

2023 Lenten Daily Devotional Book



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Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Joel 2:12-17 New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

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, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. Who 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? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy.

Between 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?'"

Reflection:

There is nothing particularly sacred about February 22nd. The date that Ash Wednesday falls on changes year to year anyway, so some years, February 22nd isn't even a part of the Lenten season. February 22nd is truly nothing special and the day means nothing out of the ordinary.

Unless it does. Unless it is 2023 and you observe the season of Lent. Unless it is a day you intentionally decide to observe it, along with all the other spiritual sojourners who have decided to set this time apart, and turn your gaze and open your hands to receive God's invitation to draw close, to pay close attention to God's movement in the world around you and within you.

My guess is, since you're reading this today, February 22nd, 2023 is a special day. It's the beginning of a chosen season. It's Ash Wednesday, and you might get some ashes drawn on your face, attend a special worship service, maybe even ponder something you might want to fast from or possibly some practice you want to introduce into your life during this time. Today is the beginning of Lent, a 40-day season of walking closely with Jesus, identifying with His journey into the wilderness, witnessing his life and ministry – even walking with him to Jerusalem where he will die a terribly painful death, and it will seem for a couple of days like all is lost. But then. Then, he returns.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Today, just receive the invitation: *Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.* Draw close. Pay close attention. Open yourself up to the journey. Come and see what God has in store.

Prayer:

O God of sacred and ordinary time, we have chosen to RSVP "Yes, I'm coming" to your invitation. Guide us into this time we have set aside to draw near to You. Help us to feel your presence and to know your peace. Amen.

Thursday, February 23, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Psalm 51:1-2 (Common English Bible)

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt;

purify me from my sin!

Reflection:

How quickly did you remove your ashes from yesterday? Wearing ashes out of an Ash Wednesday service is an uncomfortable activity. At times I've forgotten about my ashes and stopped at the grocery store after Ash Wednesday worship only to wonder why people were looking peculiarly at my forehead. Sometimes at home on Ash Wednesday night, I scratch my forehead, again forgetting about the ashes, and wonder why my skin feels gritty. The symbology of the ashes reminds us we are sinners, and we don't like being reminded of this fact. We do sin, individually and collectively. We sin by what we do, like telling a lie to stave off trouble, and by what we fail to do, such as insisting on cheap goods that exploit the earth's natural and human resources. Yet none of our sins forever cling to us like permanent ashes. Through God's faithful love, and our honest prayers, our sin washes off as easily as yesterday's dust.

Prayer:

Have mercy on us, God of faithful love. Teach us the art of honest prayer so that we may confess our wrongdoings and find the freedom of forgiveness you promise. Amen.

Friday, February 24, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Psalm 51:15 (New Revised Standard Version)

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

Reflection:

On average, people spend 18-180 minutes speaking somewhere between 7,000 and 20,000 words every day (according to a 2016 article on wordcounter.net). Wherever you land on that particular bell curve, do you ever think about how many of the words you speak every day bring glory to God? How much of your conversation sings God's praise? How often does your voice speak love into the world? Today, and every day, let our prayer be that our mouths will proclaim praise to God every time we speak or shout or sing.

Prayer:

Holy God, with every word may my voice be singing your praise, giving you thanks, and sharing your love in my relationships and conversations. Amen.

Saturday, February 25, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Matthew 18:1-5 (Common English Bible)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Then he called a little child over to sit among the disciples, and said, “I assure you that if you don’t turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Reflection:

I’m not sure I’ve ever met a humble toddler. Their sense of “ego” is just not developed enough at that age, so the distinctions between “self” and “other” are blurry and undefined. One day, they will learn to be self-conscious and self-obsessed like the rest of us, but until then, they have a lot to teach us. Every toddler believes that they are an artist, a dancer, an athlete, a singer, or whatever else they decide that day. There is no trepidation, shame, or measuring against others. They simply accept that they and their creations are valid and valuable. Unless you become like a toddler, surely you will never be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Unless you accept that your value is inherent and inalienable, then your fragile ego will keep getting in your way. You are loved, you are valued, and you are valid.

Prayer:

Oh great celestial parent, you who are the midwife to the stars in their nebulae and yet lovingly craft us in your image, help us to have the faith of a child. Help us and our fragile egos believe that we have value so that we might be free to pour out love on others. Amen.

Sunday, February 26, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Matthew 4:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward 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.'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.'

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection:

Sometimes we are tempted to take God's lovingkindness for granted. We think that we can do everything by ourselves, despite the consequences. Expecting God to ride in and magically fix our situation is quite like Satan's proposal to Jesus to put God to the test.

The more we rely on God's guidance, we can come to fully trust in God's Wisdom and Faithfulness. Rather than calling on God only when we have a problem, we can live our lives in the confidence of knowing that God will provide us with what we need.

Prayer:

Faithful God, lead us with your wisdom. We pray for ears that hear you, and the confidence to know that your leading will bring us to the life that you wish us to have. Amen.

Monday, February 27, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

Psalm 32:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version)

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Reflection: Happiness is not an emotion we often associate with the usually somber season of Lent. Yet the psalmist finds happiness and blessing in God's forgiveness. As we enter into this first full week of Lent may we seek to find blessing and happiness through those intentional practices that draw us closer to God and God's grace found in Jesus.

Prayer: O Holy One, draw us closer to you this Lent. As we follow Jesus may we discover the grace we so desperately need for our lives. May we find blessing for our souls. Amen.

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown, PA

Hebrews 4:14-5:2 New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

Reflection:

As we continue our Lenten journey that is often focused on sin, inward reflection, and abstaining from certain indulgences; I find this scripture reassuring. We too often fail to reflect on the humanness of Jesus, focusing on his godliness and power. But this text from Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is able to empathize with the tough parts of being human: weakness, temptation, ignorance – and much more! We see in the Gospels Jesus experiencing a range of human emotions including fierce anger to tear-filled sadness. Take comfort in knowing that our God is a God who came to experience human life and all that it entails. You are not alone in whatever you feel or experience in this life.

