

UpWords

**A daily Lenten devotional
created by gathered worshippers
of Third Christian Reformed Church
of Zeeland, Michigan**

2006

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Introduction

In the fall of 2005, the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship contacted Third Church about our willingness to participate in a unique Worship Renewal grant project. Twenty five congregations from across the United States and Canada were chosen from a variety of denominational traditions to participate. The goal of this project was to encourage local congregations to use their creative gifts to generate ideas and resources for a project entitled, “Vertical Habits”.

The concept of Vertical Habits is quite simple: the forms of speech and vocabulary we use to talk with God in worship is similar to that which we use with each other. The question of the Worship Renewal Project is: how can we build and enhance the connections between the ways in which we talk to God with the ways in which we talk with one another?

Worship Renewal grants are given to help local congregations develop resources for worship, education, evangelism, and for life. As one member of the Worship Institute told us, “we want you and your congregation to do what you do best.” And this is what we have done. Using art, drama, prose, song, and dance, we are making connections and building bridges. The resources we develop, as well as our own learnings along the way, will be shared with broader Church.

The Words We Use

Walter Bruggemann has written that “Words create worlds.” What we say, when we say it, and how we say it is an important part of honest relationship. This is true in human communication as much as it is true in worship. When do we say “I’m sorry” in life? In worship? What does it take for us to say, “I’m listening”? These are the kinds of things we will be exploring in Lent. Each

week the devotional and our worship will help us focus our speech with God and one another. Our words include:

Help! I'm Listening I Love You I'm sorry
Here I Stand Bless you What Can I Do?
Why? Thank you

Vertical Habits as Upwords

This devotional is some of the fruit of some of these labors. At Third however, we have not called our vocabulary “Vertical Habits”, but are calling it “UpWords”. In the season of Lent, we will keep asking ourselves and each other, “how does our talk with God change our talk with each other? How does our talk with each other connect with our talking to God?”

We are glad to say that this devotional is “homemade”. Every attempt has been made in its editing to honor the original words of each contributor. Because of this, this daily devotional embodies heartfelt expressions of each of the contributors. This devotional also contains submissions of previously printed reflections. In each of these, the author and the person making the submission has been referenced. Happily, this devotional reflects the generations of Third Church; contributors range in age from 10-70+ years old. Many contributors wrote their own prayers for the reader’s use. Printed prayers that follow the name of a contributor have been written by Marc Nelesen. On most Fridays and Saturdays, readers will be given a sneak preview of a word that is coming during Holy Week. This devotional follows the journey from Ashes to Alleluia; from Ash Wednesday to Resurrection morning. Join us on the journey.

A final pair of words to all contributors and participants in this project: THANK YOU. Special thanks too, to Betty Grit of the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship. Her encouraging emails and presence has made this project not only successful but delightful. To God be the glory!

Confession, Sin, and Assurance of Grace

Confessing one's sins does not come naturally. Because we are sinners, confession is not only a necessary part of worship, but also provides a healthy orientation to reality. The Psalms, though frequently intensely personal, are never private. Indeed, the Psalter was the corporate prayer book of the people of Israel, and now it is also the corporate prayer book of Jewish and Christian believers today.

...

- William R. Dyrness, taken from: [A More Profound Alleluia](#). By Leanne Van Dyke.

- *Submitted by Carol Raterink*

Words That Create

Words, words, words. Our Society is full of words: on billboards, on television screens, in newspapers and books. Words whispered, shouted, and sung. There are words that move, dance, and change in size and color. There are words that say, “taste me, smell me, eat me, drink me, sleep with me,” but most of all, “buy me.” With so many words around us, we quickly say, “Well, they’re just words.” Thus, words have lost much of their power.

Still the word has power to create. When God speaks, God creates. When God says, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3), light is. God speaks light. For God, speaking and creating are the same. It is this creative power of the word we need to reclaim. What we say is very important. When we say, “I love you,” and say it from the heart, we can give another person new life, new hope, new courage. When we say, “I hate you,” we can destroy another person. Let’s watch our words.

- *Henry Nouwen. Bread for the Journey. 2.11*

- *Submitted by Marc Nelesen*

Prayer:

*In a world of many words,
help us dear God
to see and hear your Word made Flesh,
that he might shape our
speech and our silences.
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Good Friday Preview: Why?

