



LENT SCRIPTURE

A Guide for Individual Study

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. ¹²Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend 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. ¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God? ¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

COMMENTARY

Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ This is a question that hits us right where we are today as more and more people look at Christians and ask the exact same thing. So what is going on in this passage? At first glance, something doesn’t seem quite right. We discover that Joes wants the trumpet to be sounded and the alarm to be raised because the day of the Lord is on the horizon. Why the alarm? Isn’t the day of the Lord something that would be a cause for celebration and joy?

Yes, of course they were looking forward to it, however; it seems that the people had fallen away from the commandments of God and their covenant relationship. The judgement was coming and they were going to be caught and judged for their shortcomings. Fortunately, that’s not where the passage ends. A second blow of the trumpet is to be sounded to call the people to gather in fasting and repentance. It is an urgent call and not to be ignored. It is good news that it’s the Lord who will be doing the judging, because it is the Lord there is hope! Hope because the one who is

coming is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord relents from punishing. This means that there is time for restoration of both covenant and relationship. So 'Where is their God?' He is with those who have turned to him and

given their lives over to his gracious care in obedience and trust. He is with those who are stepping outside of their own ego and selfishness and repenting for what they have done wrong. The Lord is coming and it will be a time of joy and celebration.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What areas of your life require you to repent?
2. How can you turn to God and trust in his judgement?
3. In what ways can you be more obedient to God's commandments and become a witness to the good news?

PRAYER

God of steadfast love, be slow to anger and gracious with me as I seek to examine your will for my life. Grant to me mercy and strength to renew my relationship with you. Amen.

PSALM 103:8-18

⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger for ever. ¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. ¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. ¹⁴For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. ¹⁵As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, ¹⁸to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

COMMENTARY

This psalm picks up with the theme we just read in Joel. What Joel believed and claimed to be true is found here in the psalm—that the Lord is gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Because this is the very character of God and God's nature, the Psalmist is able to burst forth with tremendous praise for the Lord.

This psalm grasps our attention with its beautiful poetry as each successive line reveals a new level of God's relationship with creation. Though we have sinned and fallen short of the commandments of God, God doesn't cast us aside from his love and care. Indeed, the disobedience and iniquities are

removed from those who are willing to in fear of the Lord submit to his rule.

This psalm speaks to us just as clearly today as when it was first written. There is much doubt in our day and questions arise all the time about whether there is or ever was any divine power in history. This psalm reminds us in our own doubts that the blessings of the Lord are for all time—from generation to generation—and that they are everlasting. Of course we must also fulfill our part in this relationship and keep God's covenant relationship and remember to do his commandments.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How has your understanding of God's grace and mercy changed how you live?
2. What areas of living in God's way require your attention?
3. How can you remember his commandments new each day?

PRAYER

Merciful Lord, your love is mysteriously transformative. Grant that I may experience that transformation new each day and strengthen me to live into a deeper and stronger relationship with you as I strive and seek to live out your way in this world. Amen.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.²For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger;⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love,⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;⁸in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed;¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

COMMENTARY

It is a great honour to be an ambassador, someone who is entrusted to represent the interests of and be tasked to speak with authority for the sovereign ruler who appoints you to the task. So we are ambassadors for Christ, Paul tells us, so what does that mean? Well it means that we have the privilege and full authority to speak, act and instruct on behalf of Jesus our Lord. We have been sent to the world to deliver a message, one of hope, peace, love, grace and mercy. To be sure, this is a weighty responsibility but it is one that God has tasked us to do as a community of believers

and with the help of the Holy Spirit—we don't go it alone.

Our ambassadorship ought to look like Jesus'. We note here that Jesus identified with sinners and outcasts. He became involved in their lives and helped not by distancing himself from them or shouting commands, directions and instructions from a distance but rather by entering into their lives and speaking and demonstrating God's righteousness in relationship.

Paul urges us to accept the message of grace in faith but not to do so lightly. We are to remember the responsible and trusted

position we've been asked to fulfill. We are cautioned to live as the one who sent us because it will affect the ministry and the message we have to offer. It is in Jesus way we have been called to respond and care for

the world and our own lives, such that, the gospel message may be proclaimed by faithful and trustworthy ambassadors and not be rejected by those whom we go to.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In baptism we were marked for the role of ambassador, how does the baptismal covenant instruct us for living out this role?
2. What ways do you need to change in order to live into the title of ambassador?
3. How does Jesus relationship with outcasts and sinners change how you can do ministry? What steps will you take?

PRAYER

In love you called and sent me Lord. May I live into a loving relationship with you and those whom you've sent me to proclaim your good news and gift of grace. Amen.

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

‘Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.³‘But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.⁶‘But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.¹⁷‘But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

COMMENTARY

Jesus is not surprised that people who choose to follow him will engage in acts of faithfulness and service. This was not something new in religious living or thought. What Jesus was concerned with was how followers would carry out these acts and services.