Prayer:

God of humanity, thank you for walking among us as Jesus. Thank you for being willing to experience the ups and downs of human life. Remind us that you are with us always; in our sorrow and in our joy, in our anger and in our contentment, in our suffering and in our success. Amen.

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Matthew 18:10-14 New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think?

If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Reflection:

In the season of Lent, we tend to do a lot of introspection – checking in with God and with ourselves, noticing places of distance, lack of control, maybe even glaring habits we wish to hide from everyone else. That kind of introspection can be really life-giving, as becoming aware of things we wish were different gives us the opportunity to see another way, to choose another way. However, it’s also not hard to move from introspection to shame, believing that if we even admitted to things being “off,” we must be terrible people, unable to do the “right thing,” incapable of “keeping it together” and, therefore, lead us to asking ourselves, “why even try?”

This image of God as a shepherd being willing, desiring even, to get into the mess with us, to drop everything to lead us back to safety – this image is a loving one, and isn’t intended to be shame-inducing. The sheep doesn’t feel guilty for the shepherd coming after it – it just allows its caretaker to lead it back to the rest of the herd, to a place of security and care.

As you travel through this Lenten journey, do you think you could allow yourself to see what’s under the surface without placing a value statement on what you see? Not turn away, but allow yourself to see what you find as an opportunity for growth, as an invitation to allow God to tenderly guide you to a place of security and care?

Prayer:

Loving shepherd, no matter how far we roam, it seems the distance is never too far for you to travel. You look on us with love and concern, but we don’t always see ourselves that way. Help us to see ourselves as you see us – as someone you rejoice in and someone worthy of loving pursuit. Amen.

Thursday, March 2, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

2 Timothy 1:3-7 (Common English Bible)

I'm grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. When I remember your tears, I long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. I'm reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I'm sure that this faith is also inside you. Because of this, I'm reminding you to revive God's gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.

Reflection:

My grandmother's name was Lois, and for this reason I've always been hooked reading this passage from 2 Timothy. However, my grandmother Lois is not the grandparent who deepened my faith. That would be my other grandmother, Katharine, or Ma Kitty as we called her. Ma Kitty was a woman of strong faith—powerful, loving, and self-controlled. Because of her influence I attended church as a child, I received the gift of a faith community, and I was prepared to answer God's call to ordained ministry. I hope a measure of Ma Kitty's faithfulness and tenacity lives on me. We all have people who have deepened, inspired, and influenced our faith journeys; people whose lived example of following Jesus affects how we follow. Who has impacted your journey, someone whose faith you hope continues in you? Maybe that person is a grandparent, a friend, someone in your congregation. If you have the chance, tell that person what they have meant to you, or if that person is among the saints in light, say a prayer of thanksgiving today for their continued legacy.

Prayer:

Connecting God, you have placed family members and friends into our lives to help deepen our relationship with you. We thank you for those whose faith has impacted ours and pray we may continue living the best of their example. Amen.

Friday, March 3, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Micah 7:18 (New Revised Standard Version)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?

He does not retain his anger for ever,
because he delights in showing clemency.

Reflection:

God delights in forgiving us! God delights in setting us free from our sin! God delights in pardoning us and forgetting our transgressions!! I think it can be hard for us to comprehend the fullness of God's forgiveness at least in part because it can be hard for us to imagine offering that kind of forgiveness to others. We may release the anger or hurt, but it's so hard to forget the thing that made us angry or hurt us. How could we imagine being fully forgiven when we struggle to fully forgive? Maybe it can be enough to hear and believe that God delights in showing clemency. Maybe it can be enough to pray that God will help us learn how to delight in offering forgiveness to one another.

Prayer:

Forgiving God, help us to trust that your forgiveness is as deep and wide as scripture promises. Help us to forgive others more fully and truly. Help us to delight in releasing anger and hurt in the way that you delight in offering us forgiveness. Amen.

Saturday, March 4, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Psalm 121:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition)

I lift up my eyes to the hills—

from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth.

Reflection:

Read that verse again, but this time, emphasize the “my” in the second line. “From where will MY help come?” The Psalmist was likely standing in a valley looking up to the hills where the Canaanites built their shrines. The other peoples had local gods who were powerful enough to help with the harvest, but small enough to comprehend. They had houses on hilltops, predictable rituals, and travel-sized idols. The God of the Israelites, meanwhile, forbade the people from creating comforting idols, rejected the idea of a stationary temple, and invited people to think bigger than their restrictive tribalism. There is a kind of transcendent freedom to that, but transcendence can also feel cold and distant, like it did for the Psalmist. It’s easier to cling to small, familiar idols than the unimaginably awesome creator of the universe. But that’s the thing about our God. Though God is larger than the sum of all creation, God is also as near as our next breath. Within you, below you, above you, and in the spaces between your heartbeats, God is present and tender. So do not waste your time looking up to the hills. Look within and find that the creator of the universe has written eternity on your heart.

Prayer:

Transcendent God, be near to us today. In our fears, troubles, pains, and uncertainties, fill us with an undeniable sense of your presence. Help us to feel your comfort in new and expansive ways today. Amen.

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Matthew 17:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Reflection:

This is the second time that God speaks to mortals, declaring God's pleasure with Jesus. The first was at Jesus' baptism. Both times, Jesus is claimed as God's beloved son.

What joy we feel when we are proclaimed to be God's beloved child! From that moment on, when we accept God's love and Jesus' sacrifice for us, we become God's and God's alone. God will watch over us and love us. In the words of Psalm 121,

"The LORD is your keeper;
The sun shall not strike you by day
nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.
Praise be to God!

Prayer:

Loving God, we wish to please you as your child. Please bless our "coming ins" and our "going outs" as we strive to live in your ways. Today and everyday. Amen.

