



**A 2010 Lenten Devotional Guide
by and for the members of St John's**



St John's Lutheran Church
Salisbury, North Carolina

intro

In your hands is a gift. It's also a tool.

Throughout the Lenten season, members of St John's have shared personal insight and stories surrounding the appointed readings for the day. In each case, an extended reading begins the devotion, followed by a focus verse upon which the devotion is based. In many cases, a simple prayer follows. We feel certain that you will be blessed by this collection of devotions. Three days each week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays) the authors invite you to carefully unwrap their gift and place it close to your heart. A gift that shares the love of Christ.

These devotions also are tools for enriching your faith. Just like a football player spends a lot of time in practice, the Bible teaches us that Christians should practice their faith . to engage in certain disciplines that help to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ. These devotions can be tools to developing such disciplines. Three days each week you will be invited to set aside time to read God's Word and share in a prayer that will be common to many other members of St John's. If time permits, be sure to read the complete reading(s). If time is short, the focus verse will guide you into the devotional.

Many of us are able to identify at least one discipline that we need to work on. Perhaps you've gotten out of the habit of reading the Bible. Perhaps the craziness of the day sends prayer to the back burner of your to-do list. If that's the case, let these devotions be a jump start to establishing (or renewing) a much-needed discipline. When you do, you'll quickly recognize them as marvelous gifts of love and tools for faithful living.

Blessings to you in your journey. We'll see you in worship.

Ash Wednesday

Today's reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Joel 2:13

When was the last time you used the word *sin*+other than during a Sunday morning confession? You probably haven't used it for a while. The same is true with *damnation* or *repentance* or *salvation* or *iniquity* or *transgression*. And who's used the phrase *sackcloth and ashes*+lately? I sure haven't.

Some words sound like language from an earlier age, when human relationship with God was defined by blame and threat and fear. We may not even know what the words mean, but we know that they judge us and produce guilt within us. The obvious solution to the discomfort they provoke is to stop saying them altogether, which is what many folks have done.

Fewer and fewer of us have used the words in our prayers and conversations. Some of our churches have stopped using them as well, dropping the confession of sin from Sunday worship in order to make the time a more positive experience. When we speak of God, we go straight for the grace. That's why the story of the prodigal son is one of our favorite stories because it assures us that no matter how far we have gone from God and no matter what we have done, we are always welcome home. After all, Jesus died with his arms wide open as an everlasting reminder of our pardon, and all who have been baptized in his name have received the forgiveness of sin. Why, then, should we talk about sin? Why dwell on the failures God has promised to forgive?

Do you want to know why? Because we believe that God wants to use us in his desire to redeem the world. We have been chosen, in the language of Genesis, not only to be blessed, but also to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Our participation in that high calling requires us to understand God's grace as something more than the infinite forgiveness of our sins. Talk of God's grace includes talk of regeneration . . . of new life, new vision, new values, new behavior. To do that, the Bible begs of us: *Return to the Lord, your God. He is gracious and merciful.*+And he is. So eager to strip us of our sin and welcome us to new life.

Pastor Rhodes Woolly

Friday, February 19

Today's readings: Exodus 5:10-23 and Acts 7:30-34

Then the slave drivers and the foremen went out and said to the people, "This is what Pharaoh says: 'I will not give you any more straw. Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all.'" Exodus 5:10,11

One of many reasons I appreciate the Bible . the inspired Word of God -- is that it's so real. It doesn't gloss over the fact that life is often very hard, even for a believer . sometimes even **harder** for believers! This was the case in today's reading. After Moses asked Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves take a three-day journey to worship God, what was Pharaoh's response? He decreed that, not only did the Israelites have to make their usual quota of bricks, now they had to gather their own straw! In other words, things went from bad to worse.

Acts 7:34 recalls the Lord telling Moses, "I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. +But it wasn't a quick fix. And things got worse before they got better.

Especially in today's economy, many people are stressed as one of two extremes . unemployed and looking for work; or overworked because their department was downsized. More students to teach, more customers to serve, more patients to care for, more projects to manage. Figuratively not only having to make the usual quota of bricks, but now having to gather their own straw! Things going from bad to worse.

In everyday life, when you think you're about maxed out, the car breaks down. A relationship breaks down. You get sick -- maybe even terminal cancer.

Yet overarching all this is the Easter promise of John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. +

Prayer for the day: *Jesus, thank You for dying for us to set us free. You're the hope to which we cling, the Savior to Whom we sing.*

B.J. Connor

Monday, February 22

Today's readings: Exodus 6:1-13 and Acts 7:35-42

"This is the Moses who said to his congregation, 'God will raise up a prophet just like me from your descendants.' This is the Moses who stood between the angel speaking at Sinai and your fathers assembled in the wilderness and took the life-giving words given to him and handed them over to us, words our fathers would have nothing to do with. They craved the old Egyptian ways, whining to Aaron, 'Make us gods we can see and follow.'" – Acts 7: 37-39

True remembrance happens when words are taken to heart and tied to something tangible, engaging our senses either positively or negatively. Babies and children are living examples of this process and for them, it's all about the tangible.