Scripture: Isaiah 53:3-5 NIV

*He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.*

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Psalter Hymnal #386 Ah, Holy Jesus

Ah, holy Jesus, how have you offended,
that mortal that mortal judgment has on you descended?
By foes derided by your own rejected
O most afflicted!

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you?
It is my treason, Lord, that has undone you.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you;
I crucified you.

For me, dear Jesus, was your incarnation,
your mortal sorrow, and your life's oblation;
your death of anguish and your bitter passion,
For my salvation.

Therefore, dear Jesus, since I cannot pay you,
I do adore you and will ever pray you,
think on your pity and your love unswerving,
Not my deserving.

- *Submitted by Carol Raterink*

Words That Feed Us

Words can deepen our bonds with one another. Telling someone “I love you” in whatever way is always delivering good news. Nobody will respond by saying, “Well, I knew that already, you don’t have to say it again”! Words of love and affirmation are like bread. We need them each day, over and over. They keep us alive inside.

- *Henry Nouwen, Bread for the Journey. 2.12*

- *Submitted by Marc Nelesen*

Prayer:

*Help us dear Lord,
to nourish one another with good and encouraging
words that give life;
even as you gave your people daily bread in the wilderness
and as you give us Daily Bread in Jesus Christ.
You never withheld good bread from anyone who was hungry.
Give us equally generous hearts.
Hear us as we pray these words in
Jesus’ Life-Giving Name.
Amen.*

First Sunday in Lent

Upword: “Help!”

Help!

Psalm 88:1-2 “O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.”

It was a beautiful sunny day. Projects were underway. Work was the furthestmost thing from our minds; we had the day to enjoy. Who knew that one phone call could change so much? With that one phone call, we were rushing to the hospital. I frantically prayed. “God, keep him safe.” “God, heal him.” “God, be with him.” “God, let him be okay.” “God, be with the doctors.” “God don’t take him now.”

Nehemiah experienced prayer in this way. During his time, the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem for the third time after being in captivity. They were attempting to rebuild the walls around the city with Nehemiah’s leadership. Their enemies sought to sabotage their work through scorn, slander and threats. Internally, there was fear, conflict and discouragement amongst the Israelites.

Nehemiah felt the pressure of each of these challenges and called on God in the midst of the situation. When Nehemiah was talking with the King, the King noticed Nehemiah was sad and asked him why. What did Nehemiah do? “He prayed to God and then he answered the King” (Nehemiah 2:4). When the Israelites saw the first bit of opposition and questioned Nehemiah about it, he stopped and prayed for God’s help (Nehemiah 4:4). When their enemies sought to slander their intentions of building the wall, Nehemiah stopped and prayed, “Now strengthen my hands” (Nehemiah 5:9b). God was a vital,

active part of Nehemiah's life. He talked with God in the midst of every situation.

"God, heal him." "God, be with him." "God, let everything be okay." "God, keep him safe." As I looked at the clock in the truck, a great peace and calm came over me. I stopped my prayers and trusted that God had answered them. As we walked into the hospital and asked where he was, the nurse paused and led us into a room with family and friends. My best friend ran to me and cried, "He's gone." In stunned silence, I held and comforted her. Two minutes before I felt the peace and calm of God, he was taken to Heaven. "Why, God? What purpose did this serve? Why didn't you answer my cries for help?" Later, I realized that God did answer my prayers, although not how I expected or wanted. In that peace and calm, it was as if God was saying, "He's okay. He's with me. I've healed him. He has new life. He is safe with me."

God hears our cries for help when we frantically call to Him. We may not always understand or comprehend His answer, but He is with us, actively involved in our lives.

"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"
(Matthew 28:20b).

- *Michelle Working*

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7 (*especially verse 2*)

Help

My sister and I agreed to drive my mother, an aunt and two uncles to Texas to celebrate a golden anniversary. While loading everyone into the van, it began to rain. The rain continued through Illinois and Missouri. Along those steep hills the rain pecked hard against our windshield. At the bottom of one especially steep hill, cars and semis were slowing and stopping because a creek had become a river and was flooding the road. Our little van seemed quite insignificant and inadequate compared to the forces of nature. I thought of the precious cargo in the back seat and silently asked God for help. Immediately, the verse came to me, "When you go through the waters, I will be with you." The fear left and I knew that God was in control of this situation even though it looked ominous to me. We safely navigated those swirling water and in two hours we were driving in sunshine. Thank-you, God, for being with us and keeping us in the hollow of your hand!

- *Carolyn Sharda*

Help!

“If I know that one of the privileges of fatherhood is to comfort a child, then why am I so reluctant to let my heavenly father comfort me?”

“Why do I think he would not want to hear about my problems? My problems are very puny compared to those such as, say starving people in India. Why do I think he is too busy for me?”

- Max Lucado, Everyday Blessings, January 4, 2004

- Submitted by CrossCanyon Youth Group

Prayer:

*Dear Father,
help me today to be willing to reach out
to you, call you by name,
and then find
- to my great surprise! -
that you have been reaching for me all along.
In Jesus' Name,
Amen.*

Oh Lord Help Me Please!

Scripture: Psalm 61

*Then will I ever sing praise to your name
and fulfill my vows day after day.*

When I'm feeling troubled and my heart is filled with pain, I'll gather up my troubles and go to God in prayer. And when I'm feeling good again, I will feel joy and see it everywhere.

I will pay God back by a little visit three times a day or more with a happy "thank you" prayer. For he has done great things in my life, and, in the life of my friends and family.

- Sherry Key

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
Give me the faith-filled courage to call on your Name.
Help me Lord in my times of trial
that my heart and life might tell of
your powerful and saving hand.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.*

Help

Scripture: Psalm 5:3

*“In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait in expectation.”*

Dear Lord,

This morning I got up at 6:11 a.m. for devotions. It is still dark out and the house is quiet. I wanted to meet You early before my children got up.

At 6:20 a.m. my four-year-old joined me.
It's the two of us this morning.

As I have been reading through the psalms, this verse stood out. Although it seems to hold no great theological thought, it reminds me of the many others through the ages who sought you in the morning.

Was it quiet in the house when King David came before You?
Could Daniel watch the sun rise with his morning prayers?
Were Ester's prayers sprinkled with silent tears as she listened for You?

Lord,

Help me to come before you.

Continue to prompt me with your Spirit

To lay my requests before you

And to wait in expectation.

I'm listening for You.

Amen.

“Open my eyes, Lord; I want to see Jesus,
to reach out and touch him,
and say that I love Him
Open my eyes, Lord; And help me to listen.
Open my eyes, Lord;
I want to see Jesus.”

- *Val Snoeyink*

Good Friday Preview: Why?

Scripture: Job 8:20-21

Kindergarteners are experts in asking the questions “why?” If they ever ask you questions like, “Daddy, why are clouds coming out of that car?” be prepared for a back-and-forth volley of “because...” answers followed by more “why...” questions. Like “...because the air is cold and the car is warm...” followed by “...but why is the engine warm?...” followed by “...because gasoline is burning in the engine...” followed by “...but why is the gasoline burning...”. Since I am not eternally patient, I usually end the volley with the answer “...just because” (the clever child, of course, will ask “why because?”) Sigh.

Unlike earthly parents, our heavenly Father is eternally patient. He won’t ever answer a “why?” question with “just because”. In fact, God wants us to ask him deep, probing and sometimes difficult “why?” questions, and He promises to answer them, although not the way we might expect or with answers that we would like. With God, you can always expect perfect truth, even when the truth hurts, to the question of “why?”

In the story of Job, God allows Satan to put Job to the test. God allows Satan to make his life very difficult, even though he was blameless and upright. Throughout the test, Job is not silent to God or his community about the injustice of his plight. Job challenges every argument that tries to make logical sense of his situation with persistent questions of “why?” In Job 8:21 he gets very direct with God, pushing for an answer to why he is not forgiven and released from the test. It’s almost like Job is a kindergartner who is not satisfied with the answers to his questions of “why?” until he fully understands. If you read Job

38-42, you will see that the answers from the Lord are thorough and deep. In the end, Job receives understanding and blessing.

Take the example of Job and ask deep questions of God and your faith community. No matter if it is a light-hearted curiosity “why?” question, or a painful injustice “why?” question, the Lord is faithful to answer in truth - either directly or through the words of your community. The Lord loves you deeply, and wants you to have the answers - so ask the questions.

- *Darrin Sculley*

Resurrection Sunday Preview: Thank You

Scripture: Psalm 84:10

*“Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of the wicked.”*

This is a psalm that was used at my grandfather’s funeral. It seemed fitting because he was the janitor at our church and he spent many hours there. When I was in middle school, I would help him on Saturdays either at home or at church. I remember working for hours at a little table in the sanctuary, fixing and gluing the bindings on the old RSV Bibles in the pew. I remember vacuuming, and the smell of the janitor’s room. I also remember working with him to repair the book racks in church. He enjoyed working with wood. It seemed like he could fix anything. He often wore a little cap like an old Dutch fisherman. This would be covered with sawdust. Once I remember using the shop vac to clean him up before lunch!

But more than his physical presence and hours spent in church, he loved to be near the Lord. He went to Bible Conferences all over the country in the early 40s and 50s. He and Grandma went with our family to Maranatha and Gull Lake Bible Conferences. He was always fussing with his radio and loved listening to hymns of the faith. I still can hear the piano and organ music wafting through their upstairs apartment window while I worked in their yard.

My grandfather died of a heart attack in the back pew of church on Easter Sunday morning at 6:00 a.m. before the sunrise vigil.

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
I long to be in your presence!*

*May the many hours my children spend at church with me
give them a love for your temple
and the joy of being where You are.*

*Thank-you for a grandfather's legacy.
May all who come behind me find me faithful.
Amen.*

- Val Snoeyink

Second Sunday in Lent

Upword: “I’m Listening”

Scripture: 1 John 5:13-15

Yes, I'm Listening

“Yes, I'm listening.” How often have I uttered those words only to allow the words of the speaker to be drowned out by my own wandering thoughts?

Or how often have I spoken the opposite phrase, “Listen to me!” without producing the desired results. My children have fallen victim to the later of these phrases. I often wonder what the results would be if I modeled better listening skills. Webster's dictionary defines listening as the “act of hearing with thoughtful consideration”. How many miscommunications would I avoid if I listened to others in this way?

I am so thankful that I serve a God who hears me with thoughtful consideration. In 1 John 5:13-15 the writer assures me that if I ask anything according to his will he hears me. However I can't stop here. God listens to me but do I listen to him? Do I take the time to slow down and listen attentively for and to God's voice? I wonder how my life would be different if I took the time to hear his voice with thoughtful consideration.

As I ponder these thoughts I am challenged to “listen” not simply expect to be “listened to”. How will listening change my relationships with those around me? How will it change my relationship with God? Lord, help me to listen.

- *Missy Sculley*

I'm Listening Lord

*I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest—
I would flee far away
And stay in the desert;
I would hurry to my place of shelter,
Far from the tempest and storm."... Psalm 55:6-8*

To be horrified by the immensity of the battles of suffering before us is not to sin. What matters is what we do with the burden of sorrow....What separates us from God is our inability to add, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:36-44).

Are we willing to believe in the midst of everything that God is infinitely wise and gracious?... Do we know that, though the powers of evil rage and cause chaos in our lives and world, Christ has triumphed over them and will someday obliterate them forever?

Prayer:

Comforting Lord, be our shelter and our hope in the face of overwhelming evil and chaos...Amen.

- *Marva Dawn, Morning By Morning. Daily Meditations from the writings of Marva J. Dawn. Pg 90.*

- *Submitted by Carol Raterink*

Scripture: Psalm 46

Help Me Listen for You Lord

Don Postma the author of a wonderful devotional book entitled Space for God, says, “The Word became flesh and we turned him back into words.” I think what he is recognizing is that we are surrounded by words and noise. We are bombarded with stimuli coming from all sorts of places; even from within ourselves. If this is how it is, then we will have to be intentional about finding space for quiet; for it is in the quiet that God speaks, not in the noise and activity (I Kings 19:11-12).

In our inmost being, we know this to be true. I recently asked our high school students what the biggest threat to their faith is. Their reply was *entertainment*. I was very impressed. Our teens are keenly aware that they - like many of us - are pulled in many directions *to distraction*. We are easily distracted from that which is most important. Our teens recognized that there may be things that are important and valuable but may not be *vital* for God's children.

Psalm 46 can be heard in a variety of ways. In times of war and trouble, God is a rock-solid certainty. In times of surging and raging waters, God is steady. In the passage, the writer puts forth some wonderful images for us to cling to. Images like “a river that gladdens the city of God,” and pictures of what it looks like when God breaks the sources of human pride and power and replaces them with himself. “At the sound of his voice, the earth melts.” (vs 6).

When we are stressed or in need, images of God dissolving our worries, cares and burdens look and sound pretty good. The hard part of getting there is in *being still*.

Check yourself today. Can you ride in the car for awhile without the radio on? Can you go for a walk without being plugged into some source of noise? Can you be in a room without having the TV on? What would it take to be still and silent; not necessarily praying to God, but having a time or season of prayer of *listening to God*?

Listening requires peace, quiet, waiting, and patient perseverance. These things are so hard today! God is the One thing in life today who comes at us *slowly*. God's coming is less rush hour and more *hush* hour.

In all of the noise that is inside us and that surrounds us, this passage promises the long-yearned for peace that comes by being still with God. Maybe this is the peace that Jesus found in his many still moments alone and in prayer.

Prayer:

*O God, you are a wonderful refuge!
In you we find our lasting retreat!
Help us amidst whatever is raging,
storming, and frothing in our lives
to rest peacefully in you.*

*Grant us enough "sit still"
in our hectic lives to wait for you.
Give us visions of the peaceful river that
makes your city happy.
Help us to sit at its banks and
be healed from the noise of our lives.
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

- Marc Nelesen

I'm listening

A few years ago I had an MRI. The technician asked me if I was claustrophobic. To my knowledge, I was not. However, going into that long tube and hearing the strange sounds of the machine and having to lie perfectly still frightened me.

I prayed for God to be with me, see me and calm me. Immediately I clearly heard a voice in my head saying, "This is my child: do not touch her." A peace came over me and I realized anew that I was God's child and under His protection.

As I continued to pray, it felt like God was right there beside me. I had tears in my eyes when I came out of the machine because I had experienced God's presence and reassurance in an unlikely place.

Thinking about it later made me realize that God had reaffirmed his love to me in a place where I would surely be listening. Sometimes God has to catch me by the back of my neck to have me listen.

Could it be that God declares His love to me many times and in many ways and I'm just not listening? Are there too many distractions, too much busyness, too many pleasures and comforts to hear Him? I no longer fear that MRI machine, but I remember it as a place where I drew close to God and heard His voice. As the old hymn says, "there is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God."

~Carolyn Sharda

Scripture: *James 1:19 "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak."
Psalm 46:10 "Be Still, and know that I am God."*

I'm Listening

Please Just Listen

When I ask you to listen to me
And you start giving advice
You have not done what I asked,
Nor heard what I need.

When I ask you to listen to me
And you begin to tell me why I
Shouldn't feel that way,
You are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me
And you feel you have to do something
To solve my problems,
You have failed me ---
Strange as that may seem.

When you do something for me
That I can and need to do for myself,
You contribute to me seeming fearful
And weak.

So please listen and just hear me,
And if you want to talk, let's plan
For your turn,
And I promise I'll listen to you.

- Anonymous

This poem first appeared in our church newspaper a while ago. I really felt it was meant for me. Since reading it I have thought a lot about listening. I have grown to recognize the importance of listening to others.

We all want to have a voice, to be heard. Maybe God wanted us to know how important it is by giving us two ears and only one mouth.

I am trying everyday to be a better listener. Sometimes it's hard. I want to offer advice or give my opinion, but mostly the person talking to me just wants me to listen. I know that feeling too. I have friends and relatives that will listen to me when I need to talk. I feel so much better just by letting it out.

There's someone else that wants to be heard. God created us in his image. If he made us with the desire to be heard, then I find myself wondering if he might feel the same way.

It may be harder to hear God. But Psalm 46:10 tells us how. "Be Still" we need only to be still, quiet ourselves and wait for God to speak. He might speak to us in our hearts, in a Bible verse, through someone else, in a song, in creation - God is speaking to us everyday.... Be still and listen.

Prayer,

Lord, please help me to listen to those around me. Help me to be there when someone needs a shoulder to cry on or someone to rejoice with. Help me to remember to be quiet and use my ears and my heart. Please help me each day to be still and calm and hear what you are telling me. Thank you for listening to me and for being always faithful.

- Karen Riemersma

Good Friday Preview: “Why?”

Our cousin Betty loved children, loved being a wife, mother and grandmother. She was blessed with several children and after they were grown she returned to teaching. Her face glowed in the presence of children. But Betty also knew tragedy.

At the age of 8 she lost her mother to cancer; the same “Why” disease later claimed her only sister, her oldest daughter and other relatives. Her husband died of Alzheimer’s leaving her a widow. Finally cancer also claimed her. Perhaps she asked God “Why? or said “Enough!” Still the song she chose for her funeral was:

“He Giveth More Grace”

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

Chorus: His love has no limit. His grace has no measure.
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again.

~Carolyn Sharda

Scripture: Ps. 42:4 - *"For you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord; I sing for joy at the works of your hands."*

Resurrection Day Preview: "Thank You"

"Thank you"

I'm so thankful for all the *little* ways God shows me He cares what happens to me each day. To me this can be even more amazing than the "big" things He does.

God can do huge miracles, but it's the small stuff that means so much to me:

- A phone call at just the right time, a card or e-mail arriving on a day I need encouragement.
- Sometimes it is someone saying something in our conversation that is just what I need to hear.
- A hug or a smile to make me feel loved.
- My mom or a friend surprising me with a meal so I don't have to cook that night. God knows exactly what I need at just the right time.

I'm also thankful and amazed at how God can make my daily schedule easier to handle on the days I really need it. With my job, once in a while it feels like I scheduled more than I can handle. Quite often on days like that, someone will "just happen" to call and change their appointment or something else will "just happen" to make my schedule not so hectic. I think these things are from God. I am struck: "Wow" He really cares how I am doing *this* day.

I think almost everyday no matter what I'm doing, something little happens to make me aware that God is thinking about me and helping me get through each day. His timing is always perfect.

It's my hope and prayer that all of us will be able to see how God is reaching! out and caring for us in the small everyday things.

Prayer:

*Thank you God for making me feel special
and for showing me each day
that you care about what I am doing.
Help me also to remember
to thank the people you bring into my life.*

- Karen Riemersma

Third Sunday in Lent

UpWord: “I Love You”

Scripture: Hosea 11:1-11

I Love You

It is 6am. My 3 year old son crawls into my bed. He curls up all nestled deep into my chest and chin. It is as close to "carrying" a child as a man can have. He calls it "snuggling". I call it exquisite.

I kiss his forehead and tell him "I love you". He responds with eyes closed, in whispered and sour morning breath, "I love you too, Dad. And we both drift back to sleep. This routine of curling up, kissing, and sharing each other's warmth goes on for some time. An hour later, I say one more "I love you", and he says impatiently, "Dad, you 'sayed' that five times already!"

And I wonder, can you ever say "I love you" too much? Can a child, or anyone else for that matter, hear it too often?

In the scriptures, love is powerful. In Hosea, God loves Israel like a husband loves his wife. In chapter 11, God loves Israel as a father loves his son. "Out of Egypt I called my son;" and the fatherly images continue as he not only takes them out of danger, but bends down, taking them by the arms, and teaches them to walk. Who has not seen such a picture in "real life?"

The God of the scriptures *bends down* to care, feed, and tend to his children. Even when they walk away - *even when they are unresponsive to his calls* - God keeps loving and calling because that's who God is. The God of the scriptures loves the world (*literally the cosmos*) enough to even give up his Son as the ultimate expression of love. Some expressions of love are stronger than death (SS 8:6).

In Mark 1:11, Jesus heard an “I love you” when he rose out of the Jordan. Here he *bent down* to take a baptism that he did not need, but that he wished to undergo in order that he might *be with us* in every way.

So today I find myself wondering what that must have felt like for the Father to say those words to his Son. Was the Father *proud* of his Son? Maybe Hosea 11 was one of Jesus’ favