

Prepare the Way

*Reflection • Repentance •
Reconciliation • Renewal*



Jim Wolfe

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Devotions for Lent 2021

By Jim Wolfe

INTRODUCTION

February 17th is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a Christian holy day of prayer and fasting. It falls on the first day of Lent, the six weeks of penitence before Easter. Ash Wednesday is traditionally observed by Western Christians.

Ash Wednesday derives its name from the place of repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants to either the words “Repent and believe in the Gospel” or the dictum “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Traditionally, the ashes are prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebrations.

This small book of devotions has been prepared to offer suggestions and guidance for your personal reflection during the Lenten season. The devotions are based on the weekly readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. Ash Wednesday marks the first devotion, with devotions for each of the Sundays in Lent, as well as Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

The devotions are intended to be opportunities for personal reflection and renewal as well as corporate renewal. This is a moment in the life of the church when we are in dire need of renewal. Many of us have allowed ourselves to be so consumed by the woes and turmoil of life that we have forgotten whose we are and who is in control of our lives and circumstances. Before the Church can experience renewal, individual members of the Body of Christ are required to commit to personal renewal. The mission and ministry of the church relies on the power of the Holy Spirit, but also on a regenerate church membership that lives out the Great Commission.

As you read the biblical texts and the devotions, you are asked to meditate on what you are reading based on four criteria. Reflections. Repentance. Reconciliation. Renewal.

Reflection is two-fold. First, Jesus used the early morning time to get away from the crowds and spend time in prayer (Mark 1:35). Second, Jesus took the disciples away from the crowd for private instruction (Mark 4:10 (cf. 4:34; 7:17; 9:28; 10:10; 13:3)).

We cannot live as disciples of Jesus in the world unless we take time away from the world for private devotion. It is imperative that we “get alone” with Jesus to listen and learn from him. Our personal and corporate witness draws its strength and viability from our private moments of meditating on God’s word and listening to the gentle whisper of God’s Spirit. It is impossible to maintain public witness without private devotion.

Repentance is foundational to our relationship with Jesus Christ. Without repentance, salvation is impossible. When Peter preached the first Christian sermon on the day of Pentecost, he made this abundantly clear.

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

To repent means to change both attitude and behavior. Baptism becomes a rite of initiation into the Christian community. Baptism presupposes repentance, and a commitment in the name of Jesus to live life as Jesus would live it. Forgiveness is a commercial term for remission of debt. Forgiveness of sin, exemplified and taught by Jesus, is a hallmark of the Christian community.

Reconciliation follows on the heels of repentance. Forgiveness, noted as a hallmark of the Christian community, is an unyielding requirement for admission to the community and further, for life together in the community of faith.

Reconciliation is initiated by God. Paul’s letter to the Romans is quite clear.

We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:11).

This is further expounded upon in 2 Corinthians (5:17-19).

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Reconciliation with God relies on our living the ministry of reconciliation in our relationships to our brothers and sisters.

If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says 'I repent,' you must forgive (Luke 17:4).

Reflection, Repentance, and reconciliation lead to the Renewal, which is so desperately needed in our church, community, and nation.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

The transformation of our minds is fueled by the time we spend in reflection, the commitment we make to repentance, and living in a community of reconciliation with our sisters and brothers.

As we journey through the forty days of Lent we have the potential to be renewed individually and corporately. My prayer is that each of us will be open to the working and leading of the Holy Spirit as we seek God's renewal.

Suggestions:

Using the model of Jesus, find time alone away from daily distractions. Sit quietly and allow your mind to empty itself of the day's concerns. Read the text slowly and reflectively. One suggestion is to read the text more than once. Jesus used private times with the Twelve as teaching opportunities. The text has something to each of us each time we read it. When we rush through, we miss the message God has for us that day.

You need not beat yourself up on the idea of repentance. Rather, think about the grace God has shown in forgiving you and think of someone with whom you need to share that grace. To be forgiven requires that we practice forgiveness. During moments of reflection ask God to lead

you to the one you need to forgive or from whom you need to ask for forgiveness. Remember, from time to time, to be gentle and forgive yourself.

To experience forgiveness leads to reconciliation which is foundational to our relationship with God and our sisters and brothers in the community of faith.. To experience life in the community of faith requires the realization of God's mercy extended to me, and my willingness to practice that mercy toward my sisters and brothers.

It is no secret that the body of Christ needs spiritual renewal. We are broken in many ways and the only way to heal our brokenness is through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us the willingness to accept forgiveness and the audacity to forgive those who have sinned against us. As long as we find fault, criticize, and insult we need not pray for renewal.

Prayer:

Dear God, I will seek you in the quiet moments of my life and praise you in the tumultuous moments as well. I will listen reflectively for the gentle whisper of your voice and seek to forgive and receive forgiveness. For those I have harmed I will seek reconciliation and peace. Lord, God teach me to practice grace and seek renewal in my life and in the lives of my sisters and brothers in the community of faith. Amen.

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 17, 2021

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Joel 2:12-13

Take a few minutes and reflect on the words of the prophet. The Lord calls a sinful people to change their hearts and return to the Lord with faithful hearts, not merely outward signs. Essential to forgiveness and reconciliation is repentance.

A sign of repentance was sackcloth and ashes. The Old Testament is replete with references to people and, in fact, entire cities and nations sitting in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance. The point of the prophet is not an outward tearing of clothing, or sitting in sackcloth and ashes, the point is that to receive God's grace and mercy one is required to change one's heart.

Isaiah 58 addresses the willingness of God's people to practice piety without a concomitant change of heart. Fasting is worthless if in practice the poor and disenfranchised are treated unjustly. If the nation is deeply committed to being God's light in the world practice must follow profession.

There are profound implications for us individually and corporately. It is easy to come to church and sing praise songs, waving our hands joyfully toward heaven, it is far more difficult to forgive our neighbor, or even a family member. God cannot forgive unless we practice forgiveness. God cannot reconcile unless we practice reconciliation. The promises of grace and mercy are limited to those who dare to exercise forgiveness and reconciliation.

Prayer

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord that I may honestly reflect on my own practice of faith. Challenge me to examine the hatreds and bigotries that often form my treatment of others, even those of the household of faith. May my reflection lead me to repentance and reconciliation. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Amen.



ASH WEDNESDAY

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news – Mark 1:15

Mark is unique among the gospels in that it contains no birth narrative. Jesus is introduced simply as coming from Galilee to be baptized by John. The readings for this Sunday focus on baptism, beginning with ancient story of the covenant made by God to never again destroy the world by water. Peter sees the flood narrative as prefiguring baptism, not as means of cleansing dirt from the body but as, an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3:21).

It may be argued that to have a good conscience one needs to reflect on one's life, in terms of priorities, commitments, and actions. Jesus was baptized by John, not because he was a sinner, but to identify himself in faithfulness with those he came to save. The outward symbol of baptism is meaningless without a profound and obvious change of heart.

If I genuinely want to renew my spirit I must first reflect deeply and honestly on the things that I hold dear to my heart. A painful, but effective way to examine my priorities is to look through my check register or credit card statement. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). This may be a painful reflection, but it calls us to see where we place the priorities of our life.

Repentance means a change of attitudes and actions. It is possible that repentance means a reordering of earthly priorities and commitments. Material success may bar one from admission into the kingdom of God.

We are called to be reconciled to God. Such reconciliation means a restructuring of priorities to reflect the person of the Savior we claim to love and serve.

The good news that Jesus proclaimed means that we can experience forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal of our hearts to be more like Christ. Jesus paid the price for our sin and opened the way for each of us to experience new life. The good news is forgiveness and reconciliation with God and healthy relationships in the community of faith.