Promise a child something he can't immediately touch, taste, see or hear and he'll choose that tangible cookie jar instead, yearning for the instant pleasure of that sugary lump of cooked dough. Simply telling a child that Mommy loves him doesn't cut the mustard. But making him those fresh-baked cookies or reading "Goodnight, Moon" to him for the 438th time or making sure he gets a hug and a kiss along with that bandage on his boo-boo now THAT gets his attention!

Unfortunately, it's not always the positive reminders that teach most effectively. The Israelites have often been compared to children, whining their way through the desert. And just like children, they were incredibly stubborn when presented with the intangible. There were no cookies for them, once they got out of the clutches of Pharaoh; just two generations of foolish choices and wilderness hardship before they finally got the message and believed God's promises.

And later on, when we still cried over and over, "Make us gods we can see and follow," what did God finally do? He gave us the most tangible thing he had to offer – his only son, living with us and breathing the same air as us for 33 years, before allowing him to be slaughtered on a barbaric tool of death. But that wasn't the end of it. No, that's when the tangible positive took place, with the magic and grace of Christ's resurrection, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that if God could do that for Jesus, why not us, too?

That's what we need to remember and embrace and take so thoroughly into our hearts that nothing can budge it. We don't need to waste years in the desert making foolish choices, because we already have the Great Promise – very tangible, very real, and essentially all that really matters in the end.

Wednesday, February 24

Today's readings: Job 1:1-22 and Luke 21:34-22:6

"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." Job 1:21

What faith! Job said these words after hearing that his servants, property, and children were destroyed. Can we imagine hearing bad news such as a serious diagnosis and having that kind of faith? I am confident that it would not be easy. Think about those who lost their homes and family members in the earthquake in Haiti or those who are still rebuilding from Katrina in Louisiana.

Verse six opens in heaven with the angels being presented before the LORD. Satan (the accuser) is present. God asks him where has he been and Satan explains that he has been walking around the world. However, we do not know what he is actually looking for. We guess he is looking for someone that will curse God for their difficulties in life. God praises Job for his faith and resistance to sin. Satan asks God, "Does Job fear you for nothing?" Satan wages a bet with God that if everything was taken from Job that he will turn on God and blame God for all of his suffering. God goes along with the bet with the exception that Satan cannot kill Job. The catastrophes begin in Job's life.

What message can we learn from the story of Job? The message is trusting God when things are tough. Job trusted God even when those who were precious to him were taken away. It is easy to remember how blessed we are when things are going well. But it is in the conflicts and hard times where we must hold on to God's love for us.

As I read this story, I recall a song I've heard on the radio that echoes Job's praise and ours: "Blessed be the name of the Lord; blessed be your name; blessed be the name of the Lord; blessed be your glorious name. You give and take away, you give and take away, my heart will choose to say Lord, blessed be your name." (Matt Redman's words)

Tony Lippard

Friday, February 26

Today's readings: Genesis 13:1-7, 14-18 and Philippians 3:2-12

In the Genesis reading, Abram and Lot have conflict. They're living too close together, which causes "trauma and drama."

In the directions from Pastor Rhodes to those who offered to write for the Lenten devotional pieces, he mentioned that "God escorts us through the power of conflict to new life." Conflict can be powerful, assuredly, but I began to think of the word "power" differently in relation to the word "conflict."

What if conflict is powerful because it can improve your life? Abram's life improved because of the conflict he experienced; so maybe I need to shift my mental image to acknowledge that conflict can be good, healthy, and provide a positive life-change. As a church congregation, we have had some differences of opinion about the church's paths. In the past I would have viewed that as bad or crippling. But I'm beginning to see that conflict can make us question, listen, re-ask, and listen again to one another and ourselves.

The other part of that phrase mentioned that "God escorts us *ō*". I've always tried to see the "trauma and drama" in my life as opportunities. I admit it is sometimes a struggle and there have been times when I thought that God had left.

As the word "escort" swam around in my head, I thought of one of my brothers. My oldest brother is a trucker and in his various jobs, he was required to have an escort - a smaller 1-2 passenger truck with flags stating there was a "Heavy Load" ahead. The escort was required to stay behind.

Wow, my God never left! He was there all along. Those times when I thought God had left I realized that maybe he was escorting me; his presence was **behind** rather than in front of me. And, maybe he stayed behind so that he wasn't blocking my view. Maybe my God wanted me to see the full picture.

