeed human, with flaws and shortcomings just like us. As the mother of a spirited toddler, I know a thing or two about frustration and regularly find myself praying for patience. It is a comfort to know that even Jesus snapped once in a while.

The obvious lesson of this passage, however, is that Jesus' own humanity was superseded by his divinity. After angrily barking at the crowd, I can envision Jesus taking a deep breath (maybe counting to 10?) and then calmly healing the child. The passage does not focus on Jesus' reproach, but rather quickly moves on to Christ's benevolent act and the crowd's astonishment at the greatness of God. What a fantastic example of how we should be living our own lives. Even when we lose our temper, even if we're impatient or uncharitable, even when we fail momentarily at being a Christian, we **MUST** quickly move on and find that divinity within ourselves.

As we go through Lent, this is a lesson I will try to ingrain in myself. My family believes that instead of "giving up" something during Lent (something that we immediately go back to after Easter), we should use those forty days to work proactively on a shortcoming and attempt to make ourselves better Christians. This year during Lent, when I become irritated or annoyed, I will try harder to move on and let these ugly moments of humanity be superseded by God's grace and goodwill.

Emily Roselli

March 4, 2010

Near misses and the power of the transfiguration

After having been together for eight days, Jesus summoned Peter, John, and James to a kind of retreat. After all, they were the inner circle. The peak of Mt. Tabor was an isolated place where they could all be alone, get away, and pray quietly. As Jesus' clothes and body became dazzling white, the disciples witnessed what is known as the Transfiguration. The voice from the cloud issued a stern call, to listen to Jesus. Through the events surrounding the Transfiguration, they saw the power and glory of God.

How does God show us his power? Could it be through our own frailties or lack of power? How about the near misses in life?

Perhaps you have terminal cancer, the treatment works, and you are cancer free. You are in the ten percent of those who are able to continue a normal life.

Imagine that you are unemployed, weeks away from financial ruin; then, out of the blue, you get a job that you never expected.

There is the scary near miss in traffic. We have all been there. Your heart is pounding and, your mind races. What would have happened, had you been in the intersection, seconds before?

I am of the belief that God will never give you more than you can handle. You ponder life's near misses, asking yourself, what if God had not been there. How much worse would it have been, had he not been in the plan? There are so many instances, where God's simple grace saved you from a bad outcome.

God validated his only son in the Transfiguration. He revealed himself to the apostles in a real way--the same way he shows us grace in our lives.

Jowell Thome

March 5, 2010

In first reading this excerpt of scripture, I felt overwhelmed. What stood out most in my mind was verse 42, when Jesus comes down from a mountain after being transfigured. When a child is brought to Jesus, he laments at how much longer he will have to bear with a "faithless and perverse generation."

In this text I'm tempted to write the most obvious and apparent idea that comes to my mind which is this: we do not fully understand what the spirit has to offer. Even Jesus, an enlightened individual, knew that we could not understand the faith we lack. I try not to get too down on myself, however; even after being called perverse and faithless, the demon is cast out and everyone is astounded by God. The commentary in my mind seems to be saying, "Nobody's perfect."

What does this mean?

It is an overused cliché, and I've heard people tell me, "Nobody's perfect. It's OK if you fail every once in a while." I'm absolutely sure that their intended meaning is to share some empathy, or help someone "shake off" failure. When I apply this to my life, I want to feel humbled by a failure in order to put everything in perspective — not that this is a bad idea.

But let's be honest with ourselves; does this phrase really ever soothe us? Do we ever really think, "Yeah, you're right, I am just like everyone else, I'll just do better next time!" I rather like to think of him standing behind us with his eyebrows raised and saying sarcastically, "Come on, you can do it," like one would a reluctant child. Maybe Jesus is saying this because he knows we are more than a "faithless and perverse generation." In my mind, the wisdom in between the lines is not that we fail, but that we have the potential to succeed. Truly, I don't know if he muttered this under his breath, or if he shouted this thought to the masses, but when we look past the obvious "Nobody's perfect," the motivation is profound. When he says this, it gets under my skin! When I read of the disciples' failure, I bet the same gears clicked in their mind that did in mine; when they saw Jesus heal this child, their thoughts bluntly said, "I'm going to do better."

In realizing that we do know Jesus, we can realize that his truth, strength, will, and dedication is in us also. When we realize that he has the power, we can achieve more through him. We don't have to live our lives in a self-deprecating way, thinking, "Well, nobody's perfect, it's ok if I can't do this." Close your eyes instead, take a few deep breaths, set goals, and achieve them. When you fail, fail running at 100%, because when we fall flat on our face, Jesus is always behind us saying, "I don't have to tell you to get up because you know that you can do this."

John Tibbetts

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 6, 2010

For me, this passage is filled with mystery, miracles and change.

Like Peter, I often want to "build huts" to capture special moments. I think it is human nature to want to grab on to the good times and, believe me I have tried to hang on to many people, places and things. I have finally come to the conclusion that hanging on just doesn't work. God is changing all of creation and all of us all the time so for me to resist change, is me resisting God.

I have had to look for new ways to cherish what has been and yet still move on to what is to become. I call this my "in between space." I have found that it is in those "in between" spaces that I am most likely to see the gracefulness of God. To me this is when I am transformed—being freed to change my outlook and perspective, to see the world through new eyes, to empty myself out so that the new can have a place to perch.

It is not until I get to the "in between" space that I can experience the graciousness of God showing me the way—to be open where I have been closed, to be accepting when I have been judgmental, to see light where I have been in darkness, to experience fun instead of fear. I am still learning to recognize the "in between" spaces so I can intentionally seek the quiet place where I accept God's guidance—so I am able to see, to hear, to make positive choices and, most important, to be transformed.

What huts do you want to build?

What happens when you find yourself in the "in between" space?

When and how are you being transformed through the Grace of God?

Mary Marvin Walter

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 8, 2010

There are times in our life when we, like the fig tree, feel called to lay fallow. When we have been giving so much of ourselves, that our actual being becomes thin and wearied, and we don't have the emotional and spiritual resources to offer to our family, our friends, much less the strangers that God sends our way. That is when it is time to take a step back, to take a break from the busyness for refreshment and renewal. At certain times, this fallow period may be as short as a weekend retreat, and at other times it may mean stepping away from a ministry for an extended period of time before renewing engagement. We all need a break sometimes. It is so hard to give ourselves permission to take these breaks, to stop moving so quickly through our lives. But this time away from busyness can be incredibly valuable. In taking a step back and sorting through the manure there are vital nutrients that revitalize and renew us.

I can talk the talk, but I am not so good at living into this spiritual practice of laying fallow. I want to be involved! I want to get my hands dirty and do ministry. It is a really hard discipline, when the time comes, to sit back and contemplate where God might be calling me. Throughout my life, I have found that at times instead of deciding to take a step back, this period of laying fallow has been imposed upon me. Perhaps it is God's hand nudging me to slow down, take a break and prepare for the next step on my journey.

But when we do take that time to sit still, to be quiet and listen for God, when we do breathe those even, deep breaths of centeredness and peace, it can be an incredible time of preparation and renewal. In those quiet spaces, we may finally be able to hear God calling us into new directions in our lives and in our work in the world. In this busy world, in our busy lives the stillness and quiet can be very alluring, but we are not meant to linger in this fallow space forever. If we remain there we can become part of the manure, rather than becoming the rich fruit God desires us to be. We are meant to move on from that space and reconnect, reengage. The stillness restores our energy reserves and prepares us to go out and offer our gifts to the world.

Be open to being still, laying fallow, that you may bear luscious fruit for God to offer the world.

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey

March 9, 2010

Don't these words have new meaning this year? Blood of worshippers on the altar, falling towers—the news photos and amateur videos from Haiti, the words of newspapers and official documents tell us of the losses, Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Sisters of St. Margaret Convent and College St. Pierre, church buildings in Grand Colline and St. Etienne. Four people were killed while worshiping in Trouin. We have a better picture of those old events because we have just seen new pictures of fallen towers and crushed bodies. We had not thought before that every slain Galilean had a mother or a wife, left orphans or brothers to mourn. We had not considered that a collapsing tower might have left people maimed as well as dead. A terrible picture it is but read on; it is not Judgment Day.

Was the comment to Jesus a question? Was it a question about those trouble-making Galileans or those offenders at Siloam? He seems to know that it was and what the question was. Did these people get what they deserved? Were they destroyed as a punishment; is this judgment? He is impatient with those questions. I understand them; I understand that it is the need to feel protected from harm that leads us even if just for a moment to hope those who are terribly hurt deserved what they got—forgetting that we are probably lucky not to get what we deserve. And when something terrible happens, we want to know why, to have just that smidgeon of control that understanding why seems to give us.

But wait! This is about us, about the questioners. We can't look on smugly because no tragedy has befallen us. We cannot protect ourselves in this way. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish..." These surely are troubling words. This is the Good News? These words turn the scrutiny back on us—no more sniffing out the sins of our neighbors. We'd best be concerned with our own hearts.

We will always wonder about earthly and heavenly justice, about why bad things happen. It seems our concern with these questions better not get in the way of repentance—turning to God.

This incident occurs after Jesus rebukes the crowd for not understanding the times they were in. These are the last months of his life and the words are urgent, "Repent or die." Repent thunders through Lenten readings; repent sounds the trump in Luke. Then we have a parable, a story that slows us down and calls us to tease out its meanings. The fig tree parable holds in tension the burden of the command and its own meanings expanding on what repenting may involve and touching us at last with mercy.

We all know that to repent is to turn—it is not about feelings of regret; it is about how we live. Return to how we are called to live, return to the One to whom we belong, be the people we are created to be. Bear fruit, stubborn fig tree, or be cut down. The one more year asked by the tender of figs may not be intended to carry that specific segment of time outside the context of the story. But it is clear that it is not about some sweet day I will bear fruit. One more year is one more fruiting season. Repent clearly does not mean "Repent when you feel like it."

Ethel Ware Carter

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 10, 2010

Death. When will it come to us? How will it arrive? What can we do to dodge it, cheat it, put it off, sidestep it for a while? What will happen to us afterwards? It is the unavoidable lot of us all. Fear of death has been a prime religious motivation and obsession of mankind for the ages, so it is not surprising that when people gathered around Jesus they asked him questions about death.

Death comes to us all, whether by the hands of evil men like Herod, by natural disasters like the victims of the earthquake that felled the tower of Siloam or the one that razed Port au Prince, by disease, in childbirth or in the quiet sleep of old age. We have all offered prayers begging God to spare us or our loved ones, and sometimes it seems that such prayers work and the crash is averted by inches, the surgery is successful against all odds, the cancer goes into remission and the lost child is found unharmed. But the inevitable is only delayed. Even Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by the voice of Christ in the greatest miracle before the mighty resurrection, died again. His family and friends had to put on their mourning clothes and call the undertaker and the caterer over to the house one more time.

Our obsessions, however, are not Christ's. I believe that He wants us to be less concerned with life after death and more with life after birth. Accept the joy that life has to offer us, welcome God's love into our hearts by seeking the wisdom to discern who we were each created to be, and having the courage to live that life confidently, without fear or anxiety; living not to fulfill others' expectations, but true to the image of God in which we were uniquely created.

If we cannot so welcome Christ's love into our hearts, then it doesn't really matter what good works we do, for without love they gain us nothing. Spending our lives doing what we are "supposed to do" out of a bitter sense of obligation leaves a faint stench of death with us and with the recipients of our loveless gifts. What's the fun in that? Where is the joy in giving from mere duty?

Like the fig tree that does not accept the promise of its creation by producing fruit of its kind, if we do not allow ourselves to experience joy and thus produce the fruits of love we may as well be dead. "I set before you death and life, blessings and curses. Now choose life..."

James Marshall

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 11, 2010

I am the Accuser.
I am the Blamer.
I am the One who knows that They are wrong and I am right.
I am the Splitter between left and right, up and down, good and bad.

I am perishing, Lord.
I am withering away.
I am shrinking up.
I am coming to nothing.

Please do not cut me off.
I cease to exist without you.

*Do not worry, Dear One.
It is not possible to separate Myself from You.*

*Who looks outside, perishes.
Who looks inside, bears fruit.*

*I see You.
I am here.*

Dissolve into Me.

