

Lent 2010



Lenten Devotional for February 17, 2010 Luke 18:9-14

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

I have struggled for many weeks about what to write for this passage. The parable says that the Pharisee is standing in the Temple where everyone can see him, praying out loud and boasting about himself. He feels that he does everything correctly and doesn't need God's mercy. The tax collector on the other hand is humbled. He knows that he is a sinner and repeatedly asks for God's mercy. He understands that only through God's love can we be forgiven.

You see, my struggle is that there have been times in my life when I have been the Pharisee, comparing myself to people, justifying why I was better than that person, going to church not to ask for forgiveness but to boast about myself to God. I was less than humble. Yet when life threw challenges at me, I would get down on my knees and ask God for help because I knew that I couldn't do it on my own.

What I have come to realize is that there is no room for hubris in our relationship with God. God knows us, our feelings, and our innermost thoughts. He knows why we do what we do or say. There is no hiding from God. By asking for God's mercy, as the tax collector did, we are acknowledging that we are sinners and that we cannot possibly live without his forgiveness.

Lenten Devotional for February 18, 2010 John 17:1-8

John 17:1-8

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.'

Just prior to this emotional prayer, Jesus prays to the Father. His disciples told Him "now we are sure that You know all things and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came

from forth from God.” The disciples are telling Jesus that now they are beginning to understand his message.

In His prayer to the Father, Jesus seems to be saying that now that his disciples are beginning to understand his message, He is ready to finish the work that God sent him to do. He is ready to face the cross. In his own words Jesus reveals that He is in control of what is about to happen and is a willing participant in the salvation of all people. Knowing that Jesus commanded the horrific nature of his own death just to save me and not just me but the whole world is pretty humbling.

I am not sure I could willingly face the pain and agony that Christ faced for another person but no doubt He did it out of love for all and love is a very powerful force. I pray that God fill me with His love and that I may be a force for good. I thank Christ for the love He showed for all. I thank Him for loving me even as unworthy as I am.

Lenten Devotional for February 19, 2010 John 17:9-19

John 17:9-19

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus' Prayer for the Disciples

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. - John 17:14-15

In the hours before his betrayal, Jesus retires alone to pray. Among the many petitions to the Father, Jesus prays for his disciples and their continuing mission. Jesus acknowledges the difficult task which lay ahead for his chosen ... they will need to “carry on” after Jesus has been crucified and been resurrected; they will remain “in the world” while he returns to the Father. Yet, Jesus seeks not to call the disciples “out of the world,” but rather asks the Father to protect them with the truth as they are sent “into the world” to proclaim the gospel, just as Christ himself was sent into the world by the Father.

It is fitting, especially during the “hectic” church times of lent, Holy Week and Easter that we, like Jesus, take the time to lift up with prayer those who have been called to the ministry of Christ. Not all receive the call as the disciples did, but those who do, in most instances, make “worldly” sacrifices as the disciples did

– leaving jobs, friends, family – accepting the calling to be “sent into the world” to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

Indeed, Jesus understood the unique challenges which his calling encompasses; specifically praying that the Father protect his disciples, and indeed all who are called to be shepherds of his flock. Jesus recognizes that those who receive his word face the hatred of the world, and begs the Father to protect them with his word, as his word is the truth.

Recall this day all who have been called in Christ’s ministry, and as our Savior did, pray that they may be protected from the “the evil one”, and may be strengthened by the truth in their calling to serve God and spread his word in the world.

Lenten Devotional for February 20, 2010 John 17:20-26

John 17:20-26

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one.”

In this passage, Jesus prays for the unity of all those who will come to believe through the teaching of his disciples and those who will follow them, in other words, the emerging Christian church. It is the hope for a truly universal church that expresses its unity through love.

So, how are we doing with Christian unity 2000 years later?

How easy it is to complain about the separation of the churches and divisions among denominations. But is this an outward sign of our inner desire to keep our distance from those Christians with whose traditions, practices, style and convictions we are uncomfortable or even afraid?

Martin Smith in his essay, “Those other Christians,” suggests that by only embracing certain elements of Christianity and claiming it to be the whole picture, we are cutting ourselves off from the fullness of Christian faith. Smith also writes, “The Spirit comes to us in the very persons of those other Christians, asking us to face the challenge of what they represent and stretch the capacity of our minds and hearts in order to make room for it in our own lives of faith.”

We may always be a Christian in a particular tradition, but by opening ourselves to the wisdom and gifts

represented in our other Christian sisters and brothers we enrich our own faith journey and become a sign for unity in our diversity.

Lenten Devotional for February 21, 2010 Luke 4:1-13

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Satan worked hard to tempt Jesus. To trick him into a miracle, offer him the kingdoms of the world, and finally jump off a cliff. What if we were offered something, something we'd always wanted? Something that would make the world notice us more? And what if -- being in our closer walk with God -- before acting, we found a quiet place to be with God, to listen for His leadings, His guidance. And what if we heard, "Be patient, wait. This is not for you. I will not leave you alone. I will be with you."

What would you do? How hard would that be? Wouldn't it be easier to say, after your meditation with God, "Oh, that wasn't REALLY God -- that was just my imagination! Because I've been praying for this all these YEARS! So God must want me to have it!"

Sometimes it's the listening itself that's an answer to prayer. The prayer that's beyond all prayers. To draw closer. Learn more of His ways, spend more time at His feet, looking into His eyes. Lord, help us be open to your Word. Jesus, help us LISTEN. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for February 22, 2010 Mark 1:1-13

Mark 1:1-13

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

When I first read through this lesson, I thought how strange it was that it wasn't in the reading until the fifth day of Lent. Why not on day one? Just as my children were taught to write themes and essays with an introduction that told what they were going to say, Mark has written an introduction to his Gospel that identifies what he is going to tell you about John, and Jesus, and their relationship to God and to the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah.

Often in reading various parts of the Gospel there seems to be some secrecy in Mark's story, so that at times people don't understand who Jesus is, or what his ministry is. But Mark does not really keep Jesus' identity secret. He states at the outset that Jesus is the Son of God, who survives torment and temptation in the wilderness. The later readings go on to expand on that identity, to explain Jesus' bringing of the "good news", his battles with the forces of Satan, and his victory over them. It's an important lesson to keep in your mind as you read on in the Gospel through the remaining days of Lent.

Lenten Devotional for February 23, 2010 Mark 1:14-28

Mark 1:14-28

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another,

'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'
At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

We have just reached the end of the first week in Lent and the question today's lesson seems to be asking us is are we listening?

It was just another ordinary day in Galilee. Simon and Andrew, and James and John were going about their daily work. Their work wasn't necessarily what we would consider easy. They were fishermen and that meant that they were used to a life of hard manual labor. They were in fact in the middle of this endeavor, casting their nets and hoping for a good catch, when Jesus passes by. Jesus didn't stop to think about what he was about to do - he barely stopped at all! He saw these honest, hard-working people and called to them. He asked them to follow him.

This fact by itself is not what catches our attention in this story. What is amazing to me about this is the immediate response of these four. They didn't hesitate, didn't stop. They heard the call and got up to follow it. They left everything behind and stepped out into an unclear future because they were asked to.

Jesus calls to us the same way. Every day God is with us. Loving us, giving us strength and CALLING us. Each and every one of us. The question is are we listening? Do we hear the call, and then are we strong enough to respond to it? Just like the people in the synagogue we are amazed at what Jesus teaches us. Sometimes we don't think that his message of love and salvation is for us, sometimes we don't think that we are worthy. But God is showing us every day that we are worthy. We are worthy because God loves us, because God forgives us and because God redeems us. Every day. And God is calling us every day. Calling us into relationship with him and with each other. God is not demanding this relationship, God is asking us for it. God is calling you. Are you listening?

Lenten Devotional for February 24, 2010 John 15:1, 6-16

John 15:1,6-16

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

When I received this reading I thought, Just Great! How can I write one page when volumes have been written on the first line, let alone the millions of pages I am sure have been written on the first and great commandment. Then there is abide in me... where do you start? How do you start? Well the only place to

start is with PRAYER. Then I had to think about what am I praying for? Do you ever do that with Prayer? Sometimes finding a beginning or the what is so difficult but then I realized it doesn't matter where you start when it comes to prayer.