It is a great visual for me that as I face life's trauma and drama, that he is escorting me "through the power of conflict to new life."

Sandy Buechler

Monday, March 1

Today's reading: Matthew 5:13-16

Heavenly Father, your view of kindness and forgiveness toward our fellow man often becomes mired in my anger and resentment toward others. Help me to know and do your will in all things, for the sake of your holy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16

C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Efficacy of Prayer*, "We are not mere recipients or spectators [of God's grace]. We are either privileged to share . . . or compelled to collaborate [in the Lord's work]." Jesus shows us how to live and do God's work through His acts of kindness to the people He encountered as He walked among us and He reminds us through His words. We are to love, to forgive, to pray, and to care for others so that our lives . . . every thought, word and deed . . . reflect God's grace and endless mercy.

Are we really supposed to forgive terrorists, dishonest elected officials, and drunk drivers? Are we really supposed to give something to the same panhandlers we see everyday? Some people are so annoying. How are we supposed to keep unkind thoughts from crossing our minds? Obviously, being a mere recipient of grace or a spectator would be a lot easier.

But Jesus didn't take the easy road. He was betrayed by a friend, humiliated by the religious and government leaders, and suffered and died a horrible death for our redemption. Even from the cross, He said, "Father, forgive them."

The Light of the World tells us to let our light so shine. We are privileged to share in the Lord's work, to do good deeds and lead blessed lives. During this Lenten season, perhaps we will each pray for the compulsion to collaborate with our Father, so that His will is truly done on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer for the day: *Create in me a clean heart, Father. Renew me with the gift of your Holy Spirit so that my life reflects the joy of my salvation in Christ and so that my every thought, word and deed brings glory to You. Amen.*

C.J. Cooper

Wednesday, March 3

Today's Readings: Exodus 33:1-6 and Romans 4:1-12

"Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Romans 4:3b

Today's reading from Romans reminds us about two important examples of faith: our patriarch in the faith, Abraham, and a great teacher of the faith, Paul. Since Abraham believed, he was credited with righteousness. It was Abraham's willingness to trust God that made him righteous in the eyes of God. Abraham did not achieve this by attempts to impress God. He believed in God's promises. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul adds teaching about why this patriarch's example is so important. He says that if we work for wages, we expect to get paid. He goes on to say that if we don't do the work and get paid, then that's a gift. It's something undeserved. Christian believers call that grace. Notice that Abraham did nothing to deserve God's love. God chose Abraham. Abraham didn't choose God.

Lent is the season to ponder the wonder of God's grace. Whenever we look to the crucified Lord hanging on the cross, dying for our sins, we see God's ultimate gift of grace. This should inspire us to have an attitude of gratitude and a spirit of humility. I sometimes imagine what an impact we would make if we practiced our faith with gratitude and humility. Our church's leaders would not have to decide about any spending cuts. The church would be growing rapidly, because our neighbors and friends would want a share of the excitement we enjoy. I often remember the words below when I think about God's gift of grace and our appropriate response.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.
ELW, Hymn 803 (st.1 and 4)

Prayer for the day: *Heavenly Father, give us faith to trust in you. Remind us of the greatest testimony to your faithfulness: Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Amen*

Pastor Darrell Norris
Chaplain, The Lutheran Home and Trinity Oaks
Visitation Pastor, St John's

Lenten Devotional Guide

Friday, March 5

Today's readings: 2 Chronicles 20:1-22 and Luke 13:22-31

"Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's" 2 Chronicles 20:15

Just like King Jehoshaphat of Judah who faced yet another invading army who was bigger, stronger and more powerful than he was, we find ourselves in a battle with things of this world. The king reminds us that the battle is not ours alone, but God's. His response to fear is prayer and his prayer is what my Bible calls the model prayer. The king begins with adoration for God . not a problem list. He ends the prayer thanking God in advance for the outcome . confident of God's answer even before it comes.

When it appeared that a move was in our future, I was caught up in fear. Not because I didn't think that God would put us in a wonderful place (like St. John's!), but fear of leaving a place we had called home for 13 years. All of our children are Virginians, we had a church that we loved, I had a career that was rewarding, and who can beat the beauty of the Shenandoah Valley? I was gripped with fear of the unknown and the idea of starting over again in a new place. For weeks I ignored the idea thinking it would go away.

It wasn't until last Lenten season that I was struck with how much God loves us and has given us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Lent became a time for me to be intentional in my response to that love. No matter how we observe Lent, it invites each of us to pay more attention to the new life we've been given in Jesus Christ - new life that cannot be held hostage by fear. Of course risk and uncertainty will never be erased from human experiences, but the example of King Jehoshaphat can be ours even today. Start by praying and praising God.