We see in this passage that we are to carry out these faithful acts with purposeful intention and without a whole lot of pomp and circumstance. Jesus demonstrates the

difference between his faith and the current religious practices of the day. One way is inward focused and prideful, the other is God focused in gratitude and humility. Jesus demonstrates this difference by examining three acts—almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

These three acts were common to the life of religious folk at the time. Jesus isn't condemning the acts themselves nor deriding public displays of faith. His target is the deviant style of those who turn these

faithful acts of devotion and service into works of self-gratification by focusing the attention on themselves. What Jesus is getting at is that these are acts of love that derive their love and reward from God and are to be done in such a manner that they

glorify God, promoting the grace, mercy and justice of God's kingdom with no thought of one's own reward, gratification or interest. Acts of love from the one who first loved us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What faithful acts require your attention this Lenten season?
2. How will you engage in faithful acts throughout this year for the glorification of God?
3. In what way might you need to re-examine your motivations and intentions for participating in acts of faithfulness?

PRAYER

Almighty God, you've tasked your faithful servants with living lives of service in humility. Grant to me the courage to examine my motivations for service and strengthen me to always point toward you and your kingdom. Amen.

GENESIS 2:15-27; 3:1-7

¹⁵LORD took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

3Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ ²The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, good and evil.’ ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

COMMENTARY

One of the hardest things to do in life is to convey difficult concepts and truth to children. It’s not impossible but does require a different way of approach than we are used to as adults. It’s often the case that when we are trying to express hard concepts to children we use story. Story is the method that seems to work best. I believe that is what we find when we read the creation story in Genesis. Here we find the sharing of some deep and difficult truths shared with us in an imaginative story which is less concerned with fact than in the hope we will understand. After all, we are the children of God. The story of Adam, Eve and the serpent is a

serious attempt at conveying the difficult truth about sin in the world. Evil enters into the world, into our communities and our own lives almost without notice and once there it is more dangerous than it seems. We should take notice that the serpent doesn’t appear as either repugnant or repulsive. The serpent comes simply with a very believable argument and inserts itself into the life of the garden.

Eve knew that the fruit of the one tree was forbidden and they had been instructed by God not to eat of it. The serpent simply plants the seed of doubt in her mind—*Are you sure that’s what God said?* And with

some manipulation by the serpent she adopts the new thought as true. When she passes this new understanding on to Adam he adopts it freely as well. The story tells us that we were placed in this world by God to learn from God and to grow spiritually

together. The intention was never for the creation to overtake the garden and change the requirements to suit their own purposes. Only children think that by whining and complaining they can change things so they are the way they want.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you understand sin in the world and life?
2. How can you guard against evil influences?
3. What practical steps can you take to align yourself with God and be obedient to his instruction?

PRAYER

Creator God, you have ordered the world with love and for the abundant life of your creation. May we seek to align our wills with yours to enjoy that abundance. Give us strength to see evil and to protect against it. Amen.

PSALM 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. ⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. ⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. ⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. ¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. ¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

COMMENTARY

This psalm is the seemingly unedited outpouring of someone who has a deep relationship with God and has experienced God's forgiveness. The psalm almost rambles as the audience changes—sometimes addressing God directly, other times an unseen group of people and interspersed with words of advice thanksgiving and genuine repentance. The psalm is messy much like the process of forgiveness itself.

This is a psalm filled with God's grace. Of course you might be thinking how can that be, the Old Testament is only about law and judgement. This is a very old misconception

and understanding. We've already experienced in the Old Testament that the Lord is gracious and merciful and we'd do well to remember that. It's a treasure that the psalmist relates their understanding of forgiveness with us in this psalm. It expresses not only the personal but also the corporate role in recognizing forgiveness, particularly when forgiveness has occurred. The role of the community is to rejoice and give thanks! This is a radical change from how society functions at large. Typically we rejoice when we see someone getting *what they deserve* and celebrating when they are punished. Forgiveness tends to lead toward

anger—why them, that’s so unfair! This joy in the reconciliation of one who was lost
psalm serves as a reminder to the faithful of and welcome them with the love of the Lord.
our role in the process of forgiveness as a
witness to the mercy of God. We are to take

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have you experienced God’s forgiveness in your life?
2. What attitudes require your attention and change that you can share that forgiveness with others?
3. Why do you find forgiveness difficult? What’s the challenge to forgiving others and how can you ask God to help?

PRAYER

O Lord, we try to hide ourselves from you in many ways. May we be open to the forgiveness you’ve poured out on your servants that knowing your transforming love we may be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation in your world for the glory of your name. Amen.

ROMANS 15:12-19

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.¹⁹For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

COMMENTARY

Have you noticed how difficult peace seems to come by? Everywhere you look in the world and if we're brave enough to look at ourselves we'd have to admit that peace seems to be very elusive. I suspect as Christians it has to do with our confusion about what constitutes God's love—which we often equate with the absence of suffering.