*It is here.
The moment of Our Reunion.*

Kathryn Larisey Burke

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 12, 2010

In the passage, a group of Jews report the slaughter of Galileans in the temple to Jesus. I imagine that they were expecting him to share their outrage. But Jesus admonishes them to repent because they will likewise perish. I suppose that the people were perplexed and even disappointed at this turning of the tables. Then Jesus broadens the scope of the lesson by using the disaster of a falling tower where 18 people were killed and again tells the people to repent or they will perish, too.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a fig tree to explain. When the fig tree fails to produce fruit, even after being fertilized, the owner of the vineyard cuts it down so that it will no longer waste space.

At first Jesus' reaction to the people seemed harsh to me. Then it occurred to me that they were reporting the atrocity to him in an effort to get him to "take sides." Rather than responding to them politically, Jesus warns them not to focus on the injustices occurring in the world but to repent, to reflect on themselves.

Like the fig tree, as Christians, we are expected to be fruitful and produce. If our spiritual lives are not tended to, we will "perish."

How often do we pass judgment on a person or situation before we turn inward and contemplate? It takes a lot of practice—deep breathing, centering, finding a still place inside—to approach life from this perspective. But when we achieve it, we find that is a peaceful, joyous and fruitful existence.

Lisa Chambliss

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 13, 2010

In Luke 13:6-9 there is contained a parable which seems to hold fairly current relevancy and has given me something to think about during Lent. The story is of a landowner (farmer) who has concluded that one of his fig trees should be cut down because it has not produced any fruit for three consecutive years. He orders a servant to cut down the tree but the servant is convinced that with more care, fertilizer and hope the tree will again produce and he pleads with his owner to give it more time... another year, after which he will then cut down the tree if it remains barren.

This situation is not dissimilar to the current economic circumstances facing Atlanta, and most of our country. Many are discouraged, disheartened and fairly pessimistic about their financial circumstances. This naturally weighs heavily on our emotions, our relationships and challenges our faith at times. The Great Recession will eventually be resolved and things will improve. Until we actually see the improvement, however, we should nurture each other, be supportive of those attempting to solve the problems and allow time to pass without giving up hope and cutting down the tree.

Over the past 25 years we could not have lived in a better city or country. We now, however, face many challenges. Let's give deep personal thought to how we can contribute to the eventual solutions while remaining optimistic and patient.

George Olmstead

Lenten Meditations 2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 15, 2010

Waiting

I thought that this would be better somehow. Now that he is finally gone, it has all stopped. The yelling has stopped. The slammed doors have stopped. The accusing stares have stopped. The whispered conversations with his miserable friends have stopped.

My wife no longer tells me that "I need to make him follow our rules while he lives under our roof!"

My other son no longer asks me why I put up with his nonsense.

It has all stopped.

The money was the easy part. I know how to throw money at a problem. If he wanted his share, fine, he could have it. As long as he would just go away. Just leave us alone.

Silence.

I never imagined that silence could be a tangible thing. Draping itself over the furniture. Stirring itself into my meals. Sitting on my chest, making it so hard to breathe.

Silence.

Waiting.

Paul W. Burke

March 16, 2010

Eating and drinking with sinners? Horrors. What was Jesus thinking? Could it be that he was not terribly interested in purity of the kind that sets up boundaries and barriers and separates one person from another? I've been wondering if the basis for unity among Christians is not agreement or 'like-mindedness' but is more our ability to look one another in the eye and hear one another's stories around the Lord's Table. The basis for unity is our transcending not our differences from one another, but the negative consequences of those differences. The basis for unity is not overcoming difference in favor of similarity, but appreciating difference as part of our unity in the magnificent and endless possibilities inherent in creation. What we discover around the Table is that we are eating and drinking with sinners and they discover our sinful or distorted being at the same time. Like the prodigal, we discover the prodigious love of God for all of creation in our difference around that Table. It is as we learn to recognize, understand and even appreciate difference that we become more fully ourselves, more clear about who we have been created to be and more compassionate toward others.

It is as we allow our attention to be turned toward what really matters and toward that which is of ultimate worth that we are participating truly in worship. We properly look for the effects of worship in our lives and not in the worship itself. Frequently we will not be aware of those effects of worship in our lives. At other times we will notice that we are living with a little more compassion for the follies and foibles of others than was the case in the past. Or we will discover that we enjoy being a little more generous and a little less anxious than our internalizing of all the world's messages of scarcity had previously allowed us. Once in a blue moon we might enjoy some experience of the presence of God in our being convicted of sin or called to repentance; in our being aware of forgiveness and granted a powerful sense of common cause with those about us; with our knowing the might and majesty and glory of God in a theophany during some magnificent anthem; or simply being touched at the moment of communion when just for a second or two we know ourselves one with our creator and unaware of time. All such gifts during the worship itself are exactly that—gifts of grace—and not something we can conjure, manipulate, coerce or guarantee.

So we find ourselves being welcomed as sinners and eating with others like us in the company of our gracious host—the one who runs to meet us as we lay bare our hearts before the throne of grace.

The Rev'd Geoffrey Hoare

March 17, 2010

Whenever I read this familiar story, I find myself doing a gut check—do I still need to identify with the "good son" in order to justify old resentments toward my siblings? Fortunately, the answer (most of the time anyway) is no. These days, other questions come up for me, and maybe they are your questions too.

I work in a large, diverse organization, where my colleagues hold a variety of beliefs. There is one religious word, though, that frequently pops up in short, casual exchanges: "blessed." "Have a blessed day." "How are you? I'm blessed." There is a vehicle parked in our garage with a front bumper tag that says "Blessed!" It's a pretty nice car.

I have to wonder. If you are "blessed" does it mean you have received experiences or worldly goods that are generally considered positive? If you experience pain or deprivation, do you still consider yourself "blessed?" I have not, it's true, asked these questions of anyone who uses this word to describe himself, but it's not hard to imagine there's a pretty close connection between being "blessed" and being appropriately rewarded. The "good son" in today's story would certainly think so.

The God that the "good son" believes in would reward him and all others who do the right things, in this world and the next. This is a God who spends the day doling out candy and coals. And if those who have earned candy nevertheless get coals, they should realize it is really candy in a coal wrapper (which we will understand clearly when God chooses to reveal its candyness to us). This is an orderly world—an accountable world.

But it is not the God Jesus reveals to us in this story. The God who sent Jesus to reveal Her nature does not keep track of our good and misdeeds. This God doesn't think about whether the Prodigal Son actually deserves the joyful embrace of his father, but rejoices with the father and son in their reunion.

What Good News! We don't have to wonder if we are good enough—in truth we never can be good enough to earn the wondrous, priceless love of God. We don't have to wonder if grief has come to us because of our own sins—punishment from a vengeful, Old Testament God. No, Jesus shows us a God that never promised us we would not grieve, but only that He would be with us in our grief. His arms are always open, no matter how often we've turned away, and He is with us, sharing grief and joy alike. His love is a freely given gift.

We are blessed, indeed. Thanks be to God.

Susan Hoy

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 18, 2010

Every time I hear the story of the prodigal son, I am reminded of my parents. On the occasions I would visit them at their retirement cottage on the banks of the Eastatoo River in the Carolina foothills, my mom would have made home made biscuits—the small flakey spheres oozing with fresh butter. My dad's comment would be "the prodigal son returns" indicating that he rarely had this treat except when I graced his door. He by no means felt that I was recklessly extravagant or wasteful. He and I both appreciated Mom's biscuits more than any fatted calf.

I am reminded of the inheritance I received from my parents. They were "green" before it was in vogue. The rich bottom land where the river overflowed was fertile and offered a wonderful place for their garden. What a treat it was to pick an ear of Silver Queen corn, shuck it and drop it in a pot of boiling water and have it with a plate of home-grown Heritage tomatoes and lettuce, half-runner beans that my mom had picked and prepared, and new potatoes. I can still see my dad's knurled hands grueling for these jewels under the wilting potato vines. Restaurant Eugene could have made one visit to their garden for provisions for his Sunday evening meal.

When my dad finished working his garden, he was always eager to catch his limit of trout from the swift stream. Most were from the hatchery, but what a thrill when hooked a native brown or rainbow! Since he had experienced the depression, catch and release was not in his vocabulary. Despite this he had a great respect for the land and for maintaining it for those who came after.

My parents were teachers and didn't have any reservations about sacrificing to insure that my brother and sister and I took advantage of our educational system. They had great love and generosity for their family and friends and those less fortunate.

Although they were known in the community where they settled, the mountain neighbors were slow to accept them. My parents took their produce with them and eventually supported the community church monetarily and with attendance even though it was not of their chosen denomination. The mountain neighbors gradually accepted them. It reminds me somewhat of new folks coming to All Saints'. When they become involved, they become part of the community. There are many service opportunities here to be of service without being overwhelmed. When we came to All Saints', Bill Baxter asked us to join the Sunday school teachers group. I still look on those folks as some of my dearest and closest friends here.

Not only do we inherit good and simple things from our parents, but we are also blessed with wonderful examples from our spiritual leaders. I am even grateful to Frank Ross who in an era of dynamic social unrest led by example and gave us a quiet reassuring message that change would come and not to be afraid.

I am thankful that Harry Pritchett led us to help the homeless with the night shelter which eventually led to the Covenant Community; that he was steadfast and courageous in his love and caring for our brothers and sisters who were affected by the AIDS epidemic that was raging and is still with us; and for reminding us that we are all children of God. I am appreciative of Geoffrey's strengthening of our local missions with Threads and refugee resettlement and giving us an opportunity of a broader view with work in Tanzania and Brazil.

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

I am thankful that there is All Saints', "a sweet place" as Frank used to say, "full of sweet people." I am grateful for the material things found on the corner of North Avenue and West Peachtree, but even more for the people and the simple blessings we have inherited—from Margaret Langford's garden to the work the men of the Covenant Community perform.

Art Lesesne

March 19, 2010

When reading Luke 15, my first thought is that of a parent. As a mother of two young daughters, I try to imagine what I would do as the parent in this parable. It's hard to imagine not welcoming a long lost child, no matter the reason, no matter the length of absence. Isn't that what being a parent is all about: unconditional love? We try our best to teach our children about values, hard work, and showing respect but, ultimately, they grow to make their own decisions, not of all which will be good ones. Even with preschoolers we tell our children "We love you, no matter what."

I'm sure the parent in this parable feels similar, even though the son has been gone and, as my daughter would say, "not making good decisions." The father greets him warmly, even before the son has a chance to apologize when he says "I have sinned against you."

The brother's anger at this reception is almost predictable. As an only child who became a mother of two, I'm constantly amazed at their ability to compare—even from an early age! What one has, the other must have, too. It seems they're born with an incredible capacity to remember the smallest detail of discrepancy. If someone gets something the other doesn't, you can count on "It's not fair!" as the response. (To which we usually reply, "The fair was in August!") Siblings seem to expect everything to be equal and this brother is no different. Here he has been a loyal, diligent, considerate son, yet his brother receives a hero's welcome after slacking off for who knows how long.

Beyond parenting, this makes me wonder if we don't make this mistake at work too. In business, we seem to fawn all over the clients who make the biggest noise. Those who make life difficult, complain and overreact get the most attention, while the quiet ones don't seem to get noticed quite as much. Not to say that they're not appreciated but we all know the ones that strike a true sense of urgency when they call. Our current roster of clients includes many smart, strategic, sound thinkers yet a few of the others' names send people running for cover! Shouldn't it be that the cooperative, calm, confident client gets more attention than the squeaky wheel? Logically, this makes sense but in reality it doesn't seem to work that way.

Many parents I know describe similar climates at home. That one child who always misbehaves, the one who requires so much more oversight, gets all the attention. Meanwhile the child who follows the rules, uses their manners and does what is expected gets far less attention in the same home. I'm sure I've been guilty of this from time to time myself! I think it's time to try and switch this logic in our lives. Let's remember to truly appreciate all that we have and not spend too much time on the negative. Embrace the positive and focus on the good we see in all people.

Donna Mitchell

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 20, 2010

The parable of the Prodigal Son is difficult for me because I don't have any problem being the good kid. I like to push the envelope from time to time, to test the boundaries of the rules, but all in all, I don't mind doing the right thing.

To be fair, I am not a rule-follower in order to get accolades, to rack up the gold stars or to prove my own piousness. I just find the world easier to manage when things are a bit more orderly, when I show people the respect that I'd like to be shown. I like being known as trustworthy and capable and solid. In some circles, this reputation also makes me a party pooper and a stick-in-the-mud, teacher's pet and just plain boring.

I know that not everyone is like me. I love the diversity in the world, really I do. But I also have deep sympathy for the stay-behind-son, the good guy, the trustworthy, capable, solid one—the boring one. He hung around at his parents' house, working the land, doing what was expected of him. I like that about him. I, too, would have been angry and frustrated to find out that my years of obedience and rule-following were unnoticed in comparison with the flashy re-entry of the wayward one.

My hackles go up just reading this story. It is just not fair. He should get his come-uppance! To the pig sties with him! Where is the justice?!

But this is not, of course, how God works in the world. There is justice. But the justice is available to everyone alike, just as God's mercy is.

This story smacks me hard every time with my own prejudices and blind spots. I believe in and preach about a God whose vast loving arms surround us all in a blind embrace. But when I read the story of the Left-Behind Brother (as I see it), I get angry and frustrated. I forget the wideness that is God's mercy. I forget that the infinity of God's love refuses to account for misdeeds or bad behavior.

I am beloved, but not for my good deeds, not because I follow the rules or say the right prayers. I am beloved simply because I exist, a child of a loving God, and I am beloved even when I am angry and judgmental and wrong: because God is that good.

Noelle York-Simmons

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 22, 2010

I think Hannah Salwen may be an angel. I recently heard about her and the amazing sacrifice she encouraged her family to make a few years ago. At the age of 14, she was inspired by something we have all seen... a homeless person on a street corner. Stopped at a traffic light with her father in downtown Atlanta, she also noticed a man driving a Mercedes... and was touched by the contrast. So touched that she wanted to do something... so she persuaded her family to sell their spacious home in Ansley Park and give away the proceeds. The Salwen family lives in a much smaller house now and they have scaled back their lifestyle considerably. What could have been only a random thought at a stop light is now a story of incredible generosity and it is all because a young teen cared enough to push her parents to make a difference.

Hannah's story reminds me of Mary... using the precious nard to wash Jesus' feet. This perfumed oil was extremely valuable, and as I recently learned, equal to a family's income for an entire year.

Mary and Hannah both felt a call to sacrifice something valuable for a higher purpose. For Mary, I think it was to show her devotion and faith in Jesus. For Hannah, it was to try to correct what she saw as an injustice in the world. Both stories are inspiring and both have me thinking about my own willingness to make a sacrifice for the greater good. And that is the beauty of Lent, it gives us a time each year to reflect and examine our priorities in life. I haven't made a decision about my own sacrifice for this year, but having read these stories, I realize I want to be more thoughtful in my approach.

The Power of Half by Hannah Salwen and her father, Kevin Salwen, has just been published. I plan to read it as part of my preparation for Lent this year.

I know I am not Hannah or Mary, but I hope to find my own humble approach using them as my inspiration. At the very least, they have made me think.

Jayne Gocken

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 23, 2010

Jesus is under threat of the death penalty, there's a warrant for his arrest, and his friends throw a party. I imagine that we are watching a play unfold.

ACT III, SCENE 1: *(The dining room of a house in Bethany. Jesus, the recently-resurrected Lazarus, Judas and other disciples recline before a table. Martha is back in the kitchen preparing the food. Enter Mary.)*

A happy scene, a breather following the drama of Act II; the calm before the upcoming storm when Jesus enters Jerusalem, we might think—until Mary pours \$15,000 worth of perfume on Jesus' feet.

Judas gasps. He grabs out, but the money splashes onto the floor and trickles away. All that remains is the fragrance. He lashes out at Mary with a howl about the poor. To which Jesus answers that Haiti will always be in need, as will Bangladesh and the starving children in Armenia but his friends won't have him with them always. Mary, he says, is preparing his body for burial and will be immortalized for her adoration.

And what seemed like the little relief scene in the drama, takes on great weight. We are left to figure it out.

We? Me. So, I Googled, of course. And of the many layers of meaning in this passage, the foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection, the juxtapositions and parallels, even the mind readings of some, I kept thinking about what Mary knew and intended.

Mary adored Jesus, even before he raised Lazarus from the dead. Now she must be overcome with joy and gratitude. To show her love she spills perfume over his feet and wipes them with her hair. What she does is not only extravagant beyond all reason, but she defies custom. She literally lets her hair down, something women don't do before men other than their husbands. "I don't know how to love him," sang Mary Magdalene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The song could be this Mary's as well. She loves Jesus with all she has and is.

Perhaps she anticipates Jesus' death, assuming she knows about the arrest warrant. But does she know his death is imminent? That she should prepare for his burial? I can't know.

Jesus, though, can mold her devotion to his needs. He can take one sincere act and expand it beyond measure. Martin Luther hammered 95 theses to the door of the church in Worms. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. Mary poured out perfume and Martha served supper.

Neither their acts nor mine have to be appropriate, politically correct, or theologically sound for Jesus to accept them and use them for his purpose.

As for the poor, Jesus isn't letting us off the hook. We have a responsibility and his example. Somebody else, though, can explain his words in this passage.

Jennie Helderman

March 24, 2010

This passage in John takes place after Jesus' enemies in Jerusalem have plotted to kill him. Jesus had already raised Lazarus when he returned to Bethany to visit once more with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha served the meal, and Lazarus sat at table with Jesus. Mary must have sensed that time with Jesus was limited and found her heart overflowing. To convey the depth of her feelings, she takes a bottle of nard (very expensive perfume) she had been saving to use to prepare Jesus' body for burial. She knew the time to use the perfume was now while Jesus was with her, rather than saving it until he was gone. Kneeling before him, she anoints his feet, then wipes them with her long hair and wafts the perfume throughout the house. Judas is disappointed in Mary. He does not understand why Mary did not sell the perfume in exchange for money that could be given to the poor. Judas, who kept the common purse and stole money from it often, probably wanted the money for himself. Jesus, realizing the depth of Mary's feelings, defends her.

As I studied this passage, Mary's demonstration of her unconditional love and devotion for Jesus stood out as important to me. Mary was very thankful to Jesus for raising her brother from the dead. Mary also wanted to do something to show Jesus just how much she loved him by using her very special perfume to anoint his feet.

The extraordinary love Mary feels for Jesus reminds me of the unconditional love a parent has for her child. Parents are constantly giving all that they have for their children in order to keep them safe, happy, and provided for in the best way they are able. Like a parent tries to give the best they can for their children, Mary did not hesitate to use the very best perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. Mary loves Jesus and shows him how much by her actions.

Children also exhibit the unconditional love Mary shows Jesus toward their parents. Children are constantly bringing special hand-made treasures to parents as offerings of their love. A child's love is often spontaneous and in many ways more pure like Mary's love for Jesus at the dinner.

As a parent, I am reminded that I should take more time to appreciate the special gifts that my children give me. Many times life is spinning so fast that I forget to notice these offerings of love. Jesus took the time not only to appreciate Mary's gift, but also to validate it by his words. I believe that we all give and receive this pure love throughout our lives. Stopping long enough to recognize and appreciate this amazing gift is truly a gift in itself.

Tracey Hudson

March 25, 2010

In this passage, we witness a profound act of love, and an all-too-human reaction against it. The setting is both warm and foreboding. Jesus is surrounded by close friends at a dinner given for him in the home of Lazarus. However, they know that the chief priests and Pharisees are searching for Jesus and want to arrest him. Plus, we know that Jesus is just one week away from his betrayal and crucifixion. Out of extraordinary love, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume—worth a year's wages for a laborer—and wipes his feet with her hair. Judas objects, asking why the perfume was not sold and the money given to the poor.

On the surface, Mary's act does seem extravagant. We easily identify with Judas' point. Out of fear for our own future, we ourselves often want to hold back. Our culture tells us that a penny saved is a penny earned. Our faith tells us to be good stewards. Our financial advisors tell us that we must save our money for a possible job loss, for our children's education, for our retirement, and for our long-term care. In tough economic times such as we currently have, these messages are amplified all the more. Given all that, how dare anyone spend that kind of money on such an extravagant, seemingly useless gift?

Of course, we cannot ignore the advice we have been given. We must be good stewards of our money, give wisely, and save for the future. However, we cannot be so consumed with our money, and fearful for the future, that we forget to love. Mary was not like that: she fearlessly and lovingly anointed Jesus' feet, filling the house with the fragrance of sweet perfume, and giving no thought to the perfume's worth. Judas failed to see the love in this act, focusing only on the expense.

Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This is true for our loved ones as well: we may not always have them with us. It is too easy to let money, especially the fear of not having it, get in the way of love. Many times, I have said petty, unloving things in arguments over money. These arguments were really about my fears and my desire to control, and in these arguments, I forgot to love.

We live in a world where we will always have financial worries, but we will not always have our loved ones with us. Don't forget to love.

Paul McKibben

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 26, 2010

In an old Cherokee legend, a grandfather is talking to his young grandson and tells the boy that everyone has two wolves inside of him struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other wolf is one of fear, greed and hatred. "Which wolf will win, grandfather?" Asks the young boy. "Whichever one you feed," is the reply.

In today's scripture story, John gives us an illustration of both wolves.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus sought the company of his good friend Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Judas Iscariot and the other disciples are also there for the feast Martha has prepared. As Martha serves, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume made from nard, which was imported from the Himalayas. After washing Jesus' feet, Mary humbles herself by undoing her hair (Jewish women never did that in public) and using her hair to dry his feet. Her actions showed her gratitude and love for her friend and teacher and most of all, Mary's understanding of what was to come for Jesus.

Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would later betray Jesus, took issue with Mary about such an extravagant waste of money when the nard could have been sold for 300 denarii and used for the poor. Judas controlled the money box and secretly stole from it for his own good. In his criticism of Mary, Judas projected a religious façade of caring for the poor in order to shift the focus from what he thought was too much love and devotion given to Jesus. The argument Judas made sounded admirable, but his scheming hid his secret sin of greed. The way people appear and what they say can deceive us when we assume their moral and spiritual values are the same as ours.

Let us pray today about the ways that we deceive ourselves, and others, and how we can better feed the wolf in us that we want to thrive and live on—that which will bring joy to His heart by our worship, work and witness.

Pat Pendleton

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 27, 2010

Until now, I had always thought of the story of raising Lazarus from a physical perspective—Lazarus' physical body had died and Jesus brought him back to life. Today, I see it from quite another side. Two years ago I had an experience. Some have called it a "white light" or "burning bush" experience, though I choose to call it God's grace. At the time, I was spiritually bankrupt, dead. For no doing of my own, a sudden, brief feeling of calmness, quiet, peace, warmth came over me. It was a feeling that I have never felt before and I know now that it was a moment of clarity, of God's love. I did not want the feeling to end and when it did I wanted it back, badly. This experience led me down a road of spiritual recovery that has brought me back from the dead. My journey this far in life has shown me that you can be deceased inside and still be breathing. Until that moment, I had been walking this earth dead. Today I am grateful that I, like Lazarus, was raised up and brought back to life by God's grace.

Oh how I can relate to Judas and judgement... I had lived my entire life in fear and judgement. I judged every moment good or bad. I judged every person, feeling inferior or superior to them... this is not true for me today. Today I do my best to "live and let live." I try to not judge, and when I am able to this is when I feel more connected to God. When I don't nurture my spirit through prayer and meditation, my soul is poor and I am unable to have God with me each moment. For me it is important to carry God with me throughout each day. Its very interesting how easily my mind will take me away from God. It's a yucky place to be. Fearful and judgmental... lonely.

For me, God is always accessible in the here and now. As long as my mind is quiet, and free from fear and judgement, I am able to feel a presence greater than myself. My mind can easily jump to the future (which isn't my reality) or live in the past (which isn't my reality either), but if I practice being mindfully present in the moment, I am able to be with God—and others—always.

Mike Phillips

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 29, 2010

Being anointed by Mary in the village of Bethany begins one of the last of Jesus' public acts—those occurring during the final days of his life here on earth. The acts or ministries after these are considered "private," as they were intended for his disciples. And after his death and resurrection, his spiritual ministries begin.

Lent, for many years, was a time for me to concentrate on the finality of Jesus' life, with an "obligatory" self denial of something which was usually included in my daily life (generally something edible or potable). Because of my chosen profession, I also concentrated many times on the human physiology of the horrible suffering and agony of our Lord's final hours.