Monday, March 6, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

Numbers 21:6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Reflection:

What are the poisonous serpents in our lives? We all have those things that "bite" us and darken our outlook. Our world is filled with negativity all around that seeps into our souls and "poisons" us. We get treated poorly and we treat others poorly; we get yelled at and in turn we yell at others. This scripture from Numbers teaches us that God interrupts these deadly practices and brings us life. The image of the bronze serpent mocks and counters the deadly forces that poison the ancient Israelites. So too God shows us the folly of pursuing venomous words and of the poisonous forces in our world and offers us the kingdom of life through the lifted up Christ. Look to Christ this Lent and find life; a life that rejects venomous words and actions and embraces that which gives life.

Prayer:

O Holy One, help us to live and rid ourselves of the poisons in the world. Amen.

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Isaiah 65:17-18 Common English Bible

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth:

past events won't be remembered;

they won't come to mind.

Be glad and rejoice forever

in what I'm creating,

because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy

and her people as a source of gladness.

Reflection:

Let's imagine for a second that you are living in this new Jerusalem as Isaiah imagines it. There is no more weeping, the trees are always fruiting, infant mortality is 0%, and everyone has more than they need to flourish. How would you live in a place like that? Would you spend your time learning new skills, practicing art, or enjoying good food with your loved ones? Or would you spend your time thinking about the days when people struggled to make ends meet, when factories gave people lung cancer, and when the threat of war was always on the horizon? Would you sully paradise with reflections on the pain of yesteryear? Of course you wouldn't! So why are we so content to do so now as transformed, resurrected people? Why are we so quick to ruminate on our old ways, old mistakes, and old traumas when the promise of new life is right in front of us? Granted, we're not going to live in Isaiah's new Jerusalem anytime soon, but there is a profound transformation of spirit that is available to you right now through Jesus Christ. So let us dwell not on past events, but keep our eyes to the transformation that is in our midst. Let us live as resurrection people, alive in Christ and empowered to transform our world.

Prayer:

Bring not to mind where we have come from, but fix our eyes on you and your kingdom. Help us not to dwell on our pain, but rejoice in our healing. Be with us in this time of introspection and resurrection. Amen.

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

John 8:4-11 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

They said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Reflection:

The tension in this scene is thick - anger, judgment, blame, shame, fear – all present. You might have questions like I do – how about the man this nameless woman was committing adultery *with*? She certainly wasn't on her own in committing this act. And what was Jesus writing? What word, or words were so important that Jesus took *this* moment to pause and write on the ground? Why would someone be willing to take a person's life to test the morals of another?

Jesus' response is striking amidst this charged atmosphere. He doesn't react right away. He takes a moment to allow everyone to catch their breath and doesn't even tell the accusers what to do. He gives them a pregnant pause and then turns the question on its head – “whoever is blameless here, go ahead. Throw your stones.” And then he grants them a couple more breaths.

His response takes the heat out of the moment and helps people to see each other's eyes. It's much harder to inflict pain on someone whose life you see value in. By responding the way he does, he allows both the accused *and* the accusers to see each other's humanity, and their own, and creates a way for peace. And it literally saves a woman's life.

Is there someone in your life whose eyes are difficult to look into? Hard for you to see their humanity? Let us pray that God will help us to see with renewed vision.

Prayer:

O God of pregnant pauses, grant us the opportunity to take a breath and readjust our vision. Whether it is the way we see ourselves or others, help us to see Your image reflected when we look and when we see. Amen.

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Exodus 16:1-4 (Common English Bible)

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Sin desert, which is located between Elim and Sinai. They set out on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left the land of Egypt. The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. The Israelites said to them, "Oh, how we wish that the Lord had just put us to death while we were still in the land of Egypt. There we could sit by the pots cooking meat and eat our fill of bread. Instead, you've brought us out into this desert to starve this whole assembly to death."

Reflection:

We humans are never satisfied. In summer, we long for cooler days; in winter we crave summer's warmth. In our childhoods, we are in a hurry to grow up; in our grown-up years we wish time would slow down. This tendency toward dissatisfaction is ancient, case in point today's scripture reading. In Exodus 16, the Israelite people just found freedom after generations of captivity in Egypt. They have lived through the ten plagues, the Passover, and the parting of the Red Sea. Of all the people we think would possess a measure of gratitude and contentment in what God was doing among them, we would think it would be this community. Yet the people are already complaining about God's seeming lack of provision. They would have rather God killed them in Egypt than be starved to death in the desert. In the midst of change and uncertainty, it is tough to trust in God's provision, even if we've witnessed some impressive displays of divine power. Today if trusting in God seems challenging in the midst of what you are handling, take a deep breath and remember; remember a moment when God came through for you and hold on to that moment with all your strength.

Prayer:

Holy One, you provide for us more abundantly and faithfully than we can comprehend. Thank you. Remind us of one small way you have shown us your goodness, and we pray for the courage to trust in that memory. Amen.

Friday, March 10, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Psalm 95:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)

O come, let us sing to the Lord;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

Reflection:

Two things that I have learned as a parent of three children are 1) things are going to be noisy and 2) when they get quiet, it's time to worry. In my human fallibility, I can't pretend that I *always* love their noisiness, and in their human fallibility, I can't pretend their noises are always joyful. Nevertheless, I usually delight in hearing the three of them play together. I love to hear them laugh and sing and invent new worlds and create new stories together. Their joyful noises are music to my ears!

Can you imagine how much God must delight in hearing us joyfully sing and play and collaborate together? Don't get quiet today; get loud. Make a joyful noise to the Lord!

Prayer:

Great God, may every sound we make today bring you glory and joy. Help us to be faithful and courageous enough to sing loudly with praise and thanksgiving. Amen.

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Exodus 16:27-30 Common English Bible

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather bread, but they found nothing. The Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to obey my commandments and instructions? Look! The Lord has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, on the sixth day he gives you enough food for two days. Each of you should stay where you are and not leave your place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day.

Reflection:

When the Hebrew people were living as nomads in the Sinai desert, food was scarce and they got (rightfully) anxious. So Moses prayed to God, and God gave them this mysterious bread-like substance every morning called "mana", but there was a catch. It doesn't stay fresh for long. In fact, if they tried to save some for the next day, they would wake up to find it full of maggots. In this way, the people learned to trust God for each day without being overly anxious for tomorrow. But wait, there's another catch! One of God's most important commandments to the people was to take one day per week to recharge. Do nothing, be with your family, make yourself aware of God's closeness and blessings, and that means that they couldn't collect mana on that day. So God made Friday's mana stretch through Saturday so that the people could faithfully rest. Imagine how they felt every Friday as they gathered mana. They'd seen how baskets of mana became infested with maggots on other days, but if they were to be true to God, they needed to trust that God would provide enough for them that they could actually take a day to rest. Can we learn that lesson? Can we learn to trust that the world will not collapse if we take a day off? Can we learn, deep inside, that tomorrow will take care of tomorrow?

Prayer:

Our Creator who comes down to meet us in our need, give us today our daily bread and help us to stop worrying about tomorrow's mana. Teach us how to rest without guilt. Be with us now and always. Amen.

Sunday, March 12, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

John 4:16 – 26 (New Revised Standard Version)

The (Samaritan) woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you (Jews)[b] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 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." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Reflection:

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and asks for a drink. He impresses her with his knowledge of her life, and she begins to understand that he is no ordinary man. Jesus teaches her that God is a Spirit, and that we do not have to be in a special place, such as Jerusalem's Temple or the Mountain, to worship God. When we worship God with our innermost spirit, speaking the truth of our hearts, God will meet us where we are. Whether at church, home or in other spaces, God is there.

Prayer:

Gracious God, no matter where we are, there you are also. Help us to keep you in the forefront of our minds so that we might better feel your presence. Thank you for never leaving us lonely, secure in the knowledge that you remain nearby. Amen.

Monday, March 13, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

2 John 1: 4-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment but one we have had from the beginning: let us love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.

Reflection:

“A commandment from the beginning: let us love one another.” What gets in the way of us doing so? After over 2000 years of Christianity, we still sometimes struggle with loving one another. We struggle with loving all those who sit in the pews with us; we struggle with those who think differently than us; we struggle with practicing love to its fullest. As a Lenten challenge, ask God to bless whoever or whatever you are struggling to love in this moment.

Prayer:

God of love, bless all those who we struggle to love. By the power of your Spirit, transform our hearts to your reflect your heart and your love for the whole world. Amen.

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown, PA

1 Corinthians 10:1-4 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Devotion:

Paul is speaking to the church at Corinth while they're in limbo – a sort of in-between time – as they are newly devoting themselves to Christ was also waiting for God's kingdom to be a reality on earth. We still live in these in-between times, as Christians working to follow Jesus' ways of love and peace and justice; but knowing that God's vision for the world is not fully realized. We live in limbo in other ways too: In a pandemic that's not quite over, but we continue to try and live amid sickness and death. In a world where political divisions have caused violence and hatred, as we try and create a country where all are cared for. Unfortunately, Paul seems to be saying, "Take off the rose-colored glasses." It wasn't easy; the Israelites didn't perfectly all follow Moses and take every step correctly, and we aren't either. Paul suggests to dedicate ourselves to be better followers of Christ and faithful to God. We definitely have some work to do as we continue to live in limbo and we work to create God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."

Prayer:

God of all times and places, help us to live in the in-between. To follow your ways, while knowing the beauty of your kingdom is not the reality in our world. Take off what blinds us from seeing how to better create a world of peace, of wholeness, and of newness of life. Amen.

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Psalm 81:5b-7 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I hear a voice I had not known: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

Reflection:

It is a very natural to experience moments of fear and doubt, especially when facing new situations and the end results are unclear. One of the ways that God has guided faithful people into, and through, the unknown is by helping them to engage in faith memory, reminding them of all the times that God proved faithful and brought them through, even if it wasn't quite the way they had expected. That's one of the reasons our biblical stories mean so much to us – they recount the faithfulness of God, over and over again, through times of plenty and times of little, times of struggle and times of peace.

Can you recount times in your life when God has seen you through, even if it was in ways that were surprising to you? When you think of something, pray this prayer of gratitude:

Prayer:

Faithful one, our specific circumstances in life often throw us off balance, making us doubt your promises and even to forget the ways you have shown us, time and time again, of your presence and accompaniment in all things. Thank you for stirring up in us those faith memories in these moments, reassuring us that, just as you were with us then, you are with us now. Amen.

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Ephesians 4:25-27, 31-32 (Common English Bible)

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor because we are parts of each other in the same body. Be angry without sinning. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. ... Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Reflection:

"Don't let the sun set on your anger." These words have been used to advocate for a quick resolution to conflict so that we avoid the devil. Going to bed angry is far better, though, than hastily making false peace. The devil has greater opportunity for mischief when we slap proverbial band-aids over deeper-rooted issues causing strife. Forgiveness is a process that takes time. We must name our anger and search out the reasons it exists. Once we understand what's bothering us, then we need to work up the courage to give voice to our concerns and pray the other will listen. Likely they will express their concerns in return, and we need the grace to hear. Then we have to figure out how to move forward with the perspectives and issues of all sides as best we can. Working through anger to healthy resolution is a tricky, time-consuming process that when done well takes more than a day. Rushing through the process to "avoid the devil" will only unleash other demons. The end of this passage from Ephesians 4 holds greater wisdom for us. Yes, we will feel anger, and yet may we have the grace to put aside bitterness, losing our temper, anger, shouting, and slander as we work toward forgiveness.

Prayer:

Gracious God, you are infinitely patient and understanding of us. May we mirror a measure of your mercy as we work through the conflicts in our lives. Help us to put aside behaviors that harm and become your agents of healing. Amen.

Friday, March 17, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Psalm 23:1-4 New Revised Standard Version

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

Reflection:

Today is Friday. We're about half way through Lent. Can we please listen to God's invitation to rest for a while? The Lord, our shepherd, is here, ready to give us what we need, ready to protect us while we lay down in the grass, ready to bring us to cool, clear water so that we can drink our fill, ready to restore our souls and lead us along the right path. We have nothing to fear.

Lay down somewhere comfortable today. Drink plenty of water. Nourish your body and your spirit. God is with you.

Prayer:

God our Shepherd, help us to trust that you will guide and protect us. Help us to trust that we can rest. Help us to trust that we can eat and drink our fill. Help us to trust that you will lead and comfort us, every day of our lives. Amen.

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

John 1:5 (Common English Bible)

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

Reflection:

There is a darkness that can extinguish the light, but it is rare and mysterious. When a star becomes too massive, its gravity begins to pull itself into its own center, drawing local celestial bodies into its increasingly dense center. Eventually, the gravity of this point becomes so massive that light itself cannot escape its clutches. Stars are snuffed out, photons are crushed to nothing, and the laws of physics fall apart. We call these monsters, "black holes", and until recently, we've only been able to see them by the nothingness they create. All that changed in 2019 when an international team of scientists unveiled the first ever photograph of a black hole. Since light cannot escape a black hole, it should be nearly impossible to see one, but an international team of over 200 scientists used special telescopes spanning the entirety of the globe, essentially turning the Earth into one giant telescope. They captured over a petabyte of data that took two years to compile, and the result looks a little like a blurry donut. It's not much to look at, but it stands for something incredible. The darkest places in the universe, where light is destroyed and the laws of physics themselves are rendered meaningless, are not totally dark when people work together. Companionship, collaboration, and mutual aid can photograph black holes, and can bring life to the harshest parts of our lives. Even when we feel like we are in a soul-crushing place where nothing makes sense and light is eaten up, we can find a way through it together.

Prayer:

Lord of lights, save us from the black holes of desperation that lie deep in our souls. They pull us into depression and hopelessness, and we do not have the strength to pull ourselves out. Give us friends and family who can support us when we cannot fight against gravity any longer, and may we be that same force for those that we love. Amen.

Sunday, March 19, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

1 Samuel 16:1 – 13 (New Revised Standard Version)

The LORD said 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." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 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." 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?" 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.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely his anointed is now before the LORD." 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 looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." 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." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him, for this is the one." 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.

Reflection:

Mortals look at a person's outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. It would be great if there were special goggles we could wear to see inside a person's heart. But the best we can do is figure it out by their attitudes and actions. God, however, is the only being who can know our hearts. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God also knows what we need, sometimes before we can name it. God is all-knowing and all-powerful.

Prayer:

God, you know everything about me. You know both the good things and the things I'm not so proud of. Thank you for loving me even when I am not being especially lovable. I depend on your mercy and your love. Thank you. Amen.

Monday, March 20, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

Acts 9:3-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Reflection:

The story of Saul/Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road has captured the imaginations of Christians for centuries. Yet, as modern Christians we don't often experience big conversion moments like this where the course of our lives is altered in mere seconds. Rather most of our conversions to the way of God happen little by little over our lifetimes. In prayer, ask God...How has your heart and mind been transformed already this Lent? What little changes have happened to you already as you've embraced the way of repentance and discipline? What changes are yet to come? What changes are you resisting?

Prayer:

Holy One, shape us and transform us. Overcome our resistance to change and guide us in the power of your Holy Light. Amen.

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown, PA

Colossians 1:9-14 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Devotion:

There's an old psychological principal that we should give criticism sandwiched between two compliments. In today's scripture, Paul is speaking to the Colossians as they are working to nourish their new Christian community, and it seems like they are in rough shape. Paul says, "we have not ceased praying for you"! Paul's prayers are focused on the Colossians growing in God's knowledge, being strengthened by God's power, and receiving patience and endurance. But before this admonishment to become "worthy of the Lord" Paul actually starts with a compliment – thanking God for the Colossians "faith in the Messiah Jesus" and "the love they have for all the saints" because of "the hope reserved for them in heaven". So today, let's try together to have our prayers be like those sandwiches – thanking God for something good, asking God to fulfill our needs where we are struggling, and finishing it off with another thanksgiving.

Prayer:

God of blessing, help us to seek you in prayer not just when we are in need; not just when we are lacking strength, and knowledge, and patience, and endurance. Place in us a spirit of thanksgiving; remind us to be grateful for the faith, love, and hope you've already put within us and the many blessings in our lives. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Matthew 9:27-34 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, "Do you have faith that I can do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith, let it be done to you." And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." But they went away and spread the news about him through all of that district.

After they had gone away, a demon-possessed man who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed and said, "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees were saying, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons."

Reflection:

Blind men having their sight restored. A man who was mute being able to speak freely. These healing actions of Jesus gave life to folks and were cause for celebration, wonder, and awe, and while that was the response of many, some of the religious leaders refused to believe this was the work of God. It didn't fit into their narrative, so they tried to discredit him, saying that that these acts were a result of evil forces at work.

Jesus was not sidetracked. He kept it moving. He knew what he was supposed to be doing, and he did not lose his focus because of the detractors. They didn't have to understand what he was doing – he understood, and that was enough.

Sometimes, God calls us to do things other people don't understand, for one reason or another, and they might try to detract our efforts. But, if God is calling us to something, we can trust that other people don't have to understand it for it to be right, to be true. Let us pray that we keep our focus on what God is calling us to do.

Prayer:

Calling one, you have been empowering faithful people to great things for generations, things that do not always fit the understanding of everyone. Help us to listen to your call and quiet the messages that would discredit you at work in us. Amen.

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Ezekiel 3:1-3 and Revelation 10:8-11 (Common English Bible)

Then he said to me: Human one, eat this thing that you've found. Eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he fed me the scroll. He said to me: Human one, feed your belly and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you. So I ate it, and in my mouth it became as sweet as honey.

Then the voice I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, "Go, take the opened scroll from the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will make you sick to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." So I took the scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. And it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I swallowed it, it made my stomach churn. I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings."

Reflection:

If an angel tells you to eat a scroll and then give a message, chances are good that message will not go over well. In today's scripture readings, both the prophet Ezekiel and Jesus' disciple, John, are given scrolls to eat and messages to share. Neither of them had an enviable task—Ezekiel was explicitly told his message was directed toward a bunch of hardheaded and hard-hearted people, a "household of rebels." John was merely calling time on creation, no hard task. The great irony of both stories is that God had a message for the people, and the people didn't want it. In our day, we often pray for a sign or a message from heaven and long "if only God would...." While we might ask God to give us a word, are we really prepared for the word God or God's representatives might give? More than praying that the Holy One would speak to us, perhaps we should pray for greater openness to the messages God sends.

Prayer:

Mysterious God, you continue to speak and ask for our attention today. May we have the courage to listen to the messages you have given us. Help us hear with humility and hope. Amen.

Friday, March 24, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Psalm 130:5-8 New Revised Standard Version

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Reflection:

There's a moment in *The Princess Bride* (one of my favorite movies of all time) when Inigo Montoya, pacing at the top of the Cliffs of Insanity and preparing to fight the Man in Black, mutters to himself, "I hate waiting." Relatable Content! In a world of instant gratification and constant productivity, it can be so hard to wait. And yet, here we are: waiting for the Lord, knowing there is nothing that we can do to speed up God's timeline but always trusting that God's love and presence are steadfast. Let us watch and wait as we pray:

Prayer:

Loving God, we believe that your love, your presence, and your grace are steadfast and true. Make us patient to wait for you. Keep us faithful in this time of waiting. Guide us along the path of righteousness while we wait for you. Amen.

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Psalm 130:3-4 (Common English Bible)

If you kept track of sins, Lord—
my Lord, who would stand a chance?
But forgiveness is with you—
that's why you are honored.

Reflection:

God is not “all-knowing”. There. I said it. Get the heretic pitchforks out. I’m ready to face the Inquisition! Seriously though, we spend so much time contemplating God’s knowledge and awareness of every fallen sparrow and hair on your head, but I’m far more impressed with God’s forgetfulness. God chooses to forget your shortcomings and failures. I think that God is probably more willing to forget our sins than we are. We tend to hang on to our regrets and failures, and they come back to haunt us like petulant ghosts. So let us rejoice in God’s intentional forgetfulness and allow ourselves the same grace that is freely given to us every single moment.

Prayer:

Forgetful God, thank you for your constant river of grace. Help us to accept that gift which you give so freely and excessively. Amen.

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Psalm 130 New Revised Standard Version

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD; my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

Reflection:

Many of us have gone through times of deep despair and sadness. When in the midst of feelings like this, it might be helpful to remember that Jesus also felt such emotions. On the Mt. of Olives, he prayed to not be crucified. Jesus knows despair. Even while following his Father's wishes, he knew that God's redeeming love would not leave him desolate. He would die, but rise again to defeat death itself. God will redeem us from the pit as well, just as God redeemed Jesus, and the nation of Israel time and again.

Prayer:

God, thank you for being here with me in all of my moods and fears. Fill me the hope of your redemption, to raise me up when I most need you. Send me your light and love, I pray. Amen.

Monday, March 27, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

Acts 20:7-12 New Revised Standard Version

On the first day of the week, as we gathered together for a meal, Paul was holding a discussion with them. Since he was leaving the next day, he continued talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we had gathered. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. He was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell from the third floor and died. Paul went down, fell on him and embraced him, then said, "Don't be alarmed. He's alive!" Then Paul went back upstairs and ate. He talked for a long time—right up until daybreak—then he left. They took the young man away alive, and they were greatly comforted.

Reflection:

This unusual story from the Book of Acts speaks to the changing life of the early Christian Church. This passage is the first mention in the New Testament of Christians observing the Sabbath on Sunday. They did so in celebration of Jesus' resurrection. In proper celebration, Paul nonchalantly raises Eutychus after he falls out a window and dies. The sabbath and Jesus were so important to Paul that he wanted to tell the early Christians of Troas everything he knew. Is our dedication to our Sunday Worship and gathering as enthusiastic as that? Were you excited to be in church yesterday? As we finish up Lent and beyond, may our energy for Jesus and celebration of the Resurrection be just as extraordinary as the early Christians was. However, you might want to have a slightly shorter sermon than Paul did.

Prayer:

Lifegiving God, increase our enthusiasm for our celebrations of the resurrection on this upcoming Easter Sunday and every Sunday.

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown, PA

Ephesians 2:1-10 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Devotion:

I certainly feel like a child of wrath some days. I also feel dead through my trespasses some days. Consider the word trespasses; it means going too far, or crossing a boundary we shouldn't have. How often do we push ourselves too far, try to do too much, and place ourselves in a position where we've crossed the boundaries of our own well-being and mental or physical health? This text from Ephesians brings us good news; that our salvation, our relationship with Christ, is not reliant on our work or what we do – but on God's gift of grace to us. So, take a deep breath today, don't push yourself over that boundary. God loves you and knows you – we don't have to DO anything.

Prayer:

Thank you, God of all good gifts, for your everlasting care and presence in our lives. Thank you for the gift of grace, that comes to us not because of our works, not because we've earned it – but because of your great love for us and for all people. Remind us to take a moment to care for our own well-being and to reflect your love back to ourselves. Amen.