As I prayed for guidance it came to me, the first step is the acceptance of GOD as the ultimate vine grower. He gave us Jesus as the start of all faith, if we as Christians do not accept Christ as our Savior then we will not grow, we will not be nourished and we will not survive. As a gardener, I prune the dead and withering branches from my grape vines and from my other plants. I cut off the suckers that are not good for my plants. But if we abide in Christ, that is, live and grow as a branch from his strong foundation (trunk) we will be healthy and as a result our healthy faith, trust, and living in Christ will glorify God and he will help us grow and bear the fruit he chooses for us. Originally I thought to be part of the True Vine I needed to attach or graft myself to the vine, then on reading commentaries and praying I remembered, that when I was baptized I was born in Christ; therefore, I do not need to attach myself but I need to continue to live and be part of Christ and this glorifies GOD.

When I abide in Christ I am bearing much fruit which is the love Christ has for me. I used to think that bearing much fruit meant wealth and children and material things God was going to give me but I was wrong. When I accept Christ's love and let myself be filled with His joy I am bearing much fruit. Sometimes it is hard to live with or in Christ's joy. I am not always a happy person and sometime when I pray I cry. Many times they are tears of sadness knowing I had not been abiding in Christ, sometime they are tears of relief because I know I am in Christ and sometimes tears of JOY because I can feel Christ's joy.

Christ said to the disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." WOW, friends... I am a friend of Christ! He is not just calling me a servant he wants me to be his friend. If I follow this commandment and I continue to abide in Christ, I am his friend and I will bear much fruit (Glorify God). OK so he said this to the disciples but I am a disciple of Christ so therefore I am his friend. Christ tells the disciples that they are no longer servants but they are friends because He has shared with them everything His Father told Him.

For me, what is even more exciting about this passage is Christ tells us, we did not choose Him but He chose us! He chose ME! Me to be his friend, me to share in His Love, Me to be part of His Vine! Christ has appointed Me to go and bear fruit! To live in the abundance of His Love and to share that fruit!

How can I do all this? How can I be a friend of Christ? How can I continue to abide in Him? And how can I ask anything of GOD? By being a friend, sharing His Word, showing His Joy and Love for all, and continuing to pray and grow spiritually. One of the ways I am trying to follow is what I call the 3 Bs. That is BELONGING, BELEIVING and BEHAVING. Belong to Christ, be his friend. Believe in Christ and trust that His Father will care for us and give us what is needed. And Behave, continue to Abide in HIM! Be a strong branch of Christ's vine. If we do this we cannot fail but to live the "Golden Rule", to Love one another!

So go out there and Make a Friend, Be a Friend, and Bring a Friend to CHRIST!

Lenten Devotional for February 25, 2010 Mark 2:1-12

Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' 8At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? 10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 11'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' 12And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'*

Lent is a time of year where we can slow down and take time for reflection. In this passage, Jesus has come back from one of his many journeys to be welcomed by the people. As it can be seen, people had the passion to listen to his teaching so there was a crowd that encircled Jesus. May we also have this same passion to listen to Jesus' teachings. However, there was a problem that the crowd was blocking others from getting to Jesus. The same goes for us today. There are often things in our lives that block us from getting to Jesus. What blocks us from getting to Jesus? Then, some people bring a paralytic along with them to Jesus. In this action, we can see that God provides help for us to get to Jesus. We need to be aware that everyone around us was created by God. We need to love and help them just as God loves and helps us. The paralytic had to depend on these people to help him get to Jesus. We too depend on people to help us get to Jesus. Discipleship is not for just the individual; it is for the whole community. The paralytic is a representation of us being hampered from getting to Jesus. Once again, we need to ask ourselves, what is hindering us from getting to Jesus?

Sometimes we need to be creative in the ways that we come to Jesus, just as the people came up with the idea to bring the paralytic to Jesus by digging through the roof. When we get creative ideas about getting ourselves or others to Jesus, we need to act on them and trust that God will provide a means for these ideas to become a reality. It seems that the people were not sure why they dug through the roof to get the paralytic to Jesus, but they did it anyway and this is what Jesus called faith. We may not always see how something will be possible, but we need trust that God will provide. Jesus forgives the paralytic of his sins because of the faith of the people that brought him to Jesus. We all need forgiveness and it is one of the good gifts that God has bestowed upon us. Just like Jesus forgave the paralytic, we also need to forgive ourselves and those around us. It is because of Jesus through the Holy Spirit that God has given us the authority to forgive sins and let us not miss this fact as the scribes did. By Jesus' response, we need to remember that God knows what we question and what we struggle with even if we do not explicitly say it.

Jesus had the power to heal and forgive sins and, in this scenario, he seems to be saying that it is easier to forgive sins than it is to heal. We all have the ability to forgive sins, but all have the ability to heal. Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man which is a prominent title for Jesus in Mark and it means one that is rejected, suffers, and must die. The paralytic never asks for healing, but Jesus heals him anyway. Even though the paralytic did not ask for anything that does not mean that we should just expect good gifts to come our way from God. We need to not be afraid and have confidence to ask God and others for help. God is ready and willing to meet us where we are and to help us. God met the paralytic in his state of being paralyzed and helped him by making him able to walk. God wants to do the same for us to meet us in our paralyzed state and to help us walk on our spiritual pilgrimage. As the crowd saw the paralytic be healed before their eyes, they could not help but be amazed and glorify God. When God works we cannot help but

to be amazed and give God glory. Let us be thankful for the way God works in our lives and share with others the mighty deeds that God has done and is doing for us. There is even better news that God, in faithfulness, continues and will continue to work in our lives. Thank be to God. Amen!

We thank you God for this time to slow down and be in your word. Help us to see what is hindering us from getting to you. May we not be afraid to seek help. Please help us to forgive others since you are so gracious to forgive us. Allow us to see others as part of human race which is the human family. We are grateful that whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves on our spiritual journey that you meet us there. Thank you for the work that you do in our lives, we ask that you continue to amaze us. May we glorify, honor, and praise you in all that we do. We pray this all in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for February 26, 2010 Mark 2:13-22

Mark 2:13-22

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'

'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

Come and join the party!

It was hard to get much lower in society than a tax collector. During Jesus' lifetime they were considered sinners. Yet, here was Jesus inviting Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. Jesus invites sinners.

It did not go unnoticed by others that Jesus and his disciples were dining with other sinners at Levi's house. When the Pharisees questioned this, Jesus told them he had not come to call the righteous but sinners. Jesus socializes with sinners.

In this reading Jesus uses metaphors on why he invites new people to follow him. You don't use untreated cloth to fix an old cloak, and no one puts new wine in an old wineskin or both the wine and the wineskin will be ruined.

So Jesus is calling new people to a new life. Follow Jesus. Join the party.

Lenten Devotional for February 27, 2010 Mark 2:23-3:6

Mark 2:23-3:6

One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

As a politician, Herod was capable of manipulating people and situations to maintain his reign. His "slaughter of the innocents" demonstrated his zeal in keeping himself in power. Jesus, however, was not about power and certainly was not going to be diverted from his divine mission by yet another threat from Herod.

Jesus is and was and will always be the Good News. Not everyone in Jerusalem wanted to hear the news. Others rejected both the message and the messengers. Not even Jesus Himself was believed by some.

This passage reminds me of God's love for me even when I am rejecting the good news of that Divine love. Who is carrying that message today that I am not hearing?

'God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord'. Amen

Lenten Devotional for February 28, 2010 Luke 13:31-35

Luke 13:31-35

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

How many times have we let the cares and concerns of people around us distract us from our work or focusing on the more important things in our lives? How many times do we let the anxieties of this world affect our inward resolve to continue believing that God has our concerns in His heart? It is somehow reassuring to know that Jesus experienced this and got frustrated by this too.

Here was Jesus, trying to talk with people and curing people and ministering to people. He knows the importance of His work and yet also knows that His time on this earth is limited. In fact, He anticipates that His time to do His most important and yet painfully difficult act of love draws near. He is undoubtedly the only one who fully understands what lies ahead, and He tries to keep his focus on this.

Suddenly there appears a group of people who may have every intention of being helpful and believe that they need to suggest that Jesus go somewhere different to hide from those who would want to harm Him. These people are noticing signs of danger ahead, and are understandably anxious. Don't they understand? Don't they know that He must accomplish that which He came to live among us to do?

Rest assured that each of us has been called by God to do His work here "on earth as it is in Heaven." Likewise each of us has been given unique, spiritual gifts to help us. And what is it that we have been called to do? To use those very unique sets of gifts to love our neighbors. Again we can look to Jesus' example: to teach, to heal, to comfort, to love.

So many times in our own lives we may find it difficult to hear the word of our Lord and realize what He is asking of us. So many times we may find it hard to focus on doing His will and not our will or what seems like the will of the world. It is during these times when we must remain focused and pray for the grace and peace of understanding our loving Father's will. It is these times when we must continue to listen for the still, small voice within.

Lenten Devotional for March 1, 2010 Mark 3:7-19a

Mark 3:7-19a

Jesus departed with his disciples to the lake, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

Jesus Appoints the Twelve

He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed

twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

“For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him.” Why did the crowds of unclean or diseased people want to get close to Jesus? Could it be, they had a FAITH, that what Jesus could do, would help them and heal them in many ways? Following Jesus takes us down many paths and although Jesus cannot be touched physically, we must have a FAITH that by following him, he will help and heal us, and give us everlasting life.

During this season of lent let us review our lives and renew our faith and commitment to Jesus. As we journey through darkness. We must make a spiritual pilgrimage one way or the other for genuine spiritual renewal to come.

Do you have that FAITH?

A prayer:

Almighty Father, You have called me to walk by the light of Christ, Your Son, and to trust in His wisdom. During Lent, I submit myself to Him completely and strive to believe in Him with all my heart. With my renewed commitment to Jesus, I endeavor to continue His work here on earth in helping to build Your Kingdom so that all may benefit from the message of salvation. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for March 2, 2010 Mark 3:19b-35

Mark 3:19b-35

. . . and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. ‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’— for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’

The True Kindred of Jesus

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ 33And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’*

Jesus' mother and brothers did what any family member might do for another member who appeared to be in serious trouble. People thought that Jesus had lost touch with reality. So they went to get him and bring him home, back to the nurturing safety of the family's embrace. But Jesus rejected their help. He was not out of touch with reality. Actually, he was in communion with the Ultimate Reality: God who is love. And rather than being in danger, he was held in the embrace of another family, God's family.

The writer of the Gospel according to Mark wrote to a community of believers who were in serious trouble. They were blamed by the Emperor Nero for the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. They were being hunted down and executed in the most horrible of ways: thrown to wild beasts, covered with animal skins and torn apart by dogs, covered in tar and lit as human torches. Big trouble.

Perhaps the families of Roman Christians tried to talk some sense into them, to get them to "come home" and be safe. The gospel writer reminded them that they were in communion with Jesus and with his Father, and with all those who do the will of God. They were not alone to face the harsh consequences of their decision to live the baptismal covenant. And that knowledge gave them strength, comfort and courage.

Lent is the Church's great retreat, forty days of preparing to renew our baptismal covenant at Easter. The consequences of our decision are likely not as harsh as they were for our Roman ancestors in the faith. But, neither are they easy or light, not if we take our discipleship seriously. Nevertheless, no matter what we experience, endure or enjoy as disciples we can find strength, comfort and courage in the communion we have with Christ and his Father and with all who do the will of God.

Lenten Devotional for March 3, 2010 Mark 4:1-20

Mark 4:1020

Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

"they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." '

And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky

ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

In Jesus' first known parable we are taught how the word of the Lord can be easily miss-placed in our hearts and in our heads. When we hear God's word but ignore Him we are like the seeds that fell on the path. Satan comes along and wipes His Word right out of our minds before The Word has a chance to move to our hearts. When we allow ourselves to feel harassed or bullied into hiding our faith we are like the seeds thrown onto rocks. Faith starts to grow but because we lack substance at the slightest obstacle faith easily dies. When we become weak and allow life's pleasures to lead us astray we are like the seeds thrown on thorns. We allow our desires to choke the faith out of us. But if we listen to God's word, accept it, and live by it we are like the seeds that fall on good soil. Our acceptance and love of God's word allows our faith to grow and flourish.

The most important part of this passage is not so much the parable itself but why Jesus teaches in parables:

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, " 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

Jesus is telling us that we are given the "secret" to the kingdom of God through our belief in Jesus as God's son. Those who choose not to believe are given parables so they will never understand.

It is only through acceptance of and faith in Christ Jesus as the son of God that we are given eternal life in God's kingdom.

Lenten Devotional for March 4, 2010 Mark 4:21-34

Mark 4:21-34

He said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a

mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

"Nothing is hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light." Jesus is beginning his message about the Kingdom of God. Up until his coming, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God have been hidden. Jesus has come to reveal them. He exhorts his followers to pay attention, that the more they understand, more will be revealed; and those who do not listen will lose all.

Jesus then tells two parables about the Kingdom of God. The first analogy is to a scattering of seeds growing to harvest and the second simile is the mustard seed which grows from a tiny seed to a huge bush that can offer shelter to birds. How these happen is a mystery.

Jesus ushers in a new kingdom - the Kingdom of God - a spiritual realm in which one must listen carefully for God's voice. The pleasures and woes of worldly things must not distract from following God's way.

The Kingdom is here and we are called to listen.

Lenten Devotional for March 5, 2010 Mark 4:35-41

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

This famous scripture describes the fearful disciples' plea for Jesus' help during a severe storm while crossing the Sea of Galilee. The fears, lack of faith, and disbelief in the power of Jesus as demonstrated by the disciples sometimes parallels our own fears and distrust when we experience overwhelming burdens and start to believe that God is not listening or caring. We ask, "Is God asleep on the job?" Although storms in our individual lives cause great anxiety, if we place our trust in our God, we know that He will bring us through the perilous times - that He will hear our prayers - His own time.

Upon being awakened from sleep with frantic requests for help in the sinking boat during the storm, Jesus asked the disciples - where is your faith?" Is faith only to exist when all is well and not revitalized or strengthened when crises appear? I believe that faith is a subliminal force that once established through our

trust in God's goodness, will always be within us – we just have to summon it forth “to center stage”. As the disciples experienced the great awe of Jesus' power in calming the storm, so do we encounter similar feelings in the mystical evidence of His healing power. And yet, this revelation of the power of Jesus did not erase their disbelief that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Too many times do we as Christians ask - "Is God really there?", when experiencing the calamities of life. However, it is through our faith that God achieves His purpose even in the face of apparent annihilation. The catastrophic situation in Haiti represents the possibility of a new beginning after a laborious, agonizing, seemingly insurmountable amount of suffering; we pray that the Haitian people will renew their faith that God will bring them through this storm. Our faith and our prayers will be their strength as we support them.

Therefore, during the storms of our lives, we remain secure in the knowledge that Jesus will bring the calm to us. He said “Peace! Be still !”... to the winds and to us. It is in the stillness of the calm that we are secure and feel the love of Jesus. For this is the Jesus who loved us and gave His life so that we may have life...and have it more abundantly. What better peace? What better love?

Lenten Devotional for March 6, 2010 Mark 5:1-20

Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Here we read of Jesus healing a man who was seemingly insane, wild and untamed. This man is representative of many such in the world, hence his name, Legion. It is Jesus who sees that in order to be sane and whole, the man must be rid of the demon or demons who govern him. By transferring the demons to the heard of swine, Jesus is able to cleanse the man. The demons themselves are then destroyed when the swine run and drown themselves in the sea.

Thus Jesus is able to replace the demons inside this man with faith in the Lord.

Even in the 21st century world, we all have demons that haunt and possess us from time to time. It might be a lack of confidence, the lure of an addiction, or even just the temptation to sneak an extra cookie at dessert. No matter how large or how trivial, these demons are our own and they are very real to each of us individually.

This passage is a reminder to us that through Jesus we have a means to conquer these demons. By trusting in our faith in God, we can reclaim the strength and goodness suppressed deep down inside us. We must be open to God's help, and the strong support network that God provides. God will not simply cure us himself, we must use the tools of faith given to us. This will make us stronger in the long run and better able to confront both new and recurring demons in the future.

Lenten Devotional for March 7, 2010 John 5:25-29

John 5:25-29

'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; 27and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. 28Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

In this passage, I believe that the spiritually dead are those who have not yet heard the voice of God through Jesus. When they hear it and believe, they will live and have life eternal. As John states, Jesus has the power to grant this because God gave him the same powers He possesses and because they are one and the same. We are able to hear the voice of God because we are all loved by Him. It is up to us whether we make ourselves available to hear Him. If we hear it we will rise from spiritual death and live.

Those who do not hear His voice may not assume that physical death is the end of life. There is judgment to be faced. I'm not just sure what this judgment entails. I see it as an accounting of the life we lived. Whether there is a penalty involved is unclear to me, but what does seem clear is that we have to face up to our life's deeds.

I do not believe this is the real message of the passage though. To me, the real message is to be open to God's love and to respond to it.

Lenten Devotional for March 8, 2010 Mark 5:21-43

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his

feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Here are two stories concerning real faith and trust in the healing power of Jesus.

The miracles manifested through Jesus have attracted people from great distances – some to see a performance – some come burdened with great problems, and seek His favor for there is no other like Him.

A father travels some distance and opens himself to ridicule for the love of his sick child. He is a man of religious importance now kneeling and pleading before this itinerant preacher. He petitions his cause and is immediately granted his wish as Jesus agrees to come to the man's home. The man's faith in the healer is greater than the loss of face if other members of the temple were to see him bringing Jesus to his home regardless of the circumstances.

A woman is caught up in a crowd of Jesus' followers. She feels unworthy to ask Him for healing for she is an outcast – a person of low esteem due to her ongoing "issue of blood". She trusts His healing powers and knows in her heart: If only I could touch any part of his garment I will be healed. She does so and immediately Jesus recognizes that someone, out of all of that throng, has the faith to reach out to Him for healing – instantly, we are told, she was healed.

Two acts of faith – two routes to Jesus – two souls recognizing that this Jesus is empowered to heal, and they are so desperate! The child is saved, and the woman is cleansed. In one instance Jesus leaves the crowd behind and heals in comparative privacy – in the other case, even though a mass of people encircle them, Jesus' miracle is most likely gone unnoticed.

The thread that weaves these two stories is the unwavering faith that this is the Savior – my Savior and healer! I feel that many in that following had wants and needs, but they lacked the faith to come to this new-found hero of the day. Jesus could have extended His hand and healed all who were there – He could have been

the greatest MVP in the land, but He chose to serve those that came to Him in faith, trust and yes thanksgiving. Not any different today!

Lenten Devotional for March 9, 2010 Mark 6:1-13

Mark 6:1-13

He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Discernment for the messengers

If we were called to do something very important, would we be able to see who would be with us and who would be against us? Would we have a better chance of getting our point across as a team, instead of by ourselves? Or is it ultimately by faith? In both examples in this passage, the perceived disbelief of some, did not stop Jesus or the disciples from continuing to spread the word. And many believed and were healed.

Or, could we be the non-believers? Do we continue to live out our disbelief? Would we run Jesus out of his hometown? Would we cause the disciples to shake the dust off their sandals and move on? After all, we have seen other leaders who were not always well received in their own town, or even their own country. And would we really want to give a second glance at a couple of poor fellows, with no worldly goods, let alone enter into some conversation with them? How would we ultimately fit into this world of non-believers?

By the grace of God, we have been given the gift of discernment. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for March 10, 2010 Mark 6:13-29

Mark 6:13-29

They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Haunted by his past, was King Herod. Full of self-loathing for his weakness and his sins, he probably saw ghosts everywhere.

Herod had liked John the Baptizer and had protected him because he was, at some level, drawn to him and his message. Then, giving in to personal and political pressure, he had had John arrested. Finally, in a moment of utter weakness, Herod allowed himself to be tricked into the ultimate betrayal and gave the order to brutally kill a man he knew to be good and righteous.

Now, he had to live with the memory of his weakness. After all, he was the king, was he not? He could have said, "No!" to the arrest and the execution of John. But that, would have been politically difficult for Herod - both in his own court and, potentially, with Rome. So he took the easy path instead of taking a stand.

Now came Jesus and His movement which seemed very similar to John's. For Herod, this must have dredged up, in detail, the memory of his failure. But Herod did not realize that Jesus' ministry was different. Where John had accused and admonished sinners to repent, in a hell-fire and brimstone fashion, Jesus called sinners to be reconciled with God and forgiven.

If Herod had understood the true message of Jesus then he could have gone to Him and confessed his sins, anguish and self-loathing. He could have asked for forgiveness and received it. He may have even been able to forgive himself.

How many of us are like Herod? No, we haven't ordered the arrest and execution of a prophet, but we have all made serious mistakes. We have all sinned against God and our neighbor. We are all haunted, at some

level, by our past. It may come to us in random thoughts, a story in the news, a conversation, TV show or dream. We may not see ghosts but we may cringe or wince and feel regret.

We can end that haunting through a relationship with Jesus, who has reconciled us with God. Through His death and resurrection our sins, past, present and future, are forgiven. If we truly embrace Jesus' message we can learn to forgive ourselves and move on in our lives free from guilt and regret. We can let the ghosts of our past rest in peace and be haunted no more. And, through Jesus, we can do what Herod could not. We can have the strength to stand and do what is right and not just what is easy.

Lenten Devotional for March 11, 2010 Mark 6:30-46

Mark 6:30-46

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Belief, help my unbelief

The disciples came back to Jesus to tell him personally all they had done with the peoples of the land: teaching, casting out demons, and anointing with oil many that were sick and healing them. "Look, teacher, all that we have done!" They were on a roll. So busy, in fact, there was little time to feed their own souls with the bread of the land nor rest. And Jesus' response was "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest awhile." Richard Bach wrote in *Illusions, The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, "You teach best what you most need to learn." And it was Jesus' turn to show his very own what they most needed to learn.

Jesus, teacher, prophet, Messiah drew those far and wide that day as the star in the east drew the wise men to his side in Bethlehem. Their time of solitude and rest became a time of teaching as the throngs of people came hungry for His word. The shepherd once again took charge of his sheep. The disciples, instead of taking in the moment, seemed to concern themselves instead with the logistics: food. It was late. They, themselves, still had no rest. How on earth can they feed these people? Send them on their way so they can take responsibility for their own.

Instead of Jesus saying, "Are you not listening to your own words? Your own professions and actions as you go from town to town?" He told the disciples to gather what was already present, blessed, and broke it

for all to partake in this sacramental feast.

Time and again, the disciples returned to Jesus for the blessed bread. Each time reminded that all things are possible through the Father. Their hands filled with the very fish and loaves they thought impossible - nourishing the bodies of all those who came to listen to Jesus.

“Look, teacher, all that we have done!” No, not what you have done. But what you have to do. Their work had just begun; where our work must continue. Belief, help my unbelief.

Lenten Devotional for March 12, 2010 Mark 6:47-56

Jesus is waiting for you! The people of Gennesaret knew who Jesus was, they "scoured the whole countryside" bringing any who were sick to a place where they knew He would be. These folks all had an intimate encounter with the Lord.

Praise be, Jesus is here with you this very instant -- he longs to speak with you, heal you, teach you. Do not let your presumed unworthiness keep you away. Jesus wants you to come so he can lighten your burden and forgive you all those things you have done that are sinful. He will restore you and make you a child of God. What could be better than presenting yourself before Jesus just as you are -- warts and all. He will restore your soul and give you the strength you need to complete your day and give you a greater appreciation of his life in you.

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Show your love for Jesus -- he is holding out his loving arms to receive you -- run to him-- abide in his love.

Lenten Devotional for March 13, 2010 Mark 7:1-23

Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your

tradition! For Moses said, "Honour your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Rules are important. They are in place to help keep order and with the intention of promoting justice. The Pharisees knew the Jewish law (rules) well and went to great pains to follow them and to insure that others followed them as well. In their minds, if the laws were not followed to the "T" then you were considered unclean, impure and not right before God.

Jesus recognizes the way the law gets twisted in order to justify certain actions. "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition." In other words, you make sure you take care of giving your offerings even at the expense of the suffering of your own mother and father. The rules take precedence over serving the needy.

How do rules help us function and serve us? How and when do they get in the way of loving and serving others? Is there ever a time to break the rules? How do you use rules to justify your own actions at the expense of others?

Lenten Devotional for March 14, 2010 John 6:27-40

John 6:27-40

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." ' Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'*

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'

This passage from the Scriptures beautifully ties in with our sacraments and communion. It is also instructional. It informs us that we need not work for the material things on earth the “food that spoils”. Our work can be for food that endures to eternal life. And what is that work? To me this passage calls for us to work by believing, sincerely believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of GOD, that Jesus is the bread of life, that Jesus is the bread of heaven.

This divine food, and our belief in it, can be completely fulfilling and last forever. This food is comfort, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, kindness, it is the life that comes from believing in the Lord God in human form, his precious Son our Blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This food is everlasting, it is selfless, it is spiritual and lives in us not only in the here and now while we are on this earth but carries forward eternally. By believing in Jesus Christ we can be fulfilled, never hungry, never thirsty.