As many of you know, I have always been very involved in the music department of my church, and I found sorrow and much depth in the many Lenten offerings of both the great and the obscure composers. Two particular musical events come to my mind when I think of Lent. The first was a moment I experienced while singing Lotti's "Crucifixus" from the balcony of our cathedral on Good Friday. It is composed on that part of our creed which states that "he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried." The music was so beautifully performed, the space so wonderful, and the sound so extraordinary, that at the end, with tears in my eyes, I felt that I was indeed transported to and had witnessed that terrible event. The second moment was the chanting of the passion gospel, also on Good Friday evening, when I was chosen to chant the part of Jesus. What a marvelous experience to sing, in solo, and concentrate solely on those actual words leading up to death hanging on a cross.

But the Lenten event which will never be surpassed was the passing of my beloved mother on Ash Wednesday. During many days of anticipation of some very risky cardiac surgery, she busied herself calling family and friends to tell them the news of her health, and to let them know how much she loved them, and how grateful she was to have had them in her life. She was admitted to the hospital on the day prior to surgery, and late in that evening, her minister brought her holy communion. I don't know what was said during that time as these were her "private" conversations. Some of her last words to me, however, included the insightful "Don't worry, Sweetheart, no matter what happens, I'll win."

I had prepared her continuously for the fact that I would be at the organ for the Ash Wednesday evening service (the Chenaults were leaving town for a recital), and that I would see her right after surgery, but if she wasn't quite alert after the anesthesia, not to worry, I would be right back. Her answer to me was, "Take your time, and play like I know you can. They need you, too." The surgery was indeed too risky and too extensive for her heart to bear, and at three o'clock in the afternoon, I held her hand, talked to her (knowing that she could hear me even in a nonconscious state), and kissed her forehead as she took her last breaths. Too many times, I have been the one who has pronounced death in my career as a physician; however, it did not come close to preparing me for the experience of having to do this for a parent.

After leaving the hospital, and after several stops and phone calls, it was time to be at church. Geoffrey and Noelle were there to support and comfort me, and to make sure I was up for playing the service. For me, there was no question—Mother had told me to play. At the appointed time, I began the Bach chorale prelude "I Call to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ." I don't remember concentrating so much on the music, but thinking more about playing it for my

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mother. I think it stands out in my mind as a perfect playing of that composition. I truly don't recall much else about that service, except that everything I played—the hymns, the anthem, et al.—I played for her. For those of you who were fortunate enough to know her, you know that she was the typical mother—one who reveled in the accomplishments of her child—and we know she would have been beaming if she had been there.

That Lent of 2007, I did indeed give back to God something very significant to me; however, the spiritual revitalization that I received was and will be lifelong. Just as Jesus' followers mourned his earthly passing and the end of his earthly works; they, too, were the recipients of his spiritual ministries after his resurrection. I continue to be the beneficiary of Mother's sweet spirit, and good works here on earth, and try to live my life in the kind and generous way that she taught me by example. Her grace, her courage in adversity, and her deep and unfailing faith in our Lord are goals to which I aspire. In the traditional Lenten giving up (or back) to help us prepare for the resurrection of our Lord, I can truly say that I now more fully understand what this means, and how this may prepare us for the true pleasures which are reserved for the followers of Christ.

During this season, you may hear me play the Bach chorale prelude mentioned above at one of the many meaningful All Saints' Lenten services. I hope I can play it for you in a perfect state, and I hope that we, in spirit or in person, can join each other in joy, or maybe in sorrow, in celebrating the lives of those members of the Church victorious who continue to speak to us spiritually. And then, when the final note is released, may we all look to the happiness and delight of Easter morning.

Michael Crowe, MD

Lenten Meditations

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March 30, 2010

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Don't we all?

That's my response when the Greeks ask Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The formality of this request when contrasted with so many of the other approaches to Jesus is almost laughable. Think of it: usually when people in the Gospels approach Jesus, there is weeping, as when Mary washes his feet with her tears; or pleading, as with the woman with an issue of blood; or heart-wrenching questions, like the rich young ruler.

When others approach Jesus, there is emotion and need, anguish and devotion. But here, the Greeks sound painfully formal as if they are attending high tea instead of requesting an audience with the Messiah. If I were one of the disciples, I would have told them to get in line, to take a number and wait their turn, that Jesus had enough to do what with healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons and dodging the authorities.

But Philip doesn't do that.

Philip delivers the formal message to Jesus. And despite the delivery, despite the formality, despite everything, Jesus takes the message and begins to preach. And his message is convoluted and hidden and strange but also very plain: the world is about to be upturned. Everything will change.

Every one of us approaches God differently. With formality, with irreverence, with indifference, with quiet familiarity. We come to God with our prayers, our hopes, our fears, our pain and our joy.

The message of the Greeks approach to Jesus is this: we are never asked to wait in line. We wish to see Jesus, each of us. We wish to have our burdens lifted and our sorrows shared. And Jesus sees us, hears us, laughs and cries with us, even on the way to the cross, even on the eve of his death.

We wish to see Jesus and we shall, no matter how or where we look.

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons

March 31, 2010

The reading assigned to me for our Lenten Meditation Booklet contains just 13 verses, yet after careful study and meditation it became apparent to me that Luke's Chapter 4 represents the Alpha and the road to Omega of Jesus' three short years that changed the world, ultimately creating a new concept of religion, Christianity.

Jesus went to the River Jordan to see his cousin John who had been preaching to, and baptizing an ever growing crowd. Upon seeing Jesus, John baptized Him, and the Holy Spirit filled Jesus. Soon afterwards Jesus, "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." He stayed there for forty days. Did He have conversations with God regarding His concerns about leaving His father's carpenter shop and setting out upon a ministry? With His mind filled day and night with a multitude of issues Jesus did not eat anything, apparently unaware of anything but the major changes coming into His life. Finally, He left the wilderness, famished and ready to find food. Jesus was confronted by the Devil, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4:4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Today we see the starving particularly in today's history of Haiti, destroyed by a mammoth earthquake that left thousands without food or water for days. Perhaps if we looked closely at the people of Haiti we could have seen the Devil at work, but mostly we saw the hand of God filling the people with grace and song while they patiently awaited food, water and rescue. Those filled with the thoughts of the Devil pushed through the crowds grabbing for food and water and fighting each other.