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Psalm 143:5-8 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I remember the days of old; I think about all your deeds; I meditate on the works of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit. Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust. Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Reflection:

The psalmist describes a very intimate relationship with God. They remember God's faithfulness. They spend time in the presence of God. They trust God and pray for God's guidance. They describe investing daily in that relationship with their time, energy, faith, and love, and they are honest and forthright with their desires and fears.

What might it look like for you to choose to intentionally invest in your relationship with God? To talk to God as if to a friend, with honesty and trust. Share with God right now in this time of prayer what is actually on your heart.

Prayer:

O God who knows us and loves us, help us to feel your nearness. Meet us here in the midst of our lives, in both our ordinary days and our extra-ordinary ones. Remind us of your love, your presence, and that you long for us to know you too. Amen.

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Philippians 1:3-6 (Common English Bible)

I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I'm thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it's always a prayer full of joy. I'm glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I'm sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus.

Reflection:

Life following Jesus Christ is not for the faint of heart. Discipleship asks us to turn from ourselves to a world of beauty and of need. Living in Christ's way requires introspection, confession, and humility. In our shallow, "me first" society, the values of Jesus are countercultural and difficult to embody. So who are your partners in the gospel? Who helps you follow Jesus' path, and walks with you, maybe even drags you at times, along the way? Spend some time today naming such people in your prayers and giving thanks for them. And if you can, not only thank God for such people, thank them yourself for the ways they help you carry out the good work the Holy One has begun in you.

Prayer:

Thank you, God, that you don't expect us to or demand that we live the life of discipleship alone. Thank you for all the people who make our journey with you richer, stronger, and more beautiful. And thank you for the good work you have begun in us. May we continue growing into the people you know us to be. Amen.

Friday, March 31, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

Philippians 1:27-28a New Revised Standard Version

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.

Reflection:

What does it mean to you to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”? Verses like this can serve to remind us that faith isn’t just about believing the right things about who Jesus is and what God has done. Faith isn’t just about our hope for the great beyond. Faith is also about living in this world as changed people. Faith is also about living in community, working together to serve God by serving our neighbors. Who do you see in your community who needs us to stand shoulder to shoulder with them? What needs does Jesus want us to see and meet? Together, we can live in ways worthy of the Gospel.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of faith. Help us to live lives worthy of the Gospel, breathing and speaking and sharing your love in every moment. Help us to live in unity with Christ and with one another. Amen.

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

Psalm 31:9-10 (Common English Bible)

Have mercy on me, Lord, because I'm depressed.

My vision fails because of my grief,
as do my spirit and my body.

My life is consumed with sadness;
my years are consumed with groaning.

Strength fails me because of my suffering;
my bones dry up.

Reflection:

Mental health is not all in your head. It's also in your gut, your eyes, your bones, and your spine. The most common type of antidepressant (SSRI's) works to improve mood by increasing the body's levels of serotonin. 95% of that serotonin is made in your gut which is why you feel intense emotions in your stomach. Your retinas are less than a centimeter square and a half-millimeter thick yet contain as many neurons as a dog's entire brain. Many studies have shown that chronic depression literally eats away at your bones and leads to osteoporosis. We are singular beings, and any worldview which splits our bodies and minds is dangerously mistaken. Taking care of your physical health will improve your mental health, and taking care of your mental health will improve your physical health. Taking care of your physical and mental health will also improve your spiritual health. It is incredibly hard to sense the presence of God when depression saps your spirit. I've been down in that pit many times, and even though I believe that God is with me down there, it sure doesn't feel like it at the moment! So be kind to yourself. Being human is complicated, and these bodies have a lot of moving parts.

Prayer:

Jesus, you know my every neuron. You see when they fire correctly and when my neurotransmitters fail. You see this confusing storm of consciousness as you knew it intimately in your own body. Have mercy on me in these days, and help me when I lack the strength to call out. Surround me with empathetic, loving people. Be my strength. Amen.

Sunday, April 2, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Matthew 21:1-11 New Revised Standard Version

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Reflection

Jesus triumphantly enters into Jerusalem, knowing what was coming in the week ahead. Although he warned the disciples, they really didn't comprehend. The crowds loved Jesus and hailed him as they would a conquering hero. Many of them might be calling for his crucifixion later in the week. But today, we can join in the crowd's happiness as we hail Jesus, the King of Israel. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of Man. All glory and honor be to you, Jesus our Christ!

Prayer:

May all glory and honor be yours, oh Christ. Your sacrifice has bought and paid for our redemption. Nothing we can do or say is worthy of enough praise, but on this Palm Sunday, we sing your praises with gratitude! Amen.

Monday, April 3, 2023

Rev. Matthew Hoover

Pleasantville United Church of Christ, Chalfont, PA

John 12:3-8

Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, "This perfume was worth a year's wages! Why wasn't it sold and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. You will always have the poor among you, but you won't always have me."

Reflection:

On this Monday of Holy Week, we pause to remember the extravagant gift Mary gave Jesus. She didn't hold back in anointing Jesus for his impending death. She gave her most valuable possession to Jesus. In response to Judas' criticism Jesus reminds him that the poor will always be among us. As we remember all that Jesus did and said, how might we remember Jesus' love and concern for the poor and marginalized? What would it look like if we didn't hold back in supporting those whose Jesus loved and cared for?

Prayer:

Caring and compassionate God, help us to care for you, by caring for the poor. May our compassion and giving reflect our commitment to following you. Amen.

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Rev. Kimberly Berenotto

Longswamp United Church of Christ, Mertztown, PA

John 12:20-36 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah^[b] remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is in you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Devotion:

As we move our way through Holy Week, today's reading is Jesus' final public teaching before his crucifixion. Jesus in Jerusalem attracts a large crowd of Jews and Greeks – and likely folks who have followed him from Lazarus' house and those in town for the Passover. Jesus draws these people to himself to share his message of imminent death. We cannot avoid darkness and death, but we are called to trust that God will bring about life. We know this to be true in our own lives. As much as we might try, darkness and hurt find us. But we can hold fast to Jesus' promise that he will light our paths and lead us to meaningful life.