Prayer

Good news! Thank you, Father God, that you sent your Son to pay the price for my sin and open the door to your heart. God, please challenge me, through your Spirit, to live a life that reflects the grace you have shown me in the way I treat others. Confront me about the way I treat my sisters and brothers. Don't let me skate by and attempt to justify bad behavior. Push me to treat others with the grace and mercy that I have received from you. I want to be more like you each day. Amen



FIRST SUNDAY
in Lent

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:23-31

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

Mark 9:2-9

His faith was reckoned to him as righteousness - Romans 4:22

The Old Testament reading relates the story of God's appearance to Abram during which God covenants with Abram to make his heritage "exceedingly numerous". Abram fell on his face and God said to him, as for me this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:4). It was during this encounter that God promised ninety-nine-year-old Abram that he would have a son by his aged wife Sarai. Further, God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah.

Paul uses the story of God's covenant with Abraham as an example par excellence of faith. At the time of the encounter with God Abraham was already an old man and Sarah well past childbearing years. Yet, Paul declares that no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith (Romans 4:20). It is this absolute trust in the word of God that was reckoned as faith.

Righteousness is not achieved through adherence to law or ritual, it cannot be attained by works. Rather righteousness, which is a right relationship with God, is the result solely of faith.

As I reflect on these passages, I need to examine the depth of my own faith commitment. While one may express deep, abiding faith in the word of God, we as human beings, also look to our own achievements as being worthy of praise. And while we would be reluctant to admit it, we secretly hope that God takes note of our achievements.

Repentance requires that my ego take a backseat to my faith. Righteousness, salvation, is never of my own doing. It is essential that if we are going to be reconciled to Christ and to others in the community of

faith that we let go of our need for praise and recognition and allow faith to govern our lives rather than ego.

God is a very polite God. When I push God out of the way God graciously moves without pushing back. It is sadly true that we often insist God let us be in control, always with disastrous results.

Prayer

Lord, I'm examining my life during this period of Lent. I'm wondering if my faith is strong enough to be reckoned as righteousness, or am I still looking for recognition, a pat on the back. Forgive me gracious Father, for the times I've insisted on my own way, ignoring your Spirit, demanding my rights, rather than living by faith. I want my life to be living testimony to faith in your sovereignty. Amen.



SECOND SUNDAY
in Lent

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

You shall have no other gods before me – Exodus 20:3

As we reflect on these readings, we are forced to ask ourselves what idols we have in our lives. The commandments are clear, *you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.* If we take the idea of reflection seriously, we are forced to admit that we all have the tendency to put other things above worship of God and God alone. The Ten Commandments is challenging. We may be able to hold our head up high on the moral virtues and claim absolute obedience regarding murder, adultery, etc. But if we are honest, we do have idols. Oh, I realize we do not have little statues around the house to which we burn incense and offer prayer, but we are forced to look at our commitments and priorities and honestly assess where our commitments lie.

We are committed to self-reliance and the notion of self-autonomy. “You’re not the boss of me!” is an ingrained attitude, if not a spoken declaration. Self-indulgence is an idol. Anything or anyone that usurps God’s place on the throne of our lives is an idol. It is a hard teaching. It carries with it both curse and blessing. *I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments* (Exodus 20:5-6).

The issue that Jesus had with the money changers was that they had put profit above worship. It occurs to me that I need to examine my motives in worship. Am I concerned with the forms of worship or the object of worship, that is, God? Do I expect worship to conform to my expectations? Here’s the toughest question of all. Does my practice match my worship?

It is possible to raise my hands in praise and condemn the one who sits beside me. It is time for serious reflection and heartfelt change. Lent is

a significant moment for evaluation and transformation. If we want to experience the promise of *steadfast love to the thousandth generation*, we will keep God first in our lives. Our worship will be of God and God alone.

Prayer

Lord God forgive me. I am capable of incredible hypocrisy. I can sing the songs of Zion and curse my neighbor, made in your image. Forgive my self-indulgence and arrogance. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me* (Psalms 51:10). In this prayer God, I seek your forgiveness and renewal. Amen.