In this Lenten season as we are called upon to reflect, evaluate and reconcile our lives as Christians as ones who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of GOD who is love, who was GOD in human form and who was sacrificed for our sin, may we also be called upon to determine how hard, how strong, how diligently we “work “ for that food which is our belief, our basic and fundamental belief in the bread of heaven the bread of life that is Jesus Christ. This is not to measure for success or failure but rather to stay in the race to be cognizant that by believing in Jesus Christ we can have a joyous and beautiful life that is filled with love, with kindness and with mercy. A life so completely fed by the love of God and his son Jesus Christ that when by earthly standards things are not going well, when we are worried about the health and welfare of our loved ones and our ourselves, when we think we have fallen short, to know we have an inexhaustible source of sustenance the bread of life, the bread of heaven.

We need not worry or be fearful, we need not be concerned with “doing it all” or “having it all“ instead we can rest, truly rest assured that our firm belief in Jesus Christ will provide a way, a life that is fulfilling and everlasting.

Also what a wonderful thing it would be to serve others and provide this food so that they too can be comforted and guided, that they too can be grateful, inspired and fulfilled by understanding and believing that what we are looking for is right here in our presence. That we need not “work for food that spoils”. In the here and now is the Lord God’s love, he has fed us with his love, he has fed us with the bread of life, indeed he has fed us, provided us with the bread of heaven and that bread is eternal.

“ For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”. John 6 (40)

Lenten Devotional for March 15, 2010 Mark 7:24-37

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the

demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

Jesus traveled to the area of the Ten Towns. While there people brought him a man who was deaf and could not talk plainly. Jesus led the man away from the crowd. He put his fingers to the man’s ears and then spit and touched the man’s tongue. “Looking to heaven, he sighed and said to the man, “EPHATHA” (This means 'be opened'). Instantly the man was able to hear and to use his tongue so that he now spoke clearly.

Like the deaf man that Jesus cured, we too are sometimes deaf. All Jesus asks of us is to keep our ears, hearts and minds open and willing to receive his love. No matter how many times we might disappoint Him with our failures to keep His commandments, He does not stop loving us. Our miracle is that if we are penitent and ask His forgiveness it is always there for us.

“EPHATHA” (Be opened)

During the Season of Lent Lord Jesus let our ears, minds and hearts be opened to Your love. Let us be more patient and forgiving in our daily lives. We pray for the courage and strength to imitate the example You gave us. Strengthen our faith as we live in this world so fraught with strife and pain. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN

Lenten Devotional for March 16, 2010 Mark 8:1-10

Mark 8:1-10

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.’ His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’ He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

The biblical story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes is one that resonated with me more than any other as a child. When I was young, I imagined baskets of food magically refilling with fish and bread. The image alone was enough to make me wonder at the power of this person of Jesus whom I was also told was the Son of God. What was so compelling beyond the images conjured up of multiplying food was the image of

a kind Jesus who was concerned about feeding people. I was so filled with stories of punishment and guilt, heaven and the wrath of hell, that this human image of Jesus was comforting.

As an adult, and as a mother, I see the nuances of the story. Yes, as mothers the first worry we have is of nourishment for our family. Our anxiety is ever in thoughts like, “Did everyone get enough to eat?” “What should I make for dinner?” “Oh no, we are out of milk and bread again.” I see in this story the idea that Jesus was concerned with simple and basic human needs, for hunger is a powerful human force. This is one of the times in the Bible that Jesus appears to me to be most human. Yet, here he was trying to give spiritual food to the crowds and help people to go beyond the human, as he himself was “representing” so to speak the divine God to these crowds. As humans, it is very difficult to be open to anything transcending our human condition, such as intellectual pursuits or spiritual renewal, when our basic human needs are not met. We make sure that food is available when we have meetings or workshops, or other forms of work, for example. Yet, we do indeed “hunger” for something else. So many people are searching for spiritual food, and lack of it can lead to a death perhaps worse than death caused by physical hunger. We see people searching to fill the hungry void in so many places: false prophets (Pat Robertson) who “fill” them with hatred masking as God’s will, botox and physical beautification, alcohol and drugs, and yes, even over-feeding themselves in hopes of keeping the inner hunger from overwhelming them.

Jesus’ lesson here on where real spiritual food comes from is really quite simple. The loaves and fishes in the story represent more than the miracle of the food itself. The miracle on a symbolic level is that we can and should embrace our humanity, enjoy a meal together, feed and clothe each other, take care of each other, help those who are poor and in need, and in so doing, we are feeding the soul, and we ourselves are the miracle of the multiplying loaves and fishes.

Lenten Devotional for March 17, 2010 Mark 8:11-26

Mark 8:11-26

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.’ They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’ ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’ Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not

even go into the village.’

In today’s reading there appear to be several contradictions that make us pause and puzzle over the message of the gospel. Are these “mistakes” or “misunderstandings” that arise from translation of language and culture or is there a “deeper meaning” for us fathom?

At first, Jesus dismisses the Pharisees wanting a sign saying, “There shall no sign be given unto this generation.” This comes right after He has given one of the major early signs depicted in the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes where the crowds following Jesus for days were fed. Jesus says this to the Pharisees who were the spiritual leaders among the common people not the Sadducees, who were the spiritual leaders of the elite. Most likely, the Pharisees questioning Jesus were among the people when they were fed and therefore witnessed the miracle. Using modern phrases, Jesus may well have said to the Pharisees, “You wouldn’t know a miracle if you tripped over one.”

But the gospel goes on. Jesus seems to criticize his own disciples for the very same thing. Yet, these are His very own followers, so He adds something to his rebuke: you have seen the miracle when I fed the multitude but you still do not have a faith that can take you from one situation (feeding the crowd) to another (feeding you on this ship). And just to confuse the poor disciples even more, he adds the cryptic warning about the leaven. Of course we, as modern readers of the Gospels “get it.” Jesus is never talking about earthly food but spiritual food. We know his kingdom is “not of this earth.” So we get it, or do we?

To me, the final passage in this gospel really brings the message home. The blind man at first touched by Jesus sees only “men as trees, walking.” He only sees clearly after Jesus touches his eyes a second time. What could this mean? Jesus the sarcastic critic of the Pharisees, Jesus the annoyed impatient Messiah to his followers, Jesus the miracle worker needs two tries to get it right?

I was once told that to really understand your dreams, you should see everything and everyone in your dream as yourself. When I do the same thing with this gospel, its deeper meaning opens up to me. I am a Pharisee who needs a miracle performed just for me. It’s not enough that I was there to see one performed for “the crowd” or in someone else’s life, I want my own. And I am of “that generation” that needs a miracle all the time, every day. I am a disciple, who has witnessed the miracle but forgets the lesson, and loses his faith that the miracle can happen again, this problem can be solved just like the last one was solved. And, I am the blind man, who needs to be shown not once, but again and again, for I only see “as through a glass darkly.” No, I need my eyes cleared of the cataracts whatever they might be in order to see clearly. And that is an ongoing job. Sometimes, I am even like Christ, annoyed by the world and those around me.

It is the final passage that is most puzzling. Jesus says to the blind man, “Go, tell no one.” It is almost as if he were saying, “They won’t believe you anyway, for they will have to experience their own miracle for themselves.” And what I finally come away with from this gospel story is a desire, a willingness, to have a greater, stronger faith.

Lenten Devotional for March 18, 2010 Mark 8:27-9:1

Mark 8:27-9:1

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples,

'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, *'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'* He asked them, *'But who do you say that I am?'* Peter answered him, *'You are the Messiah.'* And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' And he said to them, *'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'*

One key that has helped me understand better this passage is a foot note in the NIV translation that notes the same Greek word is used for both "life" and "soul" in verses 35-37. This word "soul" puts the emphasis on your individual life, your particular needs and wants and what makes you you.

So in Mark 8:34-37 Jesus says:

"If you want to follow Me, you must first deny yourself, and take up your cross, you must die to yourself; only then can you truly follow Me. 35 "For if you want to hold on to what makes you you in this world, you shall never become what God intends you to be; But if you give up what you think makes you you for My sake and the gospel's, you shall become what God intends you to be. 36 "For what does it profit you to gain everything the world has to offer and to actualize what you think you should be, if you than forfeit what your Creator intends you to be? For what shall you give in exchange for the very thing that truly makes you you, the essence of who you are.

The following prayer is always with me a quiet place to come back to when I try to put me first.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton
Thoughts in Solitude.