Israel was beset by this same confusion after their deliverance from Egypt. It seems to be a confusion that Paul's congregation is going through as well. Paul addresses this confusion directly and relates it here to the

justification of creation to Creator. God's love is the one thing that triumphs over the sin of this world. God's own grief and sorrow about the distance between Godself and creation is overcome in Jesus Christ by his life, death and resurrection.

The core of this passage is the salvation wrought unto humankind through God in Jesus Christ. Through the waters of baptism we are caught up in this life transforming reconciliation and love. In baptism we share in the same life as Jesus! This is a bold claim and should shock us

somewhat. We are urged then to boast in this relationship. Now this isn't the same thing as bragging, it is instead a full commitment and joyous response to the actions of God. This includes suffering and trials as did the life of Jesus and calls us into a deeper trusting relationship with gratitude for the costly reconciliation of ourselves to God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does knowing God's love transform your understanding of sin?
2. In what ways does suffering with Christ change your ability to find peace in this world?
3. Why is it important for you to work on your relationship with God? How might recalling your baptism help?

PRAYER

Father of All, you created us for love and life. Though we have transgressed and sin abounds we know you have not forsaken us. May we grow in that knowledge and experience your costly grace in our lives and be encouraged to put all our hope and trust in you, for the sake of peace in our lives and this world. Amen.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

COMMENTARY

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a well-known story. This story in particular sets the stage for the themes we will hear throughout the Lenten season. When we think of the story as a whole with the three different temptations and Jesus' rejection of each one we begin to see clearly the righteousness of Jesus. That is to say that Jesus is in right relationship to the law and to God the Father. It also highlights the words heard at Jesus' baptism that indeed this is God's beloved Son in whom He is well pleased.

After all, the temptations that Satan puts before Jesus directly address the question of Jesus' identity and try to call into question his relationship with God. Satan teases; *If you really are the Son of God then...* In Jesus' rejection of Satan there is confirmation that He is God's Son and that his trust in God is unshakable. Of course the other temptations also invite Jesus to turn away from God. Each one of them tries in different ways. The second temptation tests God's trustworthiness. The third temptation tests Jesus' loyalty and allegiance to God.

One after another, Jesus rejects what is offered to Him. Instead Jesus turns over everything to God—His identity, future and prosperity! For all things He trusts in God's character and constancy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How is it that Jesus is able to hold firm to his relationship with God?
2. In what way are you holding back from trusting in God? What would it look like to trust in God more?
3. How can you begin to give God more of your identity, future and prosperity? What practical steps could you take?

PRAYER

Lord, you have demonstrated through your well beloved Son that you are trust-worthy and true. When I am tested and tempted may I find strength in your word and in your will for my life. Grant to me knowledge of your love and be always with me in times of temptation and struggle. Amen.

GENESIS 12:1-4A

¹Now the LORD told Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."⁴So Abram went, as the LORD told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

COMMENTARY

Following God's call in your life isn't going to be the easiest thing to do. In fact it's likely going to seem illogical and strange. There is a good chance that it's going to take you into the unknown and may even be a little dangerous. Following God's call is about trusting that what God has planned is for good. Following God is going to be costly in some way in that it'll require us to give something up and/or take something on that we usually wouldn't.

Abram knows all about this call and trust as we see in this passage. Abram has to turn his back on what is familiar and comfortable and go into the strange and unknown. Surely it would have been easier for him to simply refuse God's call or to tell himself that he must just be imagining things.

Living a faithful life includes many things, chief among them are, I believe, opportunity, obligation and obedience. Though these characteristics are about living

a faithful life we tend to ignore God in favour of our own desires and comfort, finding new and creative ways to shut out the truth.

Abram demonstrates for us a different understanding. Abram shows us what it is like to put our whole trust in God. Now Abram was already inclined to hear and listen to God having cultivated a relationship with him. By doing so he was able to hear God's voice clearly so that in that moment of calling he was able to respond obediently. Abram didn't know where he was going for sure or where God was going to lead him. Abram didn't know for certain even what the result of this travel would be. All he had to go on was his relationship with God and God's promises. Yet he chooses to leave the comfort and familiarity of home and set out trusting that God was leading him into new life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does Abram's response to God make you feel?
2. What ways can you attend to your relationship with God so that God's voice becomes familiar?
3. Where have you heard God's call and ignored it? What might you do to engage with what God's called you to do and be?

PRAYER

Loving and gracious Lord, incline my ears to hear your word and call in my life. Grant me the will to follow you in trust and obedience and strength and courage to go where you're sending me. May I know that you seek what is best for me in all things. Amen.

PSALM 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? ²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The LORD is your keeper; the LORD your shade at your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸The LORD keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

COMMENTARY

The psalm opens with a question most of us have asked at one time or another. Wondering where our help is to come in the times of trouble and distress is normal. The psalmist shows us a beautiful clarity that is centered on God's action and our response. As we are want to do as human beings we tend to want to make things about ourselves and say "I did it myself." There is no room for that in this psalm. It is clear—God speaks and we respond!

Have you noticed how our communal faith life is marked by all sorts of activity and that emerging more and more is a real desire for social change and transformation? It seems to be the trend at the moment but it lacks a real desire for and a great sense of God. When we consider our appeals and reports they seem dull in comparison to the

great reports of the faithful in the book of Acts for instance.

We seem to be caught in a cycle of events and projects for social change and fundraising which only increase our own sense of responsibility and ultimately our anxiety. We are acutely aware of the need for change both in the world and within the religious institution. Yet I suggest boldly, that nothing is going to change unless we embrace the faith found in this psalm and focus our attention where we ought—on God! Our help comes from the one who created all things, who in all things seeks to keep us from harm and who watches over our going out and our coming in. All things become possible when we have the Lord as our keeper, when we set aside our own desires and yearn for God's.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you ever expressed the same question as this psalmist? What did your answer look like in comparison?
2. How might you learn better to trust in God's help?
3. Where have you felt that comfort and care from God in your life? How can you share that with others?

PRAYER

Almighty God, in times of trouble, strain and stress we need your help. May we be open to trusting our lives and our concerns to you. We have sometimes tried to give ourselves the credit for your action in this world, forgive us and continue to watch over all our days. Amen.

ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17

¹What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

COMMENTARY

Have you noticed that in the New Testament there seems to be a great deal of concern for characters like Moses and Abraham? That there is a real desire on the part of the first followers of Jesus to be associated with them. This really should not come as a big surprise to us because to be part of Abraham’s family is to be an inheritor of God’s promises and part of the covenant relationship established between God and Israel. Now, here’s the scandal perhaps—we ought to be as concerned because it helps us understand who we are and more importantly whose we are. We have a nasty habit of thinking that the Old Testament is

not important and that we are now God’s covenant people. This is a dangerous claim to make in that it suggests that God is fickle and casts aside his covenants, promises and people and really that he’s unfaithful and unreliable. If that’s the case, then why should anyone trust God?

Paul’s words in this passage are good news! God doesn’t abandon the promises God makes but finds new ways of incorporating new people into them. Certainly the faithfulness of the Gentiles would have surprised Abraham but nonetheless they are faithful. Paul identifies that this new people, once outsiders, have received mercy and

now participate fully in the life of God's covenant family. This didn't occur when we deserved it or when we became sinless. No, God called us into relationship when we were still sinners. God calls into existence the things which didn't exist—it's part of God's very nature and that includes you and I.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How is it freeing to know that God called us into his family when we were still sinners?
2. How can you reflect that same grace and mercy in your life?
3. What ways can you engage with 'outsiders' to encourage them to become people of God?

PRAYER

Merciful Lord, it is a beautiful gift that you chose me to be part of your family even though I didn't deserve it. Grant me the strength to reach out in love to those that I feel don't deserve it. Help me adopt the people I feel our outside your covenant relationship and live into the inheritance of your promises. Amen.

JOHN 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’³ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’⁴ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’⁵ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You be born from above.’⁸ The wind where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’⁹ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’¹⁰ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11’ Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16’ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17’ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

COMMENTARY

The gospel of John is my favourite with its beautiful use of language and imagery. It also has some of the most beloved of all verses. As a result however; those verses are often taken out of context and misunderstood. John 3:16 just happens to be one of them. When we place it back in context we see that it is a response to Nicodemus

and people like him—maybe even like us. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night suggesting by the dark and light imagery that runs through John that Nicodemus comes to Jesus without knowledge. He comes in his own darkness, not to be transformed by Jesus but rather to tell Jesus what *we know* about him. Nicodemus comes seeking

affirmation for his understanding of who Jesus is. Not surprisingly, Jesus undoes Nicodemus' certainty.

When we become certain of what we know about Jesus and when we believe that we have *got it right*, that is when we should expect to be undone like Nicodemus. The

story of salvation is not about what we've earned or think we know but about being known and loved by God which is beyond our understanding.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do you seek God to affirm what you believe to be true rather than being open to God's transformation?
2. How might you be free from certainty to trust more fully in God's action and plan for your life?
3. How can you be reborn of the Spirit? What would that look like in your everyday life?

PRAYER

Almighty God, scatter the darkness of certainty and help me to live as a child of light, that in letting go of what I believe to be true I may come to a fuller understanding of your love. Amen.

EXODUS 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”⁵The LORD to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD us or not?”

COMMENTARY

The people of Israel have been delivered from their captivity in Egypt and yet they continue to doubt. More precisely they seem to be wondering exactly who is in charge; is it Moses or God? In Egypt they had been chosen for slavery and death and it seems that they are wondering if Moses and God haven't chosen them for much of the same. So Moses cries out to God to complain about the people. God hears his complaint and sends him back to the people to provide them with water for their thirst.