Prayer: God of light, hold us in this Holy Week darkness. Keep us close to you as we wait in the dimness of life's struggle and suffering. Guide us through the dark toward the path of light we know awaits us in Christ's Easter resurrection glory. But, it's not time yet, so give us courage to walk in the dark until then. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Rev. Nichole Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

John 13:21-30 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining close to his heart; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival," or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Reflection:

For three years, the twelve disciples traveled and ministered with Jesus. They witnessed him heal people, listened to his teachings, saw him exorcise evil spirits out of people who were tormented, and watched him engaged with the religious leaders of the day, challenging the status quo always. They were his inner circle, his trusted friends, but he knew that one of them was going to betray him and lead those seeking Jesus' life right to him.

A lot of bad things happen to Jesus this week, and it didn't happen all at once. Betrayal is personal – it's more than just a transgression because the transgression is inflicted by someone who we trusted. And yet, Jesus doesn't even let on to the others that he knows, he just lets Judas know that he knows and, let him go to do what he set out to do.

Is there someone in your life that has betrayed you? Someone you trusted who transgressed against you, hurting you deeply and destroying your capacity to trust them, or maybe even anyone else? Take that person, or that memory, to Jesus and allow him, who knew that pain, to be with you in those feelings.

Prayer:

One who was betrayed by one of your closest friends, be present to this pain and these feelings. Remind me that it is human to be wounded by betrayal and heal the resulting wounds in your time. Amen.

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Rev. Rebecca Hoover

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Exodus 12:14 (Common English Bible)

“This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the Lord. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.

Reflection:

Today is a day of remembering for us. While we do not remember the Passover as our Jewish kindred do, we remember Maundy Thursday as the day Jesus ate his last supper, in some gospel accounts the Passover meal, with his disciples. We remember on the last night of his life, when Jesus knew what was coming for him, he could have done anything—called down a legion of angels to protect him, plotted the demise of Rome, run away—he chose to spend the night sharing a meal with those he loved. On this night Jesus could have said anything—avenge my death, take up arms, fight—he said, “Love. Love one another as I have loved you. Show the world my love through your love.” Maundy Thursday is a day of remembering for us, a day we remember and marvel at the depths of Jesus’ self-giving love.

Prayer:

Holy One, today we pause and remember your love for creation made real and poignant in Jesus. May we live out his commandment to love as you have loved us, even when and especially when we feel enough anger to tear the world down. Give us the grace, and the courage, to embody a measure of Jesus’ love. Amen.

Friday, April 7, 2023

Rev. Selina Hamilton

Rosedale United Church of Christ, Laureldale, PA

John 19:38-42 New Revised Standard Version

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

Reflection:

On Good Friday, many of our churches gather to read the full and devastating story of the last day of Jesus' life. He is betrayed, arrested, abandoned, convicted, and crucified. He dies. It is a brutal story that leaves us with little sense of hope. If we didn't know what happens next, if we didn't know the glory of the resurrection, I'm not sure that we'd be able to stand to read this story at all.

Still, in the Gospel of John, we find true tenderness at the end of this worst day. In their grief, in their crushed hopes, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus stay with their teacher. They care for his body as he cares for all our souls. They wrap him for burial and lay him in a new tomb in a garden.

Today can be so hard. Today can be too hard. Be tender with yourself. Wrap yourself in love and grace. Lay down and rest a while. Know that God is holding you tenderly and wrapping you in deep love. Trust that God will do God's resurrection work. We only need to wait.

Prayer:

Holy One, you are our God through the deepest night of our grief and in the glorious dawn of resurrection. Be tender with us as we wait and pray. Help us to rest and trust in you alone. Amen.

Saturday, April 8, 2023

Rev. Zack Jackson

Open Table United Church of Christ, Pottstown, PA

1 Peter 4:6 (Common English Bible)

Indeed, this is the reason the good news was also preached to the dead. This happened so that, although they were judged as humans according to human standards, they could live by the Spirit according to divine standards.

Reflection:

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus was betrayed. On Good Friday, Jesus was crucified. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the grave. We all know this story, but what happened on Saturday? What was happening while Jesus' body lay cold and lifeless in that solitary tomb guarded by Roman soldiers? The Bible doesn't go into much detail aside from a few delightful clues here in 1 Peter. If you flipped your page back a few verses to chapter 3, you would read that after his crucifixion, Jesus' spirit descended to the realm of the dead where he preached to those who were "rebellious in the days of Noah". This section of 1 Peter makes it pretty clear what Jesus was up to. He was doing what he always does: "seeking and saving the lost". He went into the darkness of death itself and sought to save the very people who had rejected him at the dawn of civilization. He united humanity with God through his birth, then, having conquered death itself, he set out to reunite every single lost soul to himself. I don't think we talk about this enough. Death is not the end for any of us, and not even that great, final mystery can separate us from the love of God. So as we approach the great light of Easter, let us take some time to contemplate how much greater and more merciful God might be!

Prayer:

Lord of life and death, you who have guided countless lives to their eternal homes, be with us on this day. As we dwell in the shadow of mortality, balancing on a knife's edge, comfort us with your promise of salvation. Bring us comfort, hope, and joy, and help us to grow in mercy for others. Amen.

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Mrs. Nancy McNabb

One United Church of Christ, Kenhorst, PA

Matthew 28:1-10 New Revised Standard Version

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Reflection:

The Gospel of Matthew is clear that Jesus treated men and women as equals. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians (3:28), "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Each and every one of us is equal in God's sight, and we are all equally offered salvation.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice and triumph over death, we are all offered forgiveness of our sins and life eternal. Thanks be to God for our salvation!

Prayer:

Oh God, author of our salvation, we thank you for your son, Jesus and for his death and resurrection. We thank you for offering eternal life to us all. Help us to remember that we are equal in your sight, and grant us mercy as we offer such mercy to others. Amen.