Lenten Devotional for March 19, 2010 Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew 1:18-25 (St. Joseph)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

At first glance, these passages appear to be plain in their intent and meaning, beginning with “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows.” It is pointed out that it was as was spoken by the Lord through the prophet. .” A second reading directed my thoughts to Joseph. This man is betrothed to Mary and is told by her that she is with child. He knows it’s not his child; her tale of being impregnated by the Holy Spirit has to be unbelievable to him. However, because of his love for her and not wishing her embarrassment and harm of some kind as was the law of those times, he planned to “put her away” secretly. That term is explained in my edition of the Bible as meaning to divorce her, which would mean he would marry her to prevent it being known she had sinned, and then divorce her quietly. However, he has a dream in which “the Angel of the Lord” speaks to him, reassuring him that Mary speaks the truth, and he should not be afraid to take her as his wife. Further, this child is the Immanuel; he is to be called “Jesus” and is the one who will save mankind from their sins, fulfilling the prophesy.

We know little of Joseph from Biblical accounts. It is written in this passage that he was a righteous man; further on we learn he was a carpenter. He traced his lineage from David, and at the time he was to be married, he lived and worked in Nazareth. His world and all he knew to be true was suddenly challenged. Dreams were, and still are, a part of sleep that we all encounter. Surely he had previously experienced vivid dreams, which seemed real, until daylight and reality put them in the place of imagination. He doubted the story of Mary, the love of his life; why wouldn’t he doubt his dream, vivid as it must have been? If any of us in these modern times dreamed that an angel was speaking to us on behalf of God, would we put that in the realm of reality?

It seems to me that Joseph’s deep love for Mary guided his thinking. This overwhelming love gave her the benefit of the doubt, when she told him she was a virgin, but with child. His love and desire to keep her safe, as well as her child, most likely played a part in his accepting the dream as reality. This love sustained him and overcame the doubts he must have experienced throughout the next 8 or 9 months. At some point, I’m sure he realized the truth was as he hoped, but perhaps not until Jesus’ birth or even sometime later.

As I read this passage still again and think about Joseph, I find that the words speak volumes about the goodness of this man. God, in His infinite wisdom, knew Joseph was a good and righteous man and that his love for Mary was as He intended it to be between husband and wife. These were the mortal parents to whom He entrusted His Son. Though Jesus was spiritually the Son of God, he would need to learn love as experienced and understood by mankind. And so it was that Jesus, the embodiment of the Spirit and Love of God, began his life in human flesh with parents, who, themselves, truly knew love. Without these two

parents who exemplified love and faith in their daily lives, how could Jesus have prepared for a ministry that attempted to explain the Love of God to mortals?

Lenten Devotional for March 20, 2010 Mark 9:14-29

Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?' Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.' And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' And he said, 'From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus said to him, 'If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!' After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.' But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'This kind can come out only through prayer.'

“All things can be done for the one who believes.....I believe; help my unbelief”

Do you believe? Do you doubt? Do you experience those times when your belief is weakened while at the same time believing wholeheartedly? This ordinary father, with a mixture of despair and trust, desperate to heal his son, asks Jesus to heal the boy 'if he is able'. With an incredulous response, Jesus repeats “If you are able????? -- All things can be done for the one who believes.” The man cries aloud “I believe” while at the same time lamenting “Help my unbelief”, confessing that nagging tug of uncertainty.

The man looks to Jesus for the healing of his son. Before Jesus heals, He appeals to the man's faith. And the man responds by asking for help with his hesitation, his apprehension, his uncertainty. You and I have times of doubt; especially when our prayer is unanswered in a way that we deem befitting. We want help with a problem; Jesus bids us to trust and to pray.

As a person of faith, following the call of Jesus doesn't get easier as one goes along. In fact, the call to faith entreats us toward ever deepening our understanding of what it means to live our life as a follower of Christ, giving ourselves to faith and trust over and over again.

Lenten Devotional for March 21, 2010 John 12:1-8

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

The passage of John 12: 1-8 is a foreboding of the death of Jesus. Knowing his impending death, Jesus arrives at the home of Lazarus, who he has recently risen from the dead. He is a welcome guest in the home of Lazarus' sisters, Mary & Martha, who are grateful and honored by his deeds for their brother. Judas, who is a disciple, is also present at the home but he is characterized as a less than faithful servant. Mary, being grateful to Jesus for her brother's resurrection and aware that Jesus will die, uses expensive oils to cleanse his feet in preparation for his burial. Judas questions Mary's extravagance and feels that the money spent by Mary for the oils should have been given to the poor. However, Judas is less than honorable. He has been known to steal money which could have been directed to the poor. Mary is a clear example of a true disciple of Jesus. Judas is a disbeliever of the message of Jesus. The acts of anointing Jesus' feet by Mary are acts of devotion and gratitude by Mary. Jesus is very clear in his response to Judas that Mary's gestures are in response to an extraordinary act and that we must always consider the poor as a priority for the living. Care for the poor is one of the mission of God. God's hope is that his people will act appropriately in such a cause. The passage reminds us that belief in Jesus will give us eternal life. In the resurrection and the life, he who believes in Him will live even though He dies and whoever lives and believes in Him will never die.

Lenten Devotional for March 22, 2010 Mark 9:30-41

Mark 9:30-41

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose

the reward.

There are a number of lessons laid out in this passage told in Mark's typically concise style. In the first couple of verses, Jesus foretells the circumstances of His Passion but the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying to them and are too afraid to ask. I think the lesson here is that we should not be afraid to question those things that we do not understand because through questioning and discussion, we gain deeper understanding.

The second lesson in this passage comes when Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about on their way to Capernaum. They do not answer Jesus when he asks them because they must have had some realization that their playful argument about who was "the greatest among them" was rather childish and foolish.

You can just picture the disciples as they walked along, each asserting that they were the greatest – much like you may hear a group of young men today boasting about who is the greatest athlete or who is the smartest. Jesus takes this opportunity to remind them to be humble and to welcome the least of the children of God for if they truly want to be "the greatest" they must be the "servant of all".

This is a good reminder to us, as modern-day Christians, that we must remember to look to those who are the "least" members of our society and welcome them with open arms into the body of Christ. It is only by opening our arms in love to all of God's children that we truly welcome God in our hearts and minds.

In the final lesson of this passage Jesus instructs his disciples not to speak out against others who are doing good deeds in the name of Jesus even if they are not followers. Jesus says that if someone is doing a good deed in His name, then they will not be able to speak ill of Him later. In the oft-quoted line Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us".

This serves as a good reminder to all of us that just because someone may not be a "formal" follower of Jesus, if they do good deeds in the name of Jesus then they are part of the body of Christ. The challenge for us is not to alienate those who are only "informally" connected to Jesus through their deeds, but rather, to reach out to them and engage them so that they too can become more full members of the body of Christ.

Lenten Devotional for March 23, 2010 Mark 9:42-50

Mark 9:42-50

'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell., And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

'For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

During our lives, we who love God, try to live as He would want. Since I was young this scripture has always bothered and worried me. Through the living of our lives these verses seem to say, BE CAREFUL, BE CAREFUL. Bad things can happen to you if you make people who believe, stumble. Starting with little children, who believe, we are told to not put a stumbling block in their path.

Now to me this says always examine what you do and say and how you behave. We are seen by all that we come into contact with. It is important to remember we can affect them. We do not want to put anything in their way to make them fall away from God. This is an awesome task. From little children, who Jesus loved dearly, on up BE CAREFUL.

This scripture says being perfect and whole is not as important and keeping your heart focused on God at all times and living a God filled life, so you can be an inspiration to others and not a thing that makes anyone trip.

Through God all is possible. Keep walking with Him.

Lenten Devotional for March 24, 2010 Mark 10:1-16

Mark 10:1-16

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them.

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Consider the reward that awaits you; Jesus draws the children to him, saying "it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Then He put his arms around them, laid his hands on them, and gave them His blessing.

Picture that: as you become "like a child," having Jesus "put His arms around you."

Just the thought of it is overwhelming.

Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus assigns unspeakable punishments for those who do wrong to children. Then later, he uses children as the absolute 'role model for those who would live in the Kingdom of God.

In His life that was a pathway to the crucifixion, Jesus saw, as both human and divine, the best and worst of human experience. From it all, He shows that children are the rule we should adopt. How clear, how simple.

Why then, does it become so difficult for us? As we mature we think of positions, of things, of wealth, of power, of making impressions; all these things take us farther and farther away from child-like-ness. What a loss.

Lord, help us to be adults, and yet remember to be like children: uncomplicated, trusting, and eyes wide open.

Isn't it worth it, to remember every day that Jesus is ready to "put his arms around us, lay his hands on us, and bless us?"