What catches my attention is the manner in which God responds. God chooses what is lifeless—rock—to bring the

people the very substance of life—water. We see that God life flow from the most unlikely of places. Of course this did require a lot of trust on the part of the people to keep following Moses who no doubt returned and said “follow me to Horeb where God will provide water from the rock”. I don't know about you but I'd be skeptical to say the least.

It is important for us to notice that the people who will become known as Israel; God's chosen people; bring their doubts and even quarrel with God. What is wonderful is that their persistence shapes God as God works to shape the people. In the end it's a relationship that is built strong and faithful.

These people are able to speak about their faith and their doubts and struggles in such a way that it inspires countless generations of people to follow God. The doubts and fears of the people are not brushed aside or hidden; they are embraced by God's love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. We have a tendency to hide our doubts. How can your doubts become part of your faith story?
2. What ways can you share your struggles with others and find God's embrace in your life?
3. What can you learn from the people of Israel's journey that'll help you understand your own?

PRAYER

Gracious God, we have been a quarreling and testing people who have often hid our doubts from others and you. Give us courage to share our fears with you and with others that we may live into the fullness of your love and drink of your abundant and life-giving water. Amen.

PSALM 95

¹O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! ³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
⁶O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

COMMENTARY

This psalm is all about worship and the reason for it. It begins by calling the people to gather in God's presence with thanksgiving, joy and song. As modern Christians we often find it challenging to fulfill this summons. There are many reasons and events that call our attention away from attending to the worship of God. Worship tends to take a back-seat to what seem to be more pressing engagements.

Why worship anyways we might wonder. The psalmist gives us three reasons in particular. For one, God is great! There is a great emphasis placed on God's kingship, an important reminder to us of who is really in charge of this world. In the age where the belief in many gods was prevalent this would have been a challenging reminder of God's sovereignty. Secondly, God's kingship can

be seen in the extent of his territory. The entire earth belongs to God. God doesn't simply care for a portion of it, God's concerned with its entire height and depth and everything that is in it. Thirdly, God is the creator! God is the one that formed the seas, the dry lands and everything that is in and on them.

For these reasons we are to show our thanksgiving with more devotion than we often do. Worshipping God isn't something that we just fit into an already busy schedule; it is the one thing that ought to define the rest of our time on earth. We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand and this psalm reminds us of God's love in the midst of fear, doubt and oppression. Let us hear God's voice in our lives and set God at the top of our priority list.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what way can you engage more fully in worshipping God?
2. How does this psalm challenge your priorities? Where does worshipping God fit into your list?
3. Do you ask to hear God's voice each day? How might a renewed daily prayer life help?

PRAYER

Lord you are great and mighty. We often find it difficult to fit you into our lives, may we be renewed this season by your words and hear the call to worship you with joy and song. Amen.

ROMANS 5:1-11

¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. ⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

COMMENTARY

If we were ever inclined to think that we're responsible by our actions for our own salvation, this passage from Romans quickly undoes any misunderstanding. Our relationship to God was set right not by our deed but through Jesus. Because we're not responsible for it we can look forward with confidence that what God has declared to be right continues to be right now and in the future. We can anticipate a world full of God's peace.

We might be tempted to discard Paul's words here, after all, if we've been justified already why do we find peace so absent? I believe and I think Paul was saying that it's because we confuse God's love with the

absence of suffering. We've seen this confusion before after the people were freed from slavery in Egypt.

Paul doesn't let us wallow in our confusion and instead brings us directly to the reality of God and what God's done for us in Jesus. Hope is found in God's gift freely given in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's not a life without suffering; on the contrary, the endurance of suffering is part of the witness of God's grace and mercy. We have been called to live joyfully confident in a reconciled life and to share it with others even when the cost is great to us as we share in the fullness of Jesus life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God?
2. What sort of response can you make to God's free gift of love?
3. How can you share that gift with others? What does it look like to endure suffering with hope?

PRAYER

Almighty God, through Jesus Christ you have brought us into a deep and abiding relationship with you. Encourage me to respond to this gift without reservation or fear and to share this gift with all people as I model my relationship to others on your relationship to us. Amen.

JOHN 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';¹⁸ for you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem."²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something."³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."³³ So the disciples said to one another,

“Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word.⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

COMMENTARY

This is a fascinating story and would have come as quite the shock and scandal to those who first heard it. Jesus sets out across a border into a territory that most other Jews would avoid. He crosses also a social boundary as he approaches a Samaritan woman and asks her for a drink. This is a story about water, conversion and worship.

Like Nicodemus’ misunderstanding, the Samaritan woman first thinks that Jesus is referring to the water in the well. Unlike Nicodemus however, the woman moves out of her confusion and comes to realize that Jesus isn’t speaking about ordinary water. Though she doesn’t really understand what he is saying she is willing to be changed. The moment she asks for the living water the conversation changes and focuses on her personal life. As Jesus reveals to her only

things she could have known herself her understanding of who He is changes as well and she declares that He must be a prophet. This again changes their conversation, since he must be a prophet He must understand worship, so she inquires about the true nature of worship—asking Jesus really “Who has it right? The Samaritans or the Jews?”