THIRD SUNDAY
In Lent

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life - John 3:14-15.

The ancient story recounts the grumbling of the people of Israel against God and against Moses. There is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." (Numbers 21:5). They have soon forgotten the grace of God which freed them slavery in Egypt and guides them toward a land of promise. As a result of their complaining God allows poisonous snakes to enter the camp, and many Israelites died. The people acknowledged their sin, Moses prayed for them, and consequently God provided a means of rescue from the serpents. Moses was instructed to build a serpent of brass and set it on a pole. Everyone who looked at the serpent lived.

Like the people of old it is always easy to focus on what is wrong, rather than what is going well. On the one hand, the complaint is that there is no food and water, however, the remainder of the verse says, *we detest this miserable food*. Apparently then there was food, it just wasn't to their liking.

It is time to reflect on our grumbling and complaining and focus on God's response. Paul is abundantly clear that we were all dead in our trespasses and sins. That is a hopeless situation. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Having been saved from certain death I would expect my response to be one of gratitude, rather than complaint. However, human nature being what it is, we always want something more. This is reminiscent of the story of the fall in Genesis 3. The sin was the desire to be like God, rather than celebrate the bounty of life that God provided. This is an attitude that requires humble repentance, not because we are facing punish-

ment, but God has given us life and sustains life. It may not always suit my preconceived notions of what life should be (I want better food), but we commit ourselves to the sovereignty of God and trust in God's provision.

John uses the image of the serpent in the wilderness to describe Jesus' death for all of humankind. As Jesus describes judgment it is that the possibility of life is freely offered to all, but people choose to live in darkness. God is the creator of life. To be reconciled to God requires the simple act of accepting the gift of life offered through the Son. We need not make it more difficult than that. We reflect on our sin, repent, and accept the salvation which reconciles us to God. This is the first step on the road to discipleship and maturity of faith.

Prayer

God, I am sorry for my grumbling and complaining. Thank you for reaching out to me when I was steeped in sin and darkness. Your love reached out and saved me for life in your presence now and in the future. Amen.



FOURTH SUNDAY
In Lent

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12 or Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" John 1:40-41

One of the great characteristics of Andrew was his willingness to introduce people to Jesus. As John recounts the story it was Andrew who first introduced his brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus wanted to feed a hungry crowd, it was Andrew who introduced a boy with a small lunch to Jesus (John 6:9). When some Greeks approached Philip and asked to see Jesus it was Philip, in the company of Andrew who took them to meet Jesus.

When I pause to reflect on my witness, I need to ask myself the hard questions, "Have I introduced anyone to Jesus?" "Would I stand out in a crowd as someone who represents Jesus?" If we are going to take seriously the idea of reflection, it is necessary to be brutally honest with ourselves.

Lent calls us to serious introspection. This is a private matter between us and God. We need to examine our personal witness to ascertain the impact of our testimony. It is perilously easy to look away or go another direction when the conversation turns to matters of faith. Many of us do not have a problem expressing our opinion in a text or on social media, but when the conversation turns to matters of faith it is easier to be quiet than to share our commitment to Christ.

When we are convicted over our failure to share our faith we are called to repent and change direction. We change direction by humbling ourselves and asking God to renew a right spirit within us.

It can be frightening to speak out for our faith. The world is full of darkness, skepticism, and outright disgust for things Christian. We risk humiliation and ridicule by sharing our faith. However, a world of dark-

ness needs the light and life that Jesus came to bring. We are the hands and feet of Christ.

Prayer

Lord God, I want to be more like Andrew. I want to be bold enough to share my faith in you. I am committed to you as the light of the world. I choose not to hide that light under a basket, but to let it shine in such a way that others hear you in my words and see you in my actions. In Jesus name, Amen.



FIFTH SUNDAY
In Lent

PALM SUNDAY

March 28, 2021

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

John 12:12-16

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever – Psalm 118:29.