Right here on our own doorstep we watched the victims of Katrina either waiting patiently or fighting for food, water and housing. Even now those driven by hunger, lack of housing, health care and dignity either find a way to overcome their despair or lash out violently in search of their needs. When Jesus said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,'" it seems clear that He was teaching us to lean upon God and use our intellect to meet life's challenges.

The Devil continued to tempt Jesus, however Jesus answered him with a lesson for all, Luke 4:8, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Jesus' words ring loud and clear today. Even now as we renew our baptismal vows we are asked, "Do you believe in God the Father?" and we answer, "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." More than two thousand years have past since Jesus said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." When we think about the impact of Jesus, his teaching and His love for us then, we find it carries on year after year into to all the lives that continue to follow His teaching.

Luke 4:12 Jesus, after all the temptations the Devil gave to him answered, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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The Devil gave up testing Jesus and went away, but promised to return at "an opportune time."

Time and time again man kind has been tempted, some have bought the bait and learned a hard lesson, yet most people lean upon the strength of God and ultimately find a solution to their problem.

After finishing my personal meditation on these 13 verses (Luke 4:1-13) I was in awe of the power, majesty and insight that Jesus possessed. In just three years he accomplished a miracle. Perhaps due to His crucifixion, Christianity flourished with greater power, first among His followers and then among hordes of people. If Jesus had lived and continued on teaching and performing miracles into his old age he may not have had such an impact upon the world. Our love for Jesus and his Father is an intricate part of our lives today and will continue for future generations.

Daphne Church

Lenten Meditations

2010

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April 1, 2010

I grew up imagining that Maundy Thursday was something to do with mourning and was not that excited by it. I preferred Good Friday where we were given 'hot cross buns' and sang a ditty from the 1700s. As I grew, I sang in the choir of our parish church. We tended to what I now know to be a fairly 'high' liturgical style, and Maundy Thursday was a pretty solemn and beautiful observance with not many of our fellow parishioners present. (Not unlike today at All Saints' now I come to think of it.) I remember learning that the name of the day comes from the Latin Mandatum Novum, or 'New Commandment'. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" said Jesus even as he had just made this love manifest by washing his disciples' filthy feet. Today is the day in which we remember, above all, the gifts of love made manifest, first in the Eucharist and then in the consequence of that meal in our service to one another in the world.

It is around the Table that we are formed for life by telling the story of what really matters in life, the story of Love made Manifest. In telling and hearing this story while in table fellowship and conversation with one another, we turn our attention to that which is of ultimate worth and find our lives and values, our choices and hopes all being shaped toward what really matters. This is worship, or Ultimate Worth-ship, and is a particular gift that we celebrate in this memorial of the Last Supper.

About once a year I have the privilege of meeting with some high school students who have been selected to take a class on 'Philanthropy.' We talk about the origins of the parish as a particular geographical region and the way that understanding has developed in the Anglican Tradition. I enjoy pointing out that our parish 'philanthropy' is not so much something we do out of noblesse oblige or left over from our abundance, but is something that is rooted in the ancient law of Israel. The Torah understood community as meaning that the most vulnerable in life (the weak, the widows, the orphans and the wayfarers) were especially protected as a matter of common humanity or community. In a parish understood not as a congregation of like-minded believers, but as a geographical region, the church provides care for everyone in that area as a matter of being the church and recognizing how essential is the new commandment to our identity as human beings and children of God. Caring for one another in effective, often difficult, service is something that really and truly matters to us. It is not an 'optional extra' in life. It is at the heart and meaning of life. In the Episcopal Church the pastoral responsibility for a civic geographical region like a city or county is shared among the Episcopal Churches in that locale. We offer care to everyone because that is the generosity that is extended to us by God and the kind of love that makes us more fully who we are.

What made this commandment of the Last Supper a new commandment, was Jesus saying 'as I have loved you'. We are commanded to love, remembering that the worst thing in life is not death. The fate-worse-than-death is breaking faith with the Love that made us for Love.

The Rev'd Geoffrey Hoare

April 2, 2010

How are we to sit with this text? How are we to sit with Good Friday? This year we find ourselves in John's story of Good Friday and it is different from the other gospels constructed as a drama where we are participants in the drama. Let's listen in.

From the opening scene of Jesus in the garden, we hear Jesus' question "Who are you looking for?" not once, but twice. It is a sister question to the first words uttered by Jesus in the book of John, "What are you looking for?" Jesus response to both questions is "I AM". Sound familiar? It is God's name for God's self spoken to Moses at the beginning of his ministry. In multiple places in John, Jesus refers to himself as "I AM" and gives us stories to help us understand who and what he is. I AM a shepherd that feeds his sheep; I AM a vine that nurtures the branches; I AM the doorway to life; I AM the bread of life; I AM the Way. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God—it is to come face to face with Love and its power for transformation. From the stories in John we know that some embrace it and others turn away in fear.

As the play continues, we find ourselves among "the Jews" and Pilate, with Peter and the disciples, no longer observers but participants confronted by Jesus' question, "who do you say that I AM?" The trial is the climax of Jesus ministry and even here, especially here, again Jesus offers life, possibility, peace to any who would accept it.

Trials and choosing isn't unfamiliar in the bible, old or new. Moses challenges the Israelites on the brink of entry into the land of promise: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live." Choose openness, not closed-ness; choose curiosity not blaming; choose reaching out not drawing back; choose love not fear. Jesus offers us Life in his very being.

Who is on trial in the text? For John it isn't Jesus, rather it is all who witness. The tragedy isn't Jesus' impending death, but our own. The tragedy is our denial of the very thing we seek.

This passage would be much easier if we could just feel sorry for Jesus and grieve his death, his betrayal, his physical suffering. Or if we could focus on the capacity humans have for killing with righteous indignation, or the horror humans are capable of... that would give us cause for guilt that we could handle. But what John is asking of us is the willingness to be confronted by the question, "Who are you looking for?", "Who do you say that I am?" It is an invitation to Life, an invitation to Easter.

Rebecca Parker

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

April 3, 2010

And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

Zechariah 12.10