

The Journey to Easter

A Lectionary Study based upon the readings for Year A

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Introduction

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
He fasted forty days and forty nights... Matthew 4:1 NRSV*

Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday before Easter. The idea for the season of Lent is probably based on the forty day period described in the Gospels as the Temptation of Christ. It is a time for contemplation of our Discipleship and our faith.

Why call it a journey? Because, Christian Discipleship can best be thought of as part of our Journey through life; a path we can choose to follow. We might walk many different paths through life and some of those paths will lead to places we don't wish to be. If we aren't careful our journey through life can lead us to places of harm, to places where we cause harm, to places of despair and loneliness. Our Discipleship journey is a constant effort to discern the path through life that God would have us walk. It will involve many intentional choices and, from time to time, we will step off that path. The Good News is that Christ, and indeed our brothers and sisters in Christ, are always there to call us back.

A Lectionary Study

This is a bible study based upon the readings contained in the Revised Common Lectionary as modified for the United Methodist Church. The Revised Common Lectionary is a three year cycle of scripture readings for Sundays and Christian Holidays based upon the Christian Year. The three cycles are referred to as Years A, B, and C. Each Sunday's readings usually contains two selections from the Old Testament and two selections from the New Testament. One of the Old Testament selections is almost always a Psalm but on some Sundays a poetical reading from elsewhere in the Old or New Testament is substituted. The New Testament readings will contain a selection from one of the Gospels and a reading from elsewhere in the New Testament. Year 'A' Gospel readings focus on Matthew, Year 'B' on Mark and Year 'C' on Luke. Selections from the Gospel of John are scattered throughout each year's readings.

The Lectionary has two main purposes. Firstly, it assists the Church in observing the Christian Year. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, it keeps the pastor focused on **the whole** bible instead of his or her favorite passages. By following the Lectionary, the pastor is confronted with scriptures that are difficult to preach and passages that the congregation may not wish to hear.

How to Use this Guide

The Lectionary readings for each Sunday in Lent are listed at the beginning of the section. There is a brief guide to assist you in reading these passages. You are encouraged to read the passages first and form your own first impressions before reading this material in this guide. Following that section is a series of discussion questions, two questions for each passage. As a practical matter it will not be possible to discuss each passage in any detail during a typical Sunday School class. You are encouraged to focus your discussion on one or two of the questions included here **or on questions raised by your own reading of the scriptures.**

Following the discussion questions is a suggested prayer discipline for that week related to the study themes. You are encouraged to reflect on the scripture passages as you spend your forty days in “the wilderness.”

This Study is based upon the Year ‘A’ readings for the season of Lent. It has material for each of the five regular Sundays in Lent. It concludes the week before Palm Sunday.

The First Sunday in Lent “Starting the Journey”

<i>Old Testament</i>	<i>Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7</i>
<i>Psalms</i>	<i>Psalms 32 (UMH 766)</i>
<i>New Testament</i>	<i>Romans 5:12–19</i>
<i>Gospel</i>	<i>Matthew 4:1–11</i>

Our Discipleship Journey is about choices. In a sense, we are invited each day to start our journey as Disciples of Christ. Each and every day, and throughout each day, we are faced with choices that challenge our discipleship. Choices to act or not to act in ways that proclaim our Love for God or disavow our relationship with God. Choices to abandon our lives as Christians all together. The Lectionary readings for the First Sunday in Lent deal with the choices we make and their effect on our lives.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden may be one of the most misunderstood stories in scripture. Many people seem to think that the story has something to do with human sexuality. This presumably flows from the setting of a naked man and woman in the garden suddenly discovering their nakedness and their ‘differences.’ However, consider that the term ‘naked’ can also refer to vulnerability. What has happened here is that Adam and Eve have come to realize that, even in this idyllic garden, they can be harmed. What they have learned is that they are mortal; that they can die.

It is popular to look at the serpent as Satan in disguise. However, there is nothing in the scripture that supports that interpretation. While there is nothing wrong with taking that theological view of the text consider looking at the text just as it is presented. The serpent was apparently bored and decided to break up the boring day by playing head games with Eve. The evil we encounter is often mundane, serving no purpose but chaos.