Prayer for the day: *Dear God, today let me start and finish the day by praising you for your glorious acts of grace in my life. Help me to hear your word when I am afraid and to put my trust in you knowing that the battle is not mine, but yours. Amen*

"When I am afraid I put my trust in you, God." (Psalm 56:3)

Krista Woolly

Monday, March 8

Today's readings: Daniel 3:[1-18]19-30 and Revelation 2:8-11

Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him." Daniel 3:28

The furnace was seven times hotter than it needed to be. So hot that it killed the soldiers responsible for disposing of those who refused to obey the command to bow down and worship a man-made idol.

Every child knows the story of Shadrach (Hananiah), Meshach (Mishael), and Abednego (Azariah). These Jewish youth, along with Daniel, were chosen to serve King Nebuchadnezzar and were deported to Babylon. Chosen because of their appearance, wisdom, knowledge and ability to learn (Daniel 1), they were the cream of the crop. Their destiny was to serve as government administrators for the king after three years of training and a future life of ease and prosperity.

And thenō . Rather than taking the easy way out, they risked it all by refusing to bow down to a man-made idol. They were thrown into a fiery furnace and emerged alive, to the surprise of the king. What courage, faith, and trust did that take? These three, despite threats of a fiery death, continued to obey God and to remembered the command to worship no other gods. They continued to hold deep faith and trust in God to save them, serving as examples (or even heroes) to us today to remain faithful and to have complete trust in God. King Nebuchadnezzar was so influenced by their courage he acknowledged that God was powerful, and he actually commanded his people not to speak against God.

Do we have idols today to which we are tempted to bow? Are our idols money or possessions? Our career? Our own self-pride? Do we bow to those temptations and let them take priority over our faith and trust in God? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three wise men of the Old Testament, serve as examples of how we are to put our complete trust in God when we are faced with temptations or choices in life.

Prayer for the day: *Dear Lord, any time we have choices to make, please help us to remember the example set for us by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, recognizing that the easy choice is not always the best one, and that we should always put our complete trust in you. Amen.*

Eleanor Sifford

Wednesday, March 10

Today's readings: Daniel 6:1-28 and Revelation 3:1-6

"May your God whom you serve continually, deliver you!" Daniel 6:16

King Darius was pleased with Daniel because he had distinguished himself among the leaders of the kingdom. However, other leaders conspired against him, and compelled the king to sign a document stating that only the king should receive petitions. No other man. No god.

But Daniel continued giving thanks and praise to God three times daily, as was his custom.

Darius had to adhere to the rule, and threw Daniel in the lions' den. Because of Daniel's great faith in God, he was protected.

"My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong," Daniel tells Darius in verse 22.

How many times have you faced your own lions' den and God protected you? Has God been there when you lost a loved one? Has God been there when you lost a job? Has God been there when you were sick?

Without a doubt, and thanks be to God!

And how many times have you wished God would shut your own mouth? There's an inspirational saying that goes like this: *"Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth."* I think about that saying a lot!

We've all learned that words can be encouraging or kind - or that they can be hurtful, sometimes more hurtful than a fist. Once unkind words have been uttered, they can never be recanted. In my education classes, we're reminded not to say negative words to students in times of frustration - that kind of damage can take years to undo.

Thanks be to God for walking with us in everything we say and in everything we do.

Prayer for the day: *Dear God, Thank you for your protection from every kind of "lion's den," in times of difficult situations and in times when I might not always say the right thing. Help me always to be steadfast in your Word. In your name I pray. Amen.*

Susan Shinn

Friday, March 12

Today's readings: Ezekiel 17:1-10 and Romans 2:12-16

"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified." Romans 2:13

Paul makes it clear in the second chapter of Romans that we are all sinners. From the beginning of time our human nature was to be stubborn and self-centered. We have been given a conscience to discern right from wrong, yet we sin and are disobedient to God's covenant. Still he promises to never leave us and continues to bless us with his incredible gifts of grace, unconditional love and forgiveness. He loves us **that much**. How awesome is our God!

Righteousness is not merely an absence of sin. It is allowing God to help us be more like Christ. But we cannot be filled with righteousness if we are filled with ~~self~~.

God expects us as Christians to do more than just hear and understand his word. He expects us to act. Spending time studying the Bible, meditating God's Word and daily prayer are important, but not enough. In order to become engaged in a true relationship with Christ we must become ~~doers~~ of the Word. Then and only then will we be able to experience a powerful walk with our Lord.