As the curtain rises on the last act of the final week of his life Jesus' role shifts from being the sower of the word to being the heir of the vineyard. Jesus also demonstrates his mastery over the temple, Scripture, and proper ritual practice. The final act opens with Jesus' symbolic ride into Jerusalem and the temple on a colt, a messiah-king coming to claim his due from an unrepentant people.

The cry of Hosanna! shouted by the crowd means save now. As the crowd gathered that day, they were shouting in expectation of a Savior who was to come from the house of David to rescue them from foreign oppression.

The hopes of the crowd and the reality of Jesus' presence are vastly different. Jesus understands his role as one who is to give his life for the salvation of the world. His entrance into Jerusalem is that of a king who comes in peace. The kingdom that Jesus proclaims is not located geographically, but rather is that place where God's reign is lived in the hearts and lives of those people who are committed to the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 5:10).

Upon reflection I realize that I too want Jesus on my own terms. I am quick to see Jesus as a white American and force him into my own image of what he should be. Jesus will always resist my attempts to force him into a preconceived mold, trying to bend him to my preconceived notions.

We need to see Jesus as someone who upset the status quo. Jesus hung out with tax collectors and other outcasts. Jesus eschewed the religious intellectuals and chose to spend his time with fisher folk and the people of the land. The Jesus we sometimes picture in our minds may be quite distinct from the reality of the man from Galilee.

We need to repent, and cry Save now! Save us from self-aggrandizement and self-serving actions and attitudes that have little to do with the kingdom of God. Lead us to the weak, the hurting, the hungry, and the helpless. Show us your heart and challenge us to practice our faith by being your voice, your hands, and your feet.

Prayer

Change my heart, O God. Save me from selfishness and renew within me a right spirit. Help me to create space in my life to build the kingdom in my home, at my work, and with my acquaintances. I hope to see your face in the future, help me to ready my spirit for that day by living right now in your presence. Amen.



MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 1, 2021

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another – John 13:34

Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum* or command and reflects Jesus words I give you a new commandment. The new commandment that Jesus gives is that his disciples are to practice love for one another. The love that Jesus speaks of is much more than a sentimental feeling.

During the Passover meal Jesus visibly demonstrated what he meant by love when he washed the feet of his disciples. This task was normally the responsibility of a servant, but no servant was present to perform the task, and interestingly, no one else at the meal volunteered for the task. So, Jesus humbled himself and washed feet. When he finished, he challenged his followers to follow his example of servanthood.

Servanthood. We just don't like the sound of that do we? Oh, we may give intellectual assent, to its' importance, but we stop short of washing feet. God's Son did not see that as too humble a task. For Jesus it was a powerful demonstration of the depth of his love. The following day Jesus would provide the ultimate example of servanthood in giving his life as a sacrifice for the world.

I am required to reflect on my commitment considering Jesus' commandment to love and Jesus' willingness to die to prove that point. I fair poorly in that comparison and need to repent of my selfishness and commit to think of others in humility as better than myself (Philippians 2:3). This requires both unpretentiousness and repentance. It may demand that I wash feet, literally or figuratively, in service to someone else.

We want to be reconciled to God. We want to experience the peace that comes from forgiveness and the assurance of new life in Christ. We find that reconciliation by allowing God to sit on the throne of our life and living in humble service to the least of these.

Prayer

God, I offer you the throne of my life. I will abdicate my claim to myself and my rights to serve you each day. Forgive my failures, dear Lord and lead me ever closer to a heart like yours, a heart of loving service to my sisters and brothers. Amen.



MAUNDY THURSDAY

GOOD FRIDAY

April 2, 2021

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16-25

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42

he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed – Isaiah 53:5.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) each tell of a man named Simon who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross to Golgotha. Little is known of this man other than he was from Cyrene, a city on the north African coast. Mark, however, makes the interesting comment that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). As he closes the letter to the Romans Paul lists persons to whom he wishes to send greetings. Among the names listed is Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also (Romans 16:13).