A careful reading of the text will show that Eve has added to the command given by God. God simply said that they shall not eat of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve adds, ‘nor shall you touch it.’ The Rabbis of old suggest that is the first example of human sin; seeking to change God’s words.

What the snake promises is complete knowledge of good and evil. Eve would know the heights of Good and the depths of Evil.

Psalms 32

Psalms 32 is one of seven Psalms that deal with penitence (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130,143). It offers instruction regarding the benefits of confession. Compare Proverbs 28:13. As you read through the Psalm ask yourself what the text is telling you about the nature of sin and its effects on our lives.

Romans 5:12–19

Paul's explanation of the connection between the effect of Adam's conduct (Eve having dropped from sight) and Christ's conduct (atoning sacrifice) is a bit convoluted. His premise is that sin came into the world when Adam disobeyed God. Sin, in Paul's view a force with a will of its own, liked it here and stayed. Since death was the punishment that was to follow the eating of the fruit, Sin and Death came together and settled in to stay.

Sin is that conduct that separates us from God. When Adam disobeyed the commandment of God, Adam separated himself from God. In that sense the Law 'multiplied' sin because it created many new opportunities for humankind to go against the commandments of God. Paul views the atoning sacrifice as a counterforce balancing the transgression of Adam; a free gift of grace that must be accepted to be of value. Christ's free gift of grace bridges the gap created by sin. Also note the use of the term 'righteousness'. Wherever righteousness appears in scripture it refers to being in right relationship with God.

Paul suggests that all sin has its roots in the sin the Sin of Adam. This passage from Romans is the primary source for the concept of Original Sin; i.e. the sinful state of humankind into which we are all born. Some Christian theologians, St. Augustine among them, found the source of Original Sin in the lust of the sexual act. Since everyone is born from an act driven by that lust, Augustine argued that all are marked with Original Sin. The Roman Catholics made an exception for the Virgin Mary, claiming that God had exempted her from this stain, leading to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

John Wesley argued that Adam and Eve, before the birth of their children, destroyed the image of God with which they were created by breaking God's commandments. That image was replaced by the image of Satan that places human will and choice above the commandments of God. Having destroyed the image of God, they could not pass it to their children. Wesley also believed that the destroyed image of God could be recovered through the justifying and sanctifying Grace of God.

Matthew 4:1-11

In the Gospel of Mark the Temptation of Christ is referenced in two verses but not described. Mark 1:12-13. In Matthew and Luke exchanges between Christ and Satan are described in some detail.

Note the repeated refrain, "If you are the Son of God..." In the Greek, the phrase might just as well be translated, "Since you are the Son of God." Satan knows with whom he is speaking.

Fasting was a cultic practice then, and today, to remind ourselves of our dependence upon God. Jesus has been fasting for forty days. He would be almost starved to death. Satan is playing to Jesus' human needs when he encourages him to conjure bread from stones. Jesus' response is to quote Torah. Deuteronomy 8:2-3.

The second temptation involves the multitude to whom Jesus will soon bring the Gospel. Satan knows Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus knows he is the Son of God, but the multitude does not. But, if Jesus dramatically demonstrates his divine office by throwing himself from the Temple pinnacle and causing God to save him, the multitude will know he is divine. Jesus again goes to Torah. Deuteronomy 6:16.

The last temptation calls on our desire for results and our desire for control. If Jesus is in charge he can bring about the 'Kingdom of God' as part of his benevolent rule. Wars will cease, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, etc. However, it is presumed that God could do this as well simply by eliminating free will. What Satan is offering is a classic invitation to sin: you could be just like God. Cf Genesis 3:1-7. All Jesus would have to do is acknowledge Satan as the true ruler. Once again Jesus responds from Torah. Deuteronomy 6:13. See also Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Discussion Questions

1. In the opinion of ancient Rabbis, Eve's sin starts when she adds to the Word of God. Why do you think Eve added the phrase, "or touch it"?
2. Historically, Eve has not fared well when this story is discussed. She is simultaneously depicted as a gullible woman who is also cunning and deceitful by 'tempting' Adam to stray. Over the centuries there have been suggestions that she used her sexual wiles on Adam, despite the fact that there is no suggestion in the text that sexuality came into play. Looking just at the text as presented, what happened? What does the text tell us about ourselves? What do the centuries of interpretations depicting Eve in a negative light tell us about ourselves?
3. What does Psalm 32 have to tell us about the effects of sin on our lives? Have you ever experienced those effects in your life?
4. Verse 5 of Psalm 32 speaks of hiding our iniquity. Can we hid our iniquity from God? If not, from whom are we hiding our iniquity? Why?
5. Do you find the concept of Original Sin as developed by the early Church or as described by Wesley helpful in understanding sin? Are we all born sinners? In your view, is there a primary source for all sin?
6. As noted above, Paul anthropomorphized sin; i.e. he viewed it as an entity with human characteristics like a will of its own. Paul envisioned sin as an evil force bent on enslaving humankind. There is a scriptural basis for this view. See, for instance, Genesis 4:6-7. What is your view of sin? Is sin a product of human free will or is it an actual force in the universe?

7. Many Christians seem to consider Satan a competing deity; an entity with power capable of challenging God. What does this passage tell us about the relationship between Satan and God?

8. How would you describe the temptations presented to Jesus? Have you experienced the same type of temptations?

Spiritual Discipline for the First Week of Lent: Spend ten minutes in prayer each morning thinking about the choices that you will make during the day ahead. Stop three or four times during the day and reflect on the choices you have made. Spend ten minutes in prayer each night contemplating the day and the effects of the choices you made that day.

The Second Sunday in Lent “There is no Map”

<i>Old Testament</i>	<i>Genesis 12:1–4a</i>
<i>Psalm</i>	<i>Psalm 121 (UMH 844)</i>
<i>New Testament</i>	<i>Romans 4:1–5, 13–17</i>
<i>Gospel</i>	<i>John 3:1–17</i>

If this is a journey, where is the map; the document that tells us where we’re going? The bad news is that there isn’t a map. The good news is that we don’t need one. You see, what’s called for is commitment to the journey itself, not a map.

Genesis 12:1-4a

Genesis 12 marks the beginning of the story of the People of Israel. The rest of the Old Testament tells that story, or is commentary on that story, or elaborates on the the lives of the People of Israel. The story begins with the calling of Abraham, then Abram.

Abram is at the end of his life. He is prosperous but childless. God calls him to commit to a journey to a new land. In exchange for that commitment God promises to make him a great nation and, by implication, to make that nation in the land to which he is journeying. God makes one additional promise found in verse 3b. *“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* God’s promise is not only to Abram but to all humanity.

Psalm 121

The message of Psalm 121 is short and straight forward. We are dependent upon God and God will take care of us. God watches over us even when we are sleeping and will not allow us to come to harm.

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

The passages from Romans reinforce the message of Genesis. Abraham was not receiving a *quid pro quo*; he was not being compensated for the decision to follow God. Yes there is a promised blessing, but not one that Abraham will ever collect. He will not become a great nation in his lifetime. He also has every reason to believe that the land that God is ‘giving’ to him and his non-existent descendants will be occupied by others. His decision to start out in response to God’s call is taken on faith. It reflects the right relationship between Abraham and God. Having a right relationship to God is having righteousness.

John 3:1-17

When we are very familiar with a story in scripture we sometimes fail to read it carefully when we come upon it. The passage relating the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus

is such a story. We have encountered it so many times over the years that we could almost recite it by heart.

The Gospel of John repeatedly uses imagery of light and darkness. Jesus is the light (John 1:3-5) and darkness is evil and ignorance. We know at once that Nicodemus is a conflicted individual. On the one hand he is a Pharisee, one who prides himself on being faithful to Torah. He is also a leader of the Jews in Jerusalem which is also home to the Temple; the central place in Israel for Jewish worship. However, he comes to Jesus at night, metaphorically surrounded by evil and ignorance.

Why does he come at night? We aren't told. Perhaps he wishes to hide his interest in Jesus, already a controversial figure due to his attack on the money lenders in the Temple. At the very least John provides an image of a man, wandering at night, and moving toward the 'light' that is Jesus. Nicodemus has not made a commitment to Jesus but does acknowledge that Jesus is a teacher from God. Note that this is not an acknowledgment of Jesus' divinity. Throughout the Old Testament prophets of God have performed signs and miracles but have not been divine or the Messiah ("anointed one" or in Greek "the Christ") or the Son of God. Nicodemus is putting Jesus in the same category as the prophets Elijah or Elisha.

This passage contains the much quoted verse 3:16, "God so loved the world..." Not as many people quote verse 3:17.

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."

Here we have a compliment to the promise made to Abraham. Abraham was to be a tool through which God would bless all the nations of the earth. Jesus is the means by which God will bring salvation to all the earth.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced what you would characterize as a call from God? What was it like?
2. Have you ever made a major change in your life knowing that it might not work out and that it would impact your family? How did you make that decision?
3. To what extent do you feel that you receive help, day to day, from God?
4. Ps 122:7 states that the Lord will keep us from all evil. Do you believe that? How would you explain that passage to a non-Christian?

Concern about works righteousness was at the core of the Protestant Reformation. Roman Catholicism taught that salvation was a cooperative effort between humankind and God. Protestantism taught that we receive salvation through faith alone. John

Calvin, who established what became the Presbyterian tradition, believed that we couldn't affect our salvation. He pronounced that people were elected for salvation or damnation at birth.

John Wesley rejected Calvin's view of election for salvation or damnation. He didn't believe that a just God would elect people to damnation despite their righteousness. He affirmed that we are saved by the Grace of God through faith alone. However, he also believed that our on-going devotional life and ministry allowed for the work of God's sanctifying grace in our lives.

5. Righteousness refers to being in right relationship to God. Do you believe that you are righteous?

6. Christians often have a negative view of Torah, in no small part because of the statements that Paul makes in Romans. Yet, the rule in the early Church was that gentile Christians were bound by the moral teachings of Torah. What do you consider to be the moral teachings of Torah?

7. In the Gospel passage, Jesus speaks of being born from above and being born of the Spirit. This is the basis for the concept of being "Born Again." To what extent do you consider that you have been Born Again?

8. John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world...". Do you love the world and all its people? What makes it difficult for you to love the world?

Spiritual Discipline for the Second Week of Lent: Spend ten minutes in prayer each morning thinking about the day ahead and whether you are feeling called by God to be somewhere in particular or are being called by God to carry out some task. During the day, remain sensitive to how God might be calling you or drawing your attention to something or someone. Spend ten minutes in prayer each night contemplating the day and your experience of God's presence in your life.

The Third Sunday in Lent “God Walks with Us”

Old Testament Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm Psalm 95 (UMH 814)

New Testament Romans 5:1-11

Gospel John 4:5-42

We profess that God is always with us every time we open worship at Trinity. But, do we really believe that? The texts for the Third Sunday in Lent all touch on the concept of God’s constant presence with us and our unwillingness, or inability, to recognize God’s presence. When we are on the Discipleship Journey, and even when we stray, God walks with us.

Exodus 17:1-7

Those familiar with Exodus will remember that the People of Israel tend to want to know what God has done for them lately. By this point in the journey, they have witnessed God’s plagues on Egypt that caused Pharaoh to release the people and received deliverance through the Passover. They experienced deliverance at the Red Sea and witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh’s armies. They have experienced one other water crisis where God made poisoned water ‘sweet.’ Exodus 15:22-25. He provided meat for them to eat in the form of quails and instituted the daily raining of the manna from heaven. God has also been an actual presence with them from the start, seen as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. Still, they come to a place where there is a water shortage and immediately accuse Moses and, by inference, God of plotting to kill them. Despite all that had happened, the question most on their minds is articulated in verse 7: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Psalm 95

Psalm 95 answers the question of Exodus 17:7. Yes, God is always with us and we should never doubt. God made the earth and all that is in it, including us. God is worthy of worship and we shouldn’t put God’s love for us to the test.

Romans 5:1-11

Paul declares that God is more than a loving presence in our lives. God is seeking our salvation. God has reached out to us in the form of Jesus Christ. Romans 5:6-8 contains an affirmation that is part of our weekly worship. God proved God’s love for us by dying for us while we were still sinners. The Gospel message here is the proclamation that, through Christ, your sins are forgiven.

John 4:5-42

Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. A number of themes are involved in this familiar story, one of the most prominent being the affirmation that Christ did not come

for the sake of a few but to reach out to all people. Jesus is a Jew and Jews and Samaritans did not mix. Yet Jesus not only engages the woman in conversation but ends up staying with the people of this town for two days. Indirectly the story deals with our inability to recognize God in our midst. The woman engages Jesus in conversation not knowing that she is speaking with the Word made Flesh. In chapter one of the Gospel of John, more than any other Gospel, the writer makes it clear that it is God walking among us, not simply a prophet. Although the woman views the conversation as an exchange between a Samaritan and a Jew, we, as readers of the Gospel, see the larger picture. However, the scripture challenges us to ask, do we recognize the Word of God when we encounter it?

Discussion Questions:

1. As noted above, the pattern established for the people of Israel was to be in dire straits and have God deliver them. But, the next time that things became difficult they didn't believe that God was with them. Why do we begin to doubt that God is with us when things become difficult? What are your experiences of discovering God working in your life when things became difficult?
2. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test!" But, see Genesis 22:1-14. Testing God is a common practice in the Old Testament. Have you ever put God to the test?
3. Psalm 95 affirms God's 'hand' in the depths of the earth, on the sea and on the land. Where do you see God at work in the world?
4. Psalm 95:7 speaks of God being "our" God and us being God's sheep. Do you understand this to be referring to only Christians? Only Jews and Christians? Do you believe, deep in your heart, that all people are loved by God? Why?
5. The passage from Romans contains a very well known passage: "...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." This passage claims that suffering ultimately produces hope. What is your experience?
6. Romans 5:9 speaks of being saved from the wrath of God. What does that passage mean to you? Why would God express wrath toward those who do not accept Christ?
7. There was great antipathy between Jews and Samaritans in the First Century. Yet Jesus reaches out to the Samaritans. Is there a group of people whom you do not like, do not understand and with whom you do not believe that you could ever be comfortable? What would it take for you to reach out to that group?

8. The Samaritan woman interacts with Jesus unaware that she is interacting with the incarnation of God. Have you ever had an experience where you perceived, at the time or later, that God was directly at work in your life? How did that make you feel?

Spiritual Discipline for the Third Week of Lent: Paul tells us that Christ died for us when we were sinners. Sin is that which separates us from God and often involves injury to ourselves or others. Spend ten minutes in prayer each morning thinking about your life and the sins for which you need to repent. Throughout the day stop what you're doing every two hours and offer a prayer appropriate to the moment (e.g. for a co-worker, for something you heard on the news, for a difficult ethical dilemma associated with work, for a child etc.) Spend ten minutes in prayer each evening reflecting upon the events of the day and your efforts to avoid causing harm to others.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent “The Road is Hard to See”

Old Testament *1 Samuel 16:1-13*

Psalm Psalm 23 (UMH 754 or 137)

New Testament *Ephesians 5:8-14*

Gospel *John 9:1-41*

Living as God would have us live carries consequences. Sometimes those consequences are unpleasant. Fear, our own or the the fear of others, grief and outside interference, bias and prejudice can all prevent us from following the road that God would have us walk. Indeed, our fears, grief, biases and prejudices can prevent us from clearly seeing that road.

1 Samuel 16:1-13

The people had demanded a King, and God sent Samuel to anoint Saul as the first King over the People of Israel. But, God was the ultimate King over the people and Saul chose not to do as God required. So God sent Samuel to anoint another. However, there were problems with that.

First of all, Samuel was grieving over the failure of Saul. His grief was getting in the way of looking for a new King. Then there was the fact that, since Saul was still the King, anointing another as King was probably an act of treason. Saul might kill Samuel. Then there were people who would stop Samuel because they were afraid that Samuel might bring trouble down on them. And finally there were Samuel's own prejudices preventing him from seeing David as a future King. Many things get in the way of our serving God, even if we have the best of intentions.

Psalm 23

Described as a Psalm written by David, himself a shepherd. Certainly one of the best known of all Psalms in the bible. The opening references resonate with the work of a shepherd. Sheep will not drink from rushing waters. They must be brought to still waters. Green pastures obviously provide the best food for Sheep. Sheep follow their leader and will even follow their leader into danger. A leader who leads them in the 'right paths' is to be preferred.

The writer then moves into references more clearly associated with individuals and God. Verse four translates a Hebrew word that has two roots: shade or shadow and death. "Darkest Valley", used in many modern translations is not as close to the original language as the King James' "Valley of the Shadow of Death." Anointing with oil is one of the ways of symbolizing God's blessings. A table set in front of my enemies might be an affirmation of God's protection from those enemies or even an affirmation of God's ability to bring us together with our enemies. Finally is the benediction that God will always walk with us, each and every day of our lives and we will dwell always with God.

Ephesians 5:8-14

Ephesians continues the theme of doing what is pleasing in the sight of God. To follow God is not just to walk in the light but to be light. Following other paths is to be darkness. Theologically, the writer is stating that our wrongful conduct hurts the world by generating darkness. Not only should we avoid doing what is harmful but we should be willing to expose such acts.

John 9:1-41

Chapter 9 the Gospel of John challenges those attitudes that get in our way of seeing the road that God would have us walk. The first obstacle obscuring the road is our presumption in believing that we know the mind of God.

²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

In the First Century, a common Jewish belief was that those who suffered were being punished for their sins or even the sins of the parents. That attitude is reflected in the question of the Disciples. They believe they know God’s mind and they ‘know’ that either this man, or his parents, must have sinned. Jesus’ answer could be heard to declare that God caused the man to be born blind so that Jesus could, one day, heal him. A better theological view would be that all the misfortune we encounter is an opportunity to show how God’s love works in the world.

The man is healed and he knows that Jesus healed him. He doesn’t make any claims about Jesus but is called and interrogated by the Pharisees. Pressed for an opinion the man concludes that Jesus is a “prophet.” A prophet is one who speaks for God. One can be a prophet without being the Messiah. The Pharisees’ vision is blurred because Jesus does not fit with their interpretation of scriptures. They believe they understand the scriptures and do not think it possible that a prophet could ‘violate’ the law by healing on the Sabbath.

The parents are blinded from the miracle because of fear. They would logically be willing to become Disciples of Christ but they understand the politics of the situation. Those with power to interfere in their lives do not think that Jesus is the Messiah, as many claim, and they do not wish to offer opinions that might result in punishment from those in power.

Verse 31 is a difficult passage. *“We know that God does not listen to sinners.”* But, if God does not ‘listen’ to sinners, how are sins ever forgiven? This verse is as problematic theologically as that of the Disciples who assume the blind man was being punished by God and the Pharisees who believe they have a handle on how God thinks.

The passage closes with the verdict from Jesus that the Pharisees have blinded themselves to the road that God would have them walk.

Discussion Questions

1. Grief arises out of a deep sense of loss. It might be related to the loss of a loved one or a change in our lives such as relocation or the loss of a job. Dealing with grief can bring us closer to God or cause us to draw away from God. Have you ever experienced grief to the extent that you began to question your faith in God? How did you work through that grief? Is your faith stronger or weaker because of that experience?
2. Samuel doubts God's choice of David as a future king because he doesn't look like a king. Have you found yourself judging the faith of others, or being judged, because of appearance or for some other external factor? How did that work out?
3. Psalm 23 speaks of God's constant presence in our lives. How have you experienced the presence of God in your life?
4. The most haunting line of Psalm 23 is probably the reference to the valley of the Shadow of Death. Have you ever experienced God's presence with you at a particularly threatening time in your life?
5. The Ephesians passage speaks in terms of light and darkness. However, to many of us the world is made up of grays. What experiences have you had when it seemed difficult to determine if something you were involved in, or that affected your life, was right in the eyes of God?
6. Ephesians calls upon us to expose the things done in darkness. Have you ever been in a position where you considered exposing the wrongful act of another? How did you handle that?
7. It is not uncommon for some nationally known preachers to proclaim that the evil things that happen to us are punishments from God. Do you agree or disagree that God brings evil into our lives, or chooses not to oppose evil, as a form of punishment? Assuming that God does not bring evil into our lives as punishment, why would these pastors insist that God is doing just that?
8. Fear can keep us from seeing where God wants us to go, or can freeze us in our tracks. How have you seen fear of retaliation, fear of ridicule or fear of rejection prevent someone from doing what is right?

Spiritual Discipline for the Fourth Week of Lent: Christ invites us to be a light in the world. Spend ten minutes in prayer each morning thinking about how you might bring some light into the life of another. Plan what you will do that day. Spend ten minutes in prayer each evening reflecting upon the events of the day and your efforts to be the light filled presence of Christ for another person.

The Fifth Sunday in Lent “God Opens New Roads”

Old Testament *Ezekiel 37:1-14*

Psalm *Psalm 137 (UMH 852)*

New Testament *Romans 8:6-11*

Gospel *John 11:1-45*

Where do you go when you have lost all hope? When you can't see that there is any possibility of anything new? Of anything good ever happening in your life ever again? It is at that point that God can show you a road you hadn't seen before.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel was a prophet to the exiles in Babylon. The Babylonian army had laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually broken down its walls, and destroyed the city. More than that, the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple built by Solomon. Its walls were torn down and everything it contained was either destroyed or looted; carried off to Babylon. The majority of its people were also taken into exile. The only ones left when the Babylonians finished were some farmers to operate the farms for the benefit of the Babylonian Empire. The remains of the City of Jerusalem was governed by Babylonians. The countryside was garrisoned by its troops. The People of Israel spent 75 years in exile.

Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley of bones. Note, not a valley of skeletons. All that appears in his vision is a valley of bones that are dry as the dust:

37 The hand of the LORD came 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. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

Possibly it's a vision of an old battlefield where the victors had removed their own dead and left the enemy dead for the scavengers. Possibly a mass open grave. But certainly a vision of a place without hope. And God says:

3He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”

Ezekiel cannot see any hope, but isn't ready to put anything beyond the power of God. And then God gives what may be one of the strangest commands contained in scripture. He tells Ezekiel to preach to these dead, dry bones. And, in this vision, Ezekiel sees these dead dry bones become the people of Israel, renewed by the breath of God. Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry bones is a vision of God opening a new road that no one could have believed could ever be opened again. A road home to Jerusalem. A road of hope.

Psalm 137

The actual Lectionary Psalm for this Sunday is Psalm 130. I prefer 137 for reasons that should be apparent. Psalm 137 speaks of the complete hopelessness experienced by the People of Israel in exile in Babylon. They long for Zion, Jerusalem. But Jerusalem is

destroyed and their captors mock their love for their lost lives by asking them to sing about Jerusalem.

Their hopelessness finds an outlet in anger. One of the most disturbing passages in scripture is 137:8-9:

⁸ *O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!*

⁹ *Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*

Should we ever be ‘happy’ when children are caught up in the violence that so often consumes adults? Despair, hopelessness, can be a very dangerous emotion. When someone feels that they have nothing to lose, nothing to hope for, there is nothing holding them back.

Romans 8:6-11

In the Romans passage, Paul is walking a fine line between what became orthodox Christianity and the heresy that was known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism viewed the world and all flesh as corrupt and evil. Spirit was ‘good.’ In the Gnostic view, the goal of Christianity was to learn the secret knowledge that will allow each person to become fully a spirit. Paul uses some of the language of Gnosticism when he speaks of flesh being death. However, he does not believe that any secret knowledge is necessary to be a Christian, nor does he advocate divorce from the world. He instead insists that our inspiration, our motivation, come from the Spirit that is freely given through God and Christ. We must avoid allowing ourselves to be motivated by the need to gratify the needs of the flesh.

John 11:1-45

The story of the raising of Lazarus is complex. On the one hand it is a story that offers great hope. On the other it is a story that seems to mock the many persons who have watched a loved-one die.

More than any other Gospel, John portrays Jesus as being omniscient. Jesus always knows what is going to happen and what others are thinking. When given the news of Lazarus’s illness, he makes a cryptic statement about the illness not leading to death but to the Glory of God. This echoes what Jesus said with regard to the blind man in the previous week’s lesson and foreshadows the performance of a miracle.

The Disciples are not in a hurry to go back to the vicinity of Jerusalem because of the danger posed by “the Jews.” If you stop and think about it, this is a very strange statement for these men to make since they are all Jews. The text is written in this manner to reflect the reality of the community to which this Gospel was written. This Gospel was written around 90 or 100 CE. Christianity is spreading but it is still viewed as an inferior religion by the Romans and there is a great deal of friction between

Christians and Jews. Christians wish to be seen as Jewish because the Jewish religion was more acceptable to the Romans than Christianity. There are probably some number of former Jews in the community as well who are in conflict with family and friends within the Jewish community. While Jesus undoubtedly found himself in conflict to factions within Judaism, he was not anti-Jewish. Nor would his Disciples have been anti-Jewish. John's Gospel has been the cause of much Christian anti-Semitism over the centuries. Still, it was probably true that Jesus was placing himself in greater danger going into the area that was controlled by factions affiliated with the Temple.

Jesus encounters the hopelessness, grieving and reproach of Mary and Martha. They rebuke Jesus for not coming sooner. Jesus, for his part, grieves over the loss of life even as he prepares to raise Lazarus. This should serve as a reminder to us, if we need one, that there is nothing 'un-Christian' about grieving. We are made to love life and we mourn its loss. It is here that we also have one of the most powerful descriptions of salvation to be found in the Gospels:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. John 11:25-26.

Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jewish belief at the time was that the Spirit left the remains after the third day. The reference to the stench is also meant to emphasize that Lazarus was not merely asleep. He is well and truly dead and the people witness a miracle. This miracle also foreshadows the resurrection of Christ taking place on the Third day.

Discussion Questions

1. Ezekiel is looking at a valley of bones; a people who have given up the dream of returning to their home. Have you ever been confronted with the task of preaching to the hopeless?
2. Biblical scholars view the Ezekiel text as one of the first dealing with the concept of resurrection. It declares that God can bring life where none exists. Have you seen instances where 'resurrection' has taken place in the sense that something that seemed hopelessly lost has been given new life?
3. Psalm 137 touches on the reality of deep despair arising out of dislocation and loss. Have you ever felt like a prisoner in a foreign land, mocked and not understood?
4. Psalm 137 ends with very disturbing images. The Psalmist longs for the days when the innocent children of the Babylonians will be smashed on the rocks. Have you ever experienced, or witnessed, despair turn into extreme anger and hate? What is a Christian response to such reactions? How do we minister to such people?
5. The Gnostics invited people to abandon the world in favor of what we might describe today as 'self-actualization.' It was an attractive theology because it made involvement

with the needs of the world superfluous. One could focus entirely on personal spirituality. Do you see elements of Gnosticism seeping into contemporary Christian theology? In what way? How do we address it?

6. Paul emphasizes that we go astray when we focus on the flesh. In what ways is that played out in the contemporary church?

7. In the comments I describe the story of Lazarus as one that can seem to mock those who have lost loved ones. Do you think it has a message for someone who is grieving the loss of a family member or close friend?

8. Miracle stories are often stumbling blocks for new Christians. If a non-Christian friend asked you what the story of Lazarus meant to you, what would you say?

9. Eternal life is central to Christian Theology. What does eternal life mean to you?

Spiritual Discipline for the Fifth Week of Lent: God opens new roads when all seems lost. Spend ten minutes in prayer each morning thinking and praying about hopeless situations in the news; i.e. people who have lost everything or who seem to be in hopeless situations. During the day, be sensitive to situations you may witness that suggests someone is in despair or suffering extreme anxiety. Spend ten minutes in prayer each evening reflecting upon the events of the day and your efforts to be open to new roads being disclosed by God.

Concluding Thoughts

From a Wesleyan perspective, we are works in progress. God's Prevenient Grace began working in our lives, calling us into right relationship and offering salvation, before we even knew there was a God. It was God's Justifying Grace that helped us come to a point where we could confess our faith and accept salvation through Jesus Christ. And, it is God's Sanctifying Grace that is constantly at work in our lives seeking to uncover that image of God/Christ with which we are all born. We are meant to journey in our lives, seeking to experience God, seeking to see God at work, and seeking to be instruments of God's grace in the lives of others. It is my hope that this study will encourage you to commit to that journey and encourage you to join your life with others in the journey.

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.