What are the responsibilities of a ~~doer~~? He or she is someone who realizes that God wants us to love **all** people and to reach out to **all** people who are less fortunate than we are. He is someone who helps build a **stranger's** faith that may be weak and someone whose compassion enables them to see **all** those who are lost. In order to do these things we may need to step out of our comfort zones. As ~~doers~~ we should be willing to do just that, and to sacrifice our time, possessions, money and energy in order to give to God our loving hearts. After all, isn't that what he has given us? A ~~doer~~ understands that God is the source of everything and knows he will more than compensate for whatever we need or have offered to others in his Holy Name. Let's **all** commit ourselves to becoming ~~doers~~ for Christ.

Prayer for the day: *Heavenly Father, help us to live morally right and to obey your Covenant. Turn us away from the temptations of sin. Teach us not to neglect others but to reach out to them with compassion so that we may provide comfort, encouragement and love. You know our needs. Help us to hear the needs of others and to respond. In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.*

Sally Taylor

Monday, March 15

Today's readings: Numbers 13:17-27 and Luke 13:18-21

Jesus said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?" Luke 13:18

When you think of a mustard seed, what comes to mind? For most of us, we probably have not thought lately about a mustard seed because of its insignificant size. Even the Bible says it is the least of all seeds - but also says that it is the greatest among herbs. (Mt 13:32)

Similar to a mustard seed in its infancy, we at birth are in our infancy. As the seed develops into a tree with big strong branches, it grows, strengthens and provides shelter and refuge for other life to flourish. Birds make nests in its branches. As Christians, we develop from infancy and grow spiritually so that we might provide and nourish those around us by spreading our faith - just as the mustard tree spreads its branches.

A mustard seed has little or no significance unless it is planted. Through watering, sunshine and cultivation, that tiny seed grows into something bigger and better than we could have ever thought possible or ever expected - not just into a plant or bush, but a tree. It's bigger and better than anything else in the garden.

We seem so insignificant when we are born - as insignificant as a seed. But through our baptism, worship and prayer, we are nourished to grow into the Christians God created us to be. In that capacity, we are given a glimpse of the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God!

Prayer for the day: *God our Father, help us not to dwell on life's problems and issues in a mustard seed form. Help us to plant seeds of faith and cultivate our relationship with Christ so that we may blossom spiritually to reach your kingdom in our journey.*

Glenn and Rebecca Terry

Wednesday, March 17

Today's readings: Joshua 4:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. 2 Corinthians 4:16

Society has a way of pushing the buttons of my outer nature to measure myself by how much I do and have; yet society doesn't set boundaries for what is enough. So no matter how much multi-tasking I do, I feel like I'm wasting away as I stay attached to my plans and become resentful that I can't have things my way. I get caught focusing on what is missing rather than focusing on what is present. I lose heart.

I know that I am loved by God and that God created me as one who is worthy of love. How do I remind my head to stay in relationship to my heart where I truly can feel this love? By keeping heart, I find my inner nature as a spiritual being celebrating the grace of God's love shown in all that is present.

Just as nature responds to God's plan day by day, even moment by moment, my inner nature yearns to respond moment by moment to what is before me. Though I may not understand the complex processes of my body being renewed as I breathe, eat, drink, and move, I do understand the plan as being rather simple. Similarly, though I don't understand the unlimited ways of God, I do understand God's plan of relationship as being rather simple. For it is in my relationships that I am reminded of my purpose: to love God, love neighbor, and love self.

Outer nature vs. inner nature. Holding the tension of these opposites requires me to stay in relationship with God, my neighbor, and myself.

Prayer for the day: *Dear God, may I deepen my heart for Your grace that constantly renews my spirit. Today I give thanks for Your plan of staying in loving relationship with me and inviting me into loving relationship with others. Amen*

Mark Ritchie

Friday, March 19

Today's readings: Joshua 4:14-24 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-15

And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

2 Corinthians 5:15

Today's readings remind us how faithful God is. The last verse, written above, I recommend to you for memorizing.

This little verse has the power to alter our lives because it inspires us to focus our living on the one who deserves it. Jesus is the Lord of your life and my life because he died and was raised. St. Paul reminds us about what it means to call Jesus Lord. He teaches that we should live to serve the one who died and lives again.

Alexander Papaderos, a doctor of philosophy, worked for many years after World War II to bring peace to the countries of Europe. He got some great inspiration from a little discovery he made as a child. When I was a small child, he said, during the war we were poor and lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. They came from a wrecked German motorcycle. I began to play with the biggest piece of the mirror that I scratched on a stone until it was round. As I used it for a simple toy, I became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into the dark places where the sun would never shine. in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. As I became mature, I grew to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. The light will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it.+

We affirm that Jesus is Lord when we reflect His light into deep, dark places where people hunger for it.