Jesus responds that what is central to worshipping in Spirit and in truth is relationship. A concept that she is quick to grasp on the basis of the relationship that has begun to develop there at the well. We would expect that because Jesus knows her life so well that he would have challenged her sin and judged her for it. It surprises us that this is not what happens. What is life changing for her is that being known by Jesus she is brought into a relationship and able to know Him as well.

This story isn't really about the woman at the well after all. It is a story about an encounter with the living God and about having God's truth and love spoken into our past, present and ultimately our future. It is about having the courage to see ourselves and others through God's eyes. It is about

having the strength to drop everything and share what we have experienced with our neighbours. The transformation for her as well as for us is in being known by God and loved anyways, a transformation that happens not through any demand or force but from love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does this encounter explain God's action in your life?
2. What can you learn from this story about how we can engage with the work of evangelism
3. How does this story change your understanding of worship? What response can you bring to your worship experience?

PRAYER

Lord, you know the innermost thought and deepest corners of my life. Nothing is hidden from you. May I be filled with joy at the revelation of your love for me and be enabled to share my story of faith with others. Amen.

1 SAMUEL 16:1-13

The LORD to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."² Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.'³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you."⁴ Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?"⁵ He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD."⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD on the heart."⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD this one."⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD this one."¹⁰ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD not chosen any of these."¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."¹² He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

COMMENTARY

In the previous chapter Saul had disobeyed God's direction resulting in Samuel leaving him. Even though Samuel left he is grieving over the loss of his King and friend. He's deeply aware that the man he anointed as the first King over Israel failed. What happens next seems even harder to grasp. God seems to suggest that Samuel just needs to suck it up and go anoint the next King. Though God questions Samuel and tells him to get on with finding the next king it's important to notice that God

doesn't judge or chastise Samuel's reluctance. Samuel does begin his search as commanded but goes about it with the same expectations as before. This leads him to assume that Eliab should be King. God has other plans and teaches Samuel to unlearn his expectations and trust in God's guidance instead. The story that began with

disappointment and grief ends with hope for a future with new leadership. We see in this story a beautiful picture of our human condition. In it we are shown a way to unlearn our own expectations and put our trust in God knowing that God doesn't condemn us for our reluctance.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What things in your life do you need to stop wallowing in and trust in God?
2. How does Samuel's example give you hope for the future?
3. What do you need to unlearn in order to be open to God's guidance?

PRAYER

Lord, in times of great need it is not always easy to see the path before me. Give me courage to unlearn my expectations and have them shaped by you and for your purposes. Amen.

PSALM 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

COMMENTARY

This psalm is perhaps the most well-known of all the psalms and is beloved by many. When we're so familiar with a text is when we have to be extra careful in reading and studying it. We might start by asking ourselves what we know about shepherds because that's where our text starts. A shepherd is someone who gets dirty with the sheep! They live in close proximity with them, usually under whatever shelter nature would provide. A shepherd was ever watchful and protective of their flock. Dirty, stinky, matted hair with garments likely hardly ever washed and living with the sheep is quite the contrary image to the one we conjure up when we think of Jesus with the lamb over his shoulder looking peaceful and clean.

If we claim that the Lord is my shepherd that means that we are the sheep. It means he gets down and dirty in our lives, caring

and guarding for us—ever watchful and protective. It's a wonderful image, but have you ever stopped to think about why sheep need a shepherd in the first place? It's not as flattering as you might think. Sheep require a shepherd because without one they would literally nibble themselves lost or even dead. They are creatures of appetite and in some respects that sums us up as well. After all, isn't most of our life about wanting? I want, I shop, I get and when the cycle is over I start it over again—I shall want is the motto of the day!

We live in a perpetual state of want and desire which is precisely why we need a shepherd. Though the image isn't flattering it is very beautiful. We have a tendency to nibble ourselves to death with our wants and desires, God sends a shepherd to guard, guide and sustain us—not only for a little while but for our whole life long.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What wants/desires do I need to examine and correct?
2. How does God intervene and strengthen me for change?
3. How might I be a shepherd for others?

PRAYER

Lord you are our shepherd, guide us along the narrow paths of life that we may find ourselves restored and refreshed in your green pastures. Grant that through your Son we may fear no evil and your grace and mercy follow me all the days of my life. Amen.

EPHESIANS 5:8-14

⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—
⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is
pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose
them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything
exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light.
Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

COMMENTARY

Ephesians as a whole can be seen as a letter of advice to communities of faith on how to deal with the realities of cultural realities at work around them. In the passage before us we see advice to the community on helping recent Gentile converts from being tempted back into old habits and ways of living in the society around them. We see the author setting boundaries by creating principles for life together as a community of faith. The principles and boundaries are established in love; love that calls all members to pursue justice and true.