Lenten Devotional for March 25, 2010 Luke 1:26-38

Luke 1:26-38 - The Annunciation

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

How the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary is one of the Bible's great mysteries. The author of the book of Luke is a medical doctor. He fails to tell us specifically how the conception takes place except that the power of the Most High will "overshadow Mary". Mary had faith and belief in the messenger from God and even though she was a virgin and even though she could not fully understand or believe this message she was being given by Gabriel, she kept trying. The angel tried to calm Mary's fears and encourage her acceptance of the situation. The angel explained to her some of the other unusual things that were about to take place to other people she knew. Mary finally accepted the fact that she had been chosen by God to bear his son – nothing is impossible with God – and she acquiesced saying "I am the Lord's servant. "May it be as you have said." Mary was young and must have possessed enormous inner strength, love and trust for God.

Lenten Devotional for March 26, 2010 John 10:31-42

John 10:31-42

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?' The Jews answered, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.' Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods"? If those to whom the word of God came were called "gods"—and the scripture cannot be annulled— can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, "I am God's Son"? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.' Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. Many came to him, and they were saying, 'John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.' And many believed in him there.

These verses tell of the Jews attempting to stone Jesus because of His claim “that the Father is in me and I am in the Father,” which they considered to be blasphemy.

Further, if men appointed by God as his agents can be addressed, as is written in the Law as gods, much more can one whom God set apart and sent into the world call himself, without blasphemy, the Son of God. Jesus makes an appeal for faith because his miracles confirm his claim to be the Son of God.

Another attempt to stone Him is made. Jesus leaves for safety to the scene of John the Baptist's ministry across the Jordan. The scene recalled to some of his followers the witness of John and that John did not do miraculous acts himself but everything he said about Jesus was true. Many came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah at this time.

What does this say to us in today's world? We are certainly not out doing miraculous things, or are we? We are called to replicate the ministry of Jesus by ministering to each other not only in our community of faith but also in our local community. We do this by supporting the Community Cupboard, the Interfaith Hospitality Network assisting those who are less fortunate or are in need temporary assistance. We see that our children are taught the principles of faith, receive the sacraments and also we visit the sick, and help the elderly. All these are examples of how we practice the ministry of Jesus.

My prayer would be: Jesus, I want so much to have the ability to see You not only in neighbors but in strangers, not only in family members but in those not my relatives, not only in friends but in those who are unfriendly to me. I humbly ask for your help. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for March 27, 2010 John 11:45-53

John 11:45-53

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing

at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Jesus had just performed a significant miracle when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Many ordinary Jews were starting to believe that He was the Messiah. They were ready to follow Him and even make Him their king, and this was a huge problem for the Jewish leaders. Their way of life was in danger. They understood the politics of their unique situation. Rome was occupying Israel, and usually when Rome occupied a country, they forced the people to conform to their ways, including following their religion. But, in Israel, the Jews were allowed to continue practicing their own religion. They were not forced to adopt Roman beliefs.

But the Jewish leaders understood that with one false move, Rome would take all that away. The Jews would lose their religion, and the leaders would lose their power. If Rome thought that Jesus was setting Himself up to be a king, then Rome would do whatever they had to do to stop the perceived revolt. Rome could and would destroy their Temple in Jerusalem, and destroy the Jewish people and their way of life in the process.

Somehow Jesus had to be stopped. The Jewish leaders, Caiaphas especially, determined that Jesus should die. His death would appease Rome and make them see that the Jews and their leaders weren’t about to stage a revolt. The Jewish leaders would be able to stay in power.

They could rationalize that they were looking out for the people of Israel, not just their own lives and their own power. If the leaders killed Jesus, then his death would save the Jewish people from being destroyed by Rome. One man would be the sacrifice for many.

But God used the Jewish leaders and Caiaphas to achieve His own purpose. While they were bent on killing Jesus so that they could retain their political power, Jesus’ sacrifice and death would not only save the Jews, but would be a sacrifice for people of all nations. Jesus’ death was the ultimate sacrifice, and we are the beneficiaries of that sacrifice. His death turned world upside down, and changed everything.

Jesus’ death means that we are no longer separated from God, making our sacrifices for the atonement of our sins. Jesus’ death allows our sins to be forgiven, and allows us to draw near to God. His death saved the Jewish people, and saved us all.

Lenten Devotional for March 28, 2010 Luke 22:14-23:56

Luke 22:14 - 23:56 (The Passion) (Read your Bible for this one)

The Passion Gospel is well known to us all, from our Palm Sunday and Good Friday liturgies. In rereading it separate from that context, I found myself focusing on people other than Jesus – people who abandoned their principles and faith when facing an extreme challenge.

There Pilate sits, in secular judgment. Not once, not twice, but three times he says that Jesus has been unjustly accused. He looks for an “out” – by sending the case to Herod, who also finds no cause and sends Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate again attempts to spare Jesus, and under pressure from the crowd, relents,

releasing Barrabas. He abandoned his principles, condemning Jesus.

The Lord said to Peter ". . . I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail . . ." Peter responded "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Later that evening, Peter and the other disciples fall asleep when Jesus had asked them to stay awake and pray. Peter, later denied knowing Jesus, three times, just as Jesus had predicted. We understand that Peter did so out of fear for his own personal safety. And yet, he and Christ connected visually at the time of the cock crow, with Peter finally realizing what it meant to have abandoned Jesus. And although Peter was featured in this reading, he wasn't alone, as the other disciples melted away into the crowds, or stood and watched from a distance, all following their own paths.

How often do we do the same –choosing a path of less resistance when facing a challenge, even in our everyday lives? Like the disciples, we have also heard the Word. But do we truly understand it? Apply it? Let us find new strength in this season to study and learn, and ask the Holy Spirit's blessing to guide us and prepare us to live our Christian beliefs openly, and resist the temptation to take a path that enables us to abandon them.

Lenten Devotional for March 29, 2010 Mark 11:12-25

Mark 11:12-25

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

Jesus was trying to teach an important and vital lesson to us with the Withered Fig Tree. He went to the tree expecting fruit and was astonished that the tree was only full of leaves. Jesus cursed the fig tree and it withered the next day. If we think of the church and its people as the tree we can definitely say that it is full of leaves... priests, holy people, scribes, elders, congregation members and others. When religion and the church become just a profession and do not make the Gospel relevant through faithful action, it ultimately may perish. We make many promises to God and sometimes seem to focus on adherence to the law and rote traditions without listening to the MESSAGE. We can appear as hypocrites, living our lives outside of

church void of any holiness, desiring to control our own lives, being faithless in God, and not loving our neighbors as ourselves. We talk the talk but don't always walk the walk. In doing so our tree may have leaves but in time will wither when it does not bear fruit. We need to live the "Way" in our everyday lives and become consequential

to our communities. We need to welcome the Prodigal in our midst and become a haven for all the brokenness in our world showing our enemies that the Gospel is powerful and life altering. Teaching our children to live their faith with authenticity and confidence will give the future hope and bear fruit for generations to come.

This message weighs heavily on my heart and forces me to ask some tough questions. Am I personally trying to have full faith in God? Jesus shows us that if we have sincere faith, such as the faith shown by the women who touched his cloak... miracles and the power of the Holy Spirit will abound. Are we able to give up control to God and believe whole heartedly that his grace is sufficient in all aspects of our daily lives? Faith can move mountains. Look at the recent tragedy in Haiti and the rescue of a woman underneath the rubble. She was asked if she thought she would survive and she said "Yes- why not?" and went on to praise the Lord and declare her faithfulness. Our lives are so intertwined in the secular world that we seldom look for the Holy Spirit that is in our midst. A friend recently shared this quote , "There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the incarnation.—Madeleine L'Engle, We need to become living temples to God and begin to live in faith, hope, and love bringing God out into the streets.

Another question would be- Am I truly loving my neighbor as myself? Am I able to forgive those around me? Am I able to forgive myself? In forgiveness, we find hope and instill the grace that God gifts us every day. We forgive because God forgave us. And forgiveness is the prerequisite to peace. "In forgiving we participate in Gods dream of reconciliation and shalom"- Shane Claiborne. Forgiveness is an action. In doing this we are actively pursuing peace and are mending the brokenness all around us. We are looking at the humanity around us, recognizing the faults within our own souls, and humbling ourselves to the point where we realize another person's sin could have been our own. I want to love my neighbor as I am loved by God.