Prayer for the day: *Keep in mind that Jesus Christ has died for us and is risen from the dead. He is our saving Lord; he is joy for all ages.*

Lutheran Book of Worship, Canticle 13

Pastor Darrell Norris

Monday, March 22

Today's readings: Exodus 32:7-14 and Luke 15:1-10

In today's world, some people become known as party animals. We think of them as those who are always ready to whop it up and celebrate. Sometimes the reason behind their togetherness is more for the partying aspect than for genuine celebration. Such occasions are void of the concept of rejoicing in its truest sense.

When Luke tells us that there is rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repents, he is not describing a party in current cultural terms. He is trying to make clear that to be glad, happy, and joyful is a deeper concept than just partying.

What we would do well to appreciate is that God allows us to be happy for just cause. That's a far cry from being a party animal, just for the sake of celebrating. We Christians are not sticks in the mud, but we are those who have witnessed the saving power of God's love and, therefore, are full of great joy. Christians love to be happy, joyful, and delighted.

St. John's leaders had a focused vision when they began the outreach ministry of a contemporary format for one of its worship services. As it was to be located in the area that had been known as St. John's Center, it seemed right to simply call it the St. John's Center Celebration. That contemporary worship experience reflects the spirit of joy, delight, and gladness that is part and parcel of our Christian faith. It is not a party place, but a joyful place. It is Center Celebration.

Luke wants his readers to realize the true joy that is experienced in heaven when one sinner comes to repentance and salvation. It is like the Shepherd who finds his lost sheep, or the woman who finds her lost coin. They are so joyful that they even want others to come and join in their celebrating.

It seems to me that we Christians would do well to appreciate the joy that is ours as found sinners. We don't have to be party animals in order to truly rejoice. We simply need to value the depth of our delight that is the hallmark of our Christian Faith.

Prayer for the day: *Lord, help us to truly rejoice with you in celebration and joy as members of your family, the Church. Amen*

Pastor David Nelson
Interim Visitation Pastor, St John's

Wednesday, March 24

Today's readings: 2 Kings 4:1-7 and Luke 9:10-17

Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves." 2 Kings 4:1-7

A mother with two young children experiences the unexpected loss of her husband. In the midst of her grief, a creditor arrives to claim her children as payment for her husband's debt!

She approaches the prophet Elisha who wonders how he can possibly help her, especially when she has nothing except a jar of oil. He tells her to borrow as many vessels as possible and to start pouring the oil. When one vessel is filled, she is to set it aside and continue pouring until all are filled.

She remembers that her husband trusted God; she too will trust God and His promises. The oil flows until all the vessels are filled. Now she can sell the oil, pay their debts, and save her family.

God filled earthen vessels with a never-ending flow of oil just as He fills each of us with His never-ending love. All we have to do is prepare the vessels, ourselves, to accept the joyous love and salvation that God promises each of us. What miraculous gifts - free for the taking!

Many in Haiti, just like the biblical widow, have also experienced miraculous rescues. One wife and mother, trapped for six days under rubble, was finally freed. Her immediate response? She burst into joyful song praising God for her release. A reporter thrust a microphone at her asking, "Did you expect to be saved?" She looked at him incredulously and said, "Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Yes, Lord, of course we expect you to save us. Why wouldn't we? You love us, and that's all we need.

Prayer for the day: Dear Lord, we owe you everything, all that we are and all that we have. *We praise you today for the greatest gift of all, salvation through your son Jesus Christ, sacrificed for us so we may one day enter into your kingdom with joyous praise. Amen*

Judy Trexler

Friday, March 26

Today's readings: Habakkuk 3:2-15 and Luke 18:31-34

But they (the disciples) understood nothing about these things (Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection); in fact, what he (Jesus) said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.+Luke 18:34

Two small children are enjoying a walk along a secluded path through the woods. One says to the other, "When you're walking along the path, do you ever pretend that there is something terrible just around the next corner waiting for you; and you've got to go and face it? It makes it so exciting!"

In the case of Jesus, it was no game of let's pretend. In fact, the grim truth was that something terrible was waiting for him. He knew what crucifixion was like; he had witnessed it, and yet he went on.

Isn't it interesting that despite Jesus' frequent warnings of what was to happen to him, we sometimes wonder why, when the cross came, it was such a shock and such a shattering blow to his disciples? The truth is they simply could not comprehend what Jesus was saying to them. They were obsessed with the idea of a conquering king who would ride into Jerusalem and blast his enemies off the face of the planet.

The message for us seems simple: The human mind has a way of listening only to what it wants to hear. There is a kind of wishful thinking which believes that the unpleasant truth cannot really be true. We must always struggle against the tendency to hear only what we want to hear.