Of critical importance to the community is establishing ways to live in the light of God’s presence. This means that the children of light are called into a life of transparency, honesty and goodness. The author clearly links living in this manner with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a call to members of the community to turn to other members of faith for life rather than the world

in which they live.

The challenge in this of course is to continue living in the world and not giving up on it. It would certainly be easier to become an insular self-serving community, especially when times are tough. What is being urged in this passage however; is to live in such a way that it is visibly different from the culture around them by being truthful, being a people who uphold God’s justice rather than the cultures understanding and regardless of the regular practices of the culture around them being willing to not simply go along for the sake of getting along. What is really happening is a call to live as though we’ve already been resurrected from the dead and being visible witnesses to the light of God’s kingdom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do I need to amend my behaviour to reflect the kingdom of God and not society at large?
2. How does living as a child of the light change who you are in relation to others?
3. What does living as the resurrected child of God look like? How will you serve God in a new way this year?

PRAYER

Father, we've been given a glorious inheritance as the children of light. Grant that we may at all times strive to live as visible witnesses to your kingdom of justice and peace. Forgive us when we fall short and strengthen us to get up, get out and try again. Amen.

JOHN 9:1-41

¹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"³Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,⁷saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"⁹Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."¹⁰But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"¹¹He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."¹²They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." ¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"²⁷He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his

disciples?”²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

COMMENTARY

With all the talk about light, sight and blindness one would think this gospel was really about the blind man but it’s really getting at the core question of who is Jesus. Right alongside this question is another important question about sinfulness.

The theme of sinfulness comes up in two ways—one in regards to the blind man and another directly linked to Jesus identity. The Pharisees point to Jesus being a sinner because he doesn’t observe the Sabbath command as they see it. The story ends with Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees whose sin remains because they insist that they see and know everything already and need not change. They are blind to the gift from God right in front of them—Jesus who is able to

give sight to those who know they are blind.

It is interesting to notice that as the religious authorities—the Pharisees—harden their hearts toward the man born blind, he himself grows in insight. This highlights the parallel story being told of spiritual and physical blindness and the restoration of sight. The blind man at the beginning moves from simply identifying Jesus as the man to announcing him as a prophet and when pressed further declaring that Jesus must be from God.

Like the blind man in this passage, as followers of Jesus Christ we are on display all the time. We are in the sight of the people and the society around us because we stand for something other than this world has to

give. It shouldn't surprise us when we find ourselves at odds with those in authority nor should we be in a hurry to uphold the status quo. Instead we should hope to be like the blind man, trusting in the once called Jesus and over time have the courage to declare what we know about him. To speak the truth and tell of God's amazing grace when we

have been touched by it.

We may not fully understand or even comprehend how God is at work in our lives; we may not even have the full sight necessary to seek the right questions of faith. The blind man really sums it up for us, let's hear it again: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways are you more like the Pharisees in this story?
2. How could you adopt the attitude of the blind man and be willing—even under pressure—to declare boldly what you know of God's work in your life?
3. What is the difference between 'getting religion right' and 'doing religion in love'?

PRAYER

Loving God, when I am blind to my own ignorance and find it easier to accuse others of being unfaithful, give me courage to examine my own attitudes and be loving with myself and others. Grant me the desire to speak of what you've done for me in Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

COMMENTARY

If we know of any story in the book of Ezekiel it tends to be this one. It is easy for us to skip directly to the hope of this passage without examining or giving thought to why there is a valley of dry bones in the first place. Because we're unfamiliar with much of this book, we tend

to forget all that has lead up to this point. We forget that Ezekiel had been in exile, that the temple had been destroyed and that his wife had died.

This passage is both beautiful and terrifying—like so much of scripture. Terrifying in

that it makes us remember and reflect on the devastating events that cause a valley of dry bones and beautiful because it proclaims loudly the possibility of hope and renewed life found in God. We can't simply ignore this tension; we must grapple with it in the passage, our own lives and communities. This calls us to recognize God

at work and to bear witness to hope amidst the despair of the world around us. Our task, like Ezekiel's is not an easy one but when we're obedient to God we may fulfil our part in the restoration of the dry bones in the dark valleys of our time.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where do you see a 'valley of dry bones' in your life, the community you live in, the world at large?
2. How can you speak God's Words into these places such that God's breath may bring new life?
3. How can you keep your eyes open to the new life God has for all faithful people and invite others to share in it?

PRAYER

O God, you look with love on all your creation. May I find the courage to speak your love into the darkest reaches of my life and the world that in doing so all may be restored and renewed to you. Amen.

PSALM 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. ²Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! ³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. ⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. ⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. ⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

COMMENTARY

This psalm is a hopeful one as the psalmist reaches out to God asking for forgiveness and indeed trusting in its fulfillment. It's important for us to note that after asking for forgiveness the psalmist reminds the people to wait attentively. Unlike what we just read in Ezekiel, the attitude of this author is not despair but rather a feeling of great distance from the Lord. What else is interesting about this passage is that it is forgiveness that leads to reverence of the Lord. The petitioner is willing to wait on the Lord's response, demonstrating a great deal of confidence and trust that God will indeed respond to the plea.