The final question to myself would be- Am I living an authentic life? Am I succumbing to the secular world around me or am I stepping out to be an ordinary radical? Jesus would want the latter. He wants us to live a life that is righteous and full of integrity. "The credibility of the Gospel rests upon the integrity of our lives" Shane Claiborne. I strive to be aware of the Holy Spirit around me, speak truth in love, remain faithful, and love my neighbor as myself. In doing this, I hope to bear fruit. I hope to spread the Word of God and strengthen the church so it does not wither. In community we can be the salt and the light. We can make the Gospel relevant to today's world and when Jesus looks at our church and our lives with the expectation of fruit...he will not be disappointed.

Lenten Devotional for March 30, 2010 Mark 11:27-33

Mark 11:27-33

Again they came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.' They argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But

shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And Jesus said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Where Does Jesus' Authority Come From?

At the Temple, Jesus along with his disciples, are confronted by the highest authorities there who included the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders. By this point, they have gotten tired of Jesus' shenanigans and want to challenge the basis on which Jesus has been saying and doing so many subversive things.

It appears that the purpose of the question posed to Jesus was that the authorities were hoping to trap him. If Jesus claimed that his authority came directly from God they might be able to accuse him of blasphemy; if Jesus claimed that the authority came from him, they might be able to ridicule him and make him appear foolish.

Instead of simply answering them directly, Jesus responds with a question of his own — and a very curious one, too. Until this point not much has been made of John the Baptist or any kind of ministry that he might have had. John has served only a literary role for Mark: he introduced Jesus and his fate is described as one that foreshadowed Jesus' own.

This is the source of their conundrum and the reason for responding with a counter question: if they admit that John's authority came from heaven, then they would have to allow the same for Jesus, but at the same time be in trouble for not having welcomed him. If, however, they assert that John's authority came only from man then they can continue to attack Jesus, but they will be in a lot of trouble due to John the Baptist's great popularity.

Mark has the authorities answer in the only way left open, which is to plead ignorance. This allows Jesus to refuse any direct answer to them as well. While this initially appears to result in a stalemate, Mark's audience is supposed to read this as a victory for Jesus: he makes the Temple authorities appear weak and ridiculous while at the same time sending the message that Jesus' authority comes from God just like John's did. Those with faith in Jesus will recognize him for who he is; those without faith never will, no matter what they are told.

Who speaks and acts with such authority? Certainly Jesus is more than just an ordinary man. And, of course, we know he was and he is. For he is none other than the very Holy One of God, the Son of the most High, coming to us in the flesh. You and I are children of God through our baptism into Jesus' name. This is only one of the ways we recognize his authority.

Recognizing that authority, that absolute power, is why we worship him. It's why we have Bible Study and listen to what he says. It's why we not only listen but also seek to practice what he preaches. It's why we have The Holy Communion – the Eucharistic portion of our worship service.

Of course, the temptation is always there for us to forget that authority in our lives. As sinners we are certainly prone to want to exercise our own authority – to call our own shots and to set the agenda for our own lives. For that and for all the times we forget Jesus' authority, we need to ask for forgiveness and, in that, help to submit to his authority more and more as the Lord of our lives.

Prayer: May God help us honor him again this day by moving us to hear and see the authority of Jesus in His Word once again and may He enable us to submit to that authority more and more in our daily lives and

ministries. And may Jesus' life be our life. May His will be our will and may His work be our work this coming day. Amen.

Lenten Devotional for March 31, 2010 Mark 12:1-11

Mark 12:1-12

Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

*"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?'*

During the last week of his life, Jesus told this little story to the elders in the Temple who questioned his authority to teach. They understood and feared the story because it was about them. The parable has complex meanings and many metaphors. The most eye-opening to me being that the man who planted the vineyard with such care represented God, the vineyard being His Kingdom, the Jewish people as the tenants and the servants as OT prophets, and finally the beloved son, the heir was sent---Jesus.

Like the tenants, we have free choice to be good or evil but in the end we are all accountable to the "Man" in the story. Isn't it wonderful to know we have a patient, merciful Creator who brings justice when He judges disobedience. This little story tells the tale of God's gift of His Son for man's salvation and of man's murder of that Son.

Finally, "haven't you read the scriptures", Jesus asked those elders, referring to the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures, as in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard? We are the overseers of this earth. Are we working the vineyard as God desires? Pray that we nurture it well and be ever mindful that Jesus is the foundation on which our faith is built.

Lenten Devotional for April 1, 2010 Mark 14:12-25

Mark 14:12-25

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and

wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’ So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.’

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

In our family, significant moments are marked with significant meals. Our celebrations of birthdays, graduations, anniversaries and holidays are all celebrated with food; good food, lots of it. The Hebrew people have always marked important religious moments with significant meals. Perhaps the most significant moment and meal is the Passover.

In the Passover meal, the Hebrew people recall their deliverance from bondage and death at Pharaoh’s hands and their entrance, with God’s help into the promised land.

In this reading from Mark’s gospel we see a couple of disciples making preparation for Jesus and the disciples to celebrate the Passover. Little did they know that this Passover would become another significant moment marked by another significant meal. Jesus uses the bread and the wine of the Passover meal to explain the meaning of his death on the cross which would come on the next day. Jesus’ words at this meal, instead of relating them back to Israel’s Exodus links them ahead to his death. With his death, the kingdom will come.

So each Sunday we gather around the table, we break the bread, we drink from the cup. We remember his death and resurrection as we await the day of his coming. We take into ourselves, the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven; the Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. We are forgiven, we are renewed. Then we are sent out into the world. Sent out to be the body of Christ. Sent out carrying the kingdom within us. Sent out being the eyes, heart, hands, knees, and feet of Jesus in this world, right now. Sent out to offer ourselves as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God which is our spiritual worship.

Lenten Devotional for April 2, 2010 John 13:36-38

John 13:36-38

Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.’ Peter said to him, ‘Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’ Jesus answered, ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.’

How many times has the Lenten season begun with my with resolve to follow a well-intentioned discipline of prayer and study. With a desire to spend devoted time with Jesus and scripture, I buy a brand new Lenten devotional book, or take one like this one home and set it by my chair. The first day is like a blank page. With a fresh journal by my side, a well lubricated ink pen, and my well-worn bible – I sit, read the scripture

and reflection for the day, ponder and pray. ----So renewing, so inspiring, so satisfying. Setting a certain portion of time in my life to immerse myself in the words of scripture and tending to my life with Jesus, I kind of feel like Simon Peter – when he says “I lay down my life for you”.

Day two dawns crowded with demands that require time and attention. I still find some time for devotions, but it is cut short. What can I do? Day three – I’ve fallen into bed and I am half asleep before I realize I did not sit in my chair to with my devotion for the day – Lord, forgive me. Tomorrow will be better, I promise. But somehow tomorrow’s obligations summon me in ways I did not expect. And then someone casually asks, “...what are you doing for Lent?” I offer my “plan” – but fail to mention my dereliction of duty in following the “plan”. Is that a kind of denial??

Simon Peter wants to give his life over to Jesus. In my heart, I want to give my life over to Jesus.....but too often I want to do so at my convenience. Jesus cautions Simon Peter, “... before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” Simon Peter can’t imagine how he would do this, he loves Jesus too much to deny him. I didn’t intend to neglect the call to pray, either. Circumstances dictated Simon Peter’s actions, even though his heart was in the right place. Circumstances dictate my actions, even though I believe my heart is in the right place. My intentions have been sincere; my love of God and Jesus sure. But far too often, I attribute my strength and my intentions to myself. In all my eagerness, I can fail to pray to the very one who longs for relationship. I fail to pray for the heart, the patience, the perseverance, the assistance, the grace to turn my heart toward the God of love. Lord, hear my prayer.....

Lenten Devotional for April 3, 2010 John 19:38-42

John 19:38-42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Now that Jesus is declared dead and his disciples have fled for their lives, two "secret" disciples emerge to claim the body for burial. How many other hidden disciples were there? What role did they play in spreading the Good News of the Kingdom? Were they free to come out of hiding now that the authorities felt they were rid of the Jesus nuisance?

It must have taken great courage for Joseph of Aramathea and Nicodemus to reveal their association with Jesus. The eleven remaining disciples of the inner circle had gone into hiding, fearing for their own lives. Their despair and grief must have been overwhelming and yet these two found the courage to face the authorities and ask permission to bury Jesus. I ask myself, “Would I have the guts to do that?”

A prayer quoted from Jim Cotter's "Psalms for a Pilgrim People":

"God of mystery and revelation, at the extremes of our distress and despair, when you are the only hope left, let us hear your name again, and so take courage on the journey."

Amen

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