One more thing must be noted: Jesus never foretold the cross without also foretelling the resurrection. He knew that shame lay before him, but he was equally certain that glory lay before him as well. The first congregation I served is called, "Cross and Crown Lutheran Church." What an appropriate name for Lutherans who observe the season of Lent and remember Jesus' great suffering and death. And yet we know that Easter is just around the corner, and the three greatest words of scripture will be proclaimed: "He is Risen!" It was the certainty of ultimate victory that enabled Jesus to face the apparent defeat of the cross. Jesus knew that without a CROSS there can never be any CROWN. Thanks be to God!

Prayer for the day: *Gracious and Loving God; we pray for the wisdom that allows us to be good listeners, even when we don't like what we hear. We offer thanks to you for the cross and the crown. Amen.*

Monday of Holy Week

Today's reading: John 12:1-11

The house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. John 12:3

Ah! The smell of fresh coffee wafting from the kitchen will bring me there in a second. How about you? We all have an aromatic allure or two that will get our immediate response and capture our attention.

So it was with the story of Jesus's visit to the Bethany home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Oh how the costly ointment that Mary used to anoint Jesus's feet filled the house with fragrance. It got everyone's attention; even Judas whose righteous indignation was seen for the sham it actually was. For Mary, it was an act of love.

St. John saw the anointing as a sign of what was about to occur. Jesus, the Servant of servants, was now prepared to give his life for the sake of the world. John connects the fragrance of the anointing perfume to Jesus's holy death.

Perhaps Mary, herself, did not know the full significance of her adoring act. But Jesus helped everyone in the house make the connection, let her keep it for the day of my burial. Jesus was on his way to the cross. He was about to give his life as an offering in fulfillment of God's promise.

Can you smell the aroma of Jesus's holy death? It's all around us. We carry Jesus's death, his sacrifice, his life within us. In Holy Baptism we were buried with him into death, so that as Christ was raised, we too might live a new life.

It is that aroma of grace that we now carry into the world of everyday life and relationships. It is a fragrance of love, and service, and caring for others. We do not create the aroma, Jesus did. So let the aroma of his sacrifice waft into living rooms, business meetings, grocery stores, political gatherings, Rowan Helping Ministries, and Habitat for Humanity building projects. Live in its richness. Let others experience its fullness.

Prayer for the day: *O God, you have anointed us with the fragrance of your grace. Send us now, that in our daily actions and relationships, we may share the goodness of that gift with others. Amen.*

Pastor Carl Sachtleben
Pastor, St John's, 1992-2007

Tuesday of Holy Week

Today's reading: John 12:20-36

*If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.
36'While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'* John 12:35-36

In reading this Bible verse I am told that Jesus knew what the days ahead held for Him. But He also said that was why he came on earth. Each day as I wake I ask God to use me and may something I do or say show my love for Him.

My husband, Harold and I created Piedmont Garden Supply over forty years ago. The original location was where the new Justice building resides today on North Main Street. Harold and I built a business centered on good Christian values. In the 1980s the need to expand the County Court House opened a door of opportunity to relocate our business near Peeler Road. The opportunity turned out to be a lot more work than we had expected. What inventory to move, what stayed, and the quantity seemed to grow as we progressed with the move.

My responsibility was to sort through the old dusty inventory and salvage what would go to the new location and what would stay for the moving sale. You can understand why I was dressed in old clothes and why most of those days I was covered in layers of dust.

One afternoon I was asked to go to the Downtown Post Office which was then next to St. John's Lutheran Church to pick up an important package. I did not want to go. I was filthy dirty and tired from a long days work. I really was afraid someone I knew would see me in this terrible condition but I still walked to the Post Office.

As I was almost to my destination my fear was realized. I hoped the side walk would swallow me up in time but I was seen by someone I knew, Shirley Ritchie. But to my joy Shirley greeted me with a big hi Barbara+and a big smile to match. Her loving greeting made me feel ten feet tall. Shirley did not care what I looked like; she just cared for me. You do not have to have an earth shattering experience to find the love of God. Just a smile and a big hug means so much when you are having a hard day.

I will be eighty years old this year and I still do not know why I was put here on this earth. Maybe it is to give big hugs. That would be ok by me. God has still given me so much to be thankful for. My God knows I am not perfect but He still loves me.

Prayer for the day: *Take my life and let it be all for you and your glory and let my life be yours. (song from Center Celebration)*

Barbara Rufty

Lenten Devotional Guide

Wednesday of Holy Week

Today's reading: John 13:21-32

Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. John 13:26

When I read this well known scripture, I think back to the first time I heard this story. I remember feeling confused and shocked by Judas's betrayal of Jesus. The thought of betraying a teacher, a friend, or a loved one seemed unfathomable, and the fact that Jesus knew about Judas and his plan made this story seem even more unrealistic. Over time this story became familiar to me, and yet it remained strange.