At some point we all find ourselves in the same need that is expressed in this psalm. It's not easy, but we also need to step away from ourselves, our pride, our egos and

make things right with others and seek forgiveness. This is not something that we are taught, that society exemplifies or that comes easily to us.

Forgiveness is the process by which we re-establish relationships with one another when damage has been done. When we seek God for forgiveness and the strength to forgive other people we are able to do so with the same confidence demonstrated in this psalm. God will hear our petition. God will accept our humility and we will yearn for God as we await a response. It is God that redeems us and is steadfast in his promises.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where do you need to seek forgiveness in your life, with yourself or with others?
2. What steps can you take to ask for or demonstrate forgiveness?
3. How will trusting God to respond and patiently waiting change how you interact with others?

PRAYER

Gracious Lord, we trust in your unfailing promise to hear our voice when we call on you. In our times of trial and distress give us the courage and strength to seek and be bearers of forgiveness that in all things your love may abound. Amen.

ROMANS 8:6-11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot,⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

COMMENTARY

Like most of Paul's writing this passage has a lot packed into a few short verses which require our attention. It is densely theological and so we must read it attentively. Society has always put a lot of stock into the status of people. Paul challenges this assumption in these verses as he tells us that it is not by the flesh but by the spirit of Christ that we find our life and peace. The argument here is that our family of origin or a person's status in society matters very little because that isn't our ultimate worth. Our worth as people is found through Jesus Christ and our share in the promises of God. Paul argues that if the Spirit of Christ dwells in us then we have the power to change our understanding of life from one of competition and status to one of cooperation and peace. Now we shouldn't misunderstand Paul and think that flesh is bad or that material substance isn't good but

rather that it is through the Spirit that our mortal flesh becomes filled with life.

What is being contrasted is two ways of understanding life – the way of the world and the way that is Jesus. One way upholds status and one way upholds equality. It is a beautiful example of what God is able to do when he grabs hold of individual lives and transforms them for new life. This is a powerful statement of the nature of our own community of faith; that we are brought to life by the work of God through Jesus who makes us one family. This is an affirmation of what God has already done in the life of the believer and of the church as the representation of the body of Christ. This of course also requires our response. If we are truly in the Spirit and one family then we must be loving, forgiving and a peace making people.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How are you inclined to think about family? Does it line up with Paul's argument?
2. What transformation does your understanding require to truly see fellow Christians as members of your family?
3. What practical ways can you work on your relationship with other members of the Church this year?

PRAYER

God, you have created us as flesh and bone. Grant us your Spirit that our flesh and bone may be transformed for a life that reflects your glory in this world. Make us a people that yearn for peace, hunger for righteousness and seek always your forgiveness. Amen.

JOHN 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world."¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she

knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

COMMENTARY

When we come across this passage of scripture we tend to put all our attention on the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This of course is a major part of the story, but it is also a story about his sisters and their understanding of faith and Jesus. Mary and Martha’s experience of grief and loss is one that we can all understand and draw on. Jesus doesn’t immediately come when they call and they are both blunt and curt with him when he does arrive; claiming that had Jesus arrived sooner their brother would not have died. It is a story about lament as well as life.

The key component in this passage I

believe is love. Love is always linked intimately in the gospel with moments of death. We notice that the sister’s relationship with Jesus doesn’t prevent bad things from happening. Lazarus still dies. No, God hasn’t abandoned them; this is ultimately a story that glorifies God in the midst of what initially looks like a hopeless and painful situation.

What becomes evident as we explore this passage is that Mary, Martha and Lazarus had a loving relationship with Jesus. That being in relationship with Jesus doesn’t spare them from facing the reality of death. It means coming to an understanding that death and pain don’t get the final say in life.

This is great news! Not only as a future hope but also as a present reality—that abundant life is always possible.

As we reach Holy Week and the ending of our Lenten journey, we can take comfort that Jesus is with us in life and at death as well as all the places of death in our living. Of course this means that we must also follow him to his tomb. We must endure the pain, grief and loss of Good Friday, the silence of

Holy Saturday in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life on Sunday. God has been present to us in this life. God has taken on human flesh and dwelt amongst us. Let us go with him to the cross and embrace the resurrection—not simply as a prize for faithful living but as an example of a new way of life present to us today!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What can you learn from the example of Mary and Martha in this story?
2. How does knowing that God walks with us change how you can live your life now?
3. In what ways can you learn to live out the love that is present in this passage?

PRAYER

Lord of Life and Death, we thank you for not sheltering us from the pain of death that we may experience life in all its fullness now. May we continue to be a people of love and light in the midst of suffering and loss. Grant us the strength to follow you to the cross and be raised to new life in you. Amen.

Commentary, Questions & Prayers
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