It may be speculative, but one may ask what happened to Simon that day when he carried the cross? Were his sons there? Did they watch fearfully as their father was tapped on the shoulder by a Roman soldier and ordered to pick up the condemned man's cross? Did they cower at a safe distance until their father could drop the cross beam and return to their side?

Jesus told those who professed a desire to follow him that the road required life-giving sacrifice. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24). Simon literally carried the cross that Friday. It is difficult to believe that he merely walked away and returned to his normal life.

On this day we reflect on the unbelievable sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. He told his disciples that following him required love and service to others, he healed the sick, raised the dead, cured the lepers, and washed dirty feet. In short, to see Jesus, is to see the heart of God. In our reflection comes a moment of brutal honesty. Am I willing to carry the cross? It sounds good in Sunday school and makes for a pow-

erful sermon, but the only sermon that counts is the one that is lived out each day in the real world.

On this day we repent of our selfishness and ask forgiveness and reconciliation. Having been reconciled to God through the cross we are renewed in spirit and our lives reflect the heart and actions of God.

Prayer

Good Friday sounds like a contradiction in terms, dear God. But without the sacrifice made this day on our behalf there would be no forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal. God, we humbly thank you for the gift of the Son who showed us your heart and gave his life for each of us. Amen.



GOOD FRIDAY

HOLY SATURDAY

April 3, 2021

Job 14:1-14

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

1 Peter 4:1-8

Matthew 27:57-66

John 19:38-42

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins – 1Peter 4:8.

There is no ritual attendant to Holy Saturday. We have celebrated Palm Sunday, solemnly observed the Last Supper, and wept on Good Friday. Holy Saturday is an opportunity for deep reflection, prayer, penitence, and renewal.

At the outset of these devotions, we noted that we would be focusing on reflection, repentance, reconciliation, and renewal. This is a good opportunity to revisit those concepts and perhaps, seek their application to our daily lives.

Reflection:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35

Jesus used the early morning for reflection and prayer. It is impossible to face the concerns of the world without quiet time with God. Jesus chose morning for this time of renewal. The time of day is not as important as the fact that we choose to spend time alone with God.

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. Mark 4:10 (cf. 4:34; 7:17; 9:28; 10:10; 13:3)

Jesus used private time with the disciples for teaching. When they were away from the distractions and demands of the crowds Jesus took the time to answer the questions of the disciples. People were always demanding something of Jesus as such, he need moments of quiet to help

the disciples understand his teachings and prepare them to continue his ministry when he returned to the Father.

Without reflection we cannot hope to grow in our relationship with God. Jesus promises the intimacy of friends, (John 15:15) that intimacy requires times of quiet reflection.

Repentance:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. Acts 2:38-39.

As Peter made abundantly clear on the day of Pentecost, there is no salvation without repentance. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual transformation. Repentance must always precede baptism. Forgiveness is dependent upon repentance. When we repent, we express, not only godly sorrow, but a commitment to go a different direction. We change course as it were and point our lives in the direction of the cross.

Reconciliation:

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. - Romans 5:11

We are reconciled to God through the cross of Jesus Christ. We cannot be reconciled to God in any other way than through Jesus Christ. Today we quietly contemplate the enormous sacrifice God made in sending his Son to be the atonement for our sin.

Having been reconciled to God we are required to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters. Listen to the words of Jesus about reconciliation in the community of faith.

When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive Luke 17:4.

As these verses indicate Jesus took the matter of reconciliation in the community of faith quite seriously. We may want to reflect on our relationships with our sisters and brothers. Would Jesus treat my sister or brother the same way I do? Would he use the same kind of language? Write the same words? Turn a cold shoulder? We can pray lofty prayers, replete with glorious praise, raise our hands toward heaven, but if we dare to hate a brother or sister, we have no place in the kingdom of God.

Reflect on the teachings of First John. *Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them* 1 John 3:14-15. Our words reveal the intent of our heart.

Renewal:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

The church, as well as the nation, is in dire need of renewal. Renewal can only take place when we allow the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, repent of our sin, be reconciled to God and one another. Until we allow the Spirit of God to renew our minds to discern and live the will of God, we are making a hollow mockery of our faith.

Prayer

On this Holy Saturday, dear Lord, I commit time to reflect, repent, practice reconciliation, and renew my mind to discern your what is your good, acceptable, and perfect will. This prayer I make with a full and contrite heart in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Holy Saturday

RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

April 4, 2021

Acts 10:34-43.

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18

Mark 16:1-8

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen- Luke 24:5.

It is possible to look for Jesus in all the wrong places. I am reminded of the series of British children's books "Where's Waldo?" The books consist of a series of detailed double-page spread illustrations depicting dozens of people doing a variety of amusing things at a given location. Readers are challenged to find a character named Waldo hidden in the group.

Think of it this way. The women had all good intentions. They had mourned Jesus' death and now they were doing the proper thing by planning to anoint his body according to their rituals. Nothing wrong in that. But. They are looking in the wrong place. They have gone to a tomb to search for one who is alive.

Although Jesus had told them what was to occur, it was so beyond their experience that they failed to comprehend the reality of what he said. In fact, Mark reports that even after seeing the empty tomb and hearing the message of the angels the women were so frightened that they failed to tell anyone the news of the resurrection (Mark 16:8).

We can't be too hard on the women. Let's be honest. To believe that God raised Jesus from the dead can be a hard pill to swallow. The traditional proofs of the resurrection, such as the empty tomb, the folded grave clothes, even the famous Shroud of Turin do not prove that Jesus is alive.

So then why do we hold the resurrection as the foundational pillar of faith? The only viable proof of the resurrection is found in changed lives. If, as suggested by the religious leaders of Jesus day, the body

was stolen by the disciples (Matthew 28:12-13), that doesn't account for the transformation the lives of the disciples. If the disciples stole the body, it is difficult to believe that they would have gone so far as to be martyred to perpetuate the falsehood. If in fact, Jesus was not raised from the dead, it is challenging to explain the church's ongoing mission for more than 2000 years. If it were a lie, one can reasonably argue, that the church would not have survived and prospered through the centuries.

The one viable proof that no one can deny is a changed life. Those persons who have a personal relationship with the living Lord don't need scientific evidence to convince them of what they know to be true. Present day disciples of Jesus do not have the experience of first-century disciples of companioning with Jesus in the physical sense. But the transformation that the risen Lord makes in our lives should be evident to everyone who sees us.

As a child of God, I am called to reflect every day on my relationship with the Savior. That reflection will lead me to confession and repentance. Repentance to God for my failures and repentance to my sister or brother whom I have hurt or offended in word or deed. Repentance leads to reconciliation, with God and with the person I have hurt. Reconciliation is mandatory in the body of Christ. We don't get to hate. We don't get to hold grudges. It is not acceptable to go behind another's back and say hurtful and unkind words.

Two true illustrations. A repair technician was working in our sanctuary one day and overheard two church members talking about another member of the family. The words were so cutting that the technician remarked that he would not want to be a part of our family.

I received an anonymous text one evening. The writer boldly declaring that he or she would never consider attending our church because of what some of our members posted on social media.

Reflection, repentance, reconciliation, lead us to renewed minds, focused not our own wants and desires, but on the important concerns of living as the children of God in a broken world.

There is only one convincing proof of the resurrection. A life lived in the conscious presence of the risen Lord.

A well-known hymn of the church closes with the words, “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for raising Jesus from the dead! Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to reside within us, teaching, exhorting, and comforting. On this Resurrection Day, Father God, I commit to reflecting on your awesome love and presence. I repent for the times I have failed you, accepting your forgiveness as in turn, I forgive and reconcile my relationships with those I may have harmed. Lord, I commit myself to being a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1.



EASTER SUNDAY