Now as I really think about the words that are written, I find a sort of comfort in the calm demeanor of Jesus in this situation. Jesus is calm because he knows. He knows his fate. He knows the end that awaits him. He knows he will not only be betrayed by Judas, but also die painfully on the cross. Jesus knows because he is part of a plan, God's plan. This is the plan that is presented in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* This is the plan that Judas had to help God fulfill, and in this way, Judas, who I once saw as the ultimate evil, is instead a piece of the ultimate good.

So, when considering this scripture as a manifestation of God's plan, you see that your almighty and merciful God has a plan for you. And though you may not know the plan as Jesus did, you should still feel the same comfort and calm, knowing that God is with you and he has a plan for you.

He's got the whole world in his hands+

Addison Corriher

Good Friday

Today's reading: John 18:1-19:42

Lifesavers+

The children met the pastor in the front of the church. Together, they looked at a small, brown, rectangular box with a sign on the outside that said Lifesavers. Inside that box were various items the pastor shared with the children one-by-one:

- 1 roll of multicolored candy Life Savers
- 1 match
- 1 bottle of medicine

1 bottle of water
1 cross

The children discussed how each item may be able to save a life. The last item, the cross, was not only the point of the children's sermon, but also the best item in the box. The cross on which Jesus died is the ultimate Lifesaver! That is the message of Good Friday!

A cross is in the center of our altar at St. John's and it is central to who we are. The cross of death has become the symbol of life. And, on Good Friday, life and death meet at the cross.

In Holy Baptism, we are joined in the death and the resurrection of our Lord. We are born into a broken world, and in the water and Word of Holy Baptism we are born again as a child of God. There, we inherit eternal life and we become a part of the church which is the Body of Christ. The sign of the cross is made on the forehead of the one baptized. Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.+

On this Good Friday, let me remind you that there is water in the font where we are baptized, but there is also blood.

Have you ever heard the expression "blood is thicker than water"? The saying is a suggestion that if we are related to a person (aunt, brother, sister, cousin) then the DNA relationship is special. That is why we need to remember Christ's blood is in the baptismal water. Jesus suffered and died on the cross and shed His blood, and we are baptized into His death. Our baptism cleanses us and gives us life. His shed blood is in the font and He is our blood brother. related in a special way. We have a new relationship with Him and with others-blood brothers and sisters, bound together with blood that is not our own.

Good Friday is the day when we recall, as Christians, that we have been washed by the blood of the lamb. Our Lord's blood and tears are on the cross, in the water and at the table.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life." . John 3:16

The appointed text for today from chapters 18 and 19 of St. John and John 3:16 reminds us of how Jesus' death, to bear our sins, is a Lifesaver. Easter is approaching and it is a day when we celebrate life. If you worship on Good Friday and remember the death of our Lord, the day of resurrection will be even more glorious!

Pastor Leonard Bolick
Bishop, North Carolina Synod

Easter Sunday

Today's reading: John 20:1-18

Happy Easter!

Wouldn't you have loved to be a fly on the wall or a squirrel in the tree that first Easter morning? Watching Mary Magdalene approach the tomb, the sun just peaking over the horizon. Quiet and still. Such sadness on her face, with absolutely no expectation for what she is getting ready to discover.

She approaches the tomb, notices that the large stone has been removed. Frantic, she looks for someone to question, Finding no one, she runs back to the disciples, who themselves run to the tomb. And what's the first thing they find? This is odd: linen wrappings+rolled up and neatly put away.

Think about it: the Son of Man has just been raised from the dead. The most significant moment in human history -- and what's the first thing Jesus does? He folds up his jammies and tidies up the place!

Easter reminds us of God's awesome power to defeat sin and death. At the cross, Jesus confronts the very nature of evil and prepares the way for new life. In the midst of those mystical three days, fully incomprehensible to us, God's cosmic and profound power is revealed

But the fly on the wall of the tomb noticed something else that first Easter morning . that Jesus is concerned about the little things, too -- even what we might consider the mundane and ordinary.

It's comforting to me to know that Jesus is fully present in the ordinariness of my life. He doesn't leave me to fend for myself at work, at school, in relationship with my neighbors, in the decisions big and small of everyday life. Jesus cares about every detail of my day. He gives me strength to face whatever comes my way. Daily he shapes my ordinary life and somehow --- and believe me, I'm not always sure how --- he makes it extraordinary.

The little things matter to Jesus. That gives me great joy. This morning, I hope it brings you great joy, as well.

Prayer for the day: *Lord Jesus, be present today in Word and meal, in gathering, in silence. I know that you are more ready to shower me with grace than I am to receive it. Open my heart, my eyes, my mind to see your grace in the ordinariness of this day. In your glorious name I pray. Amen.*

Pastor Rhodes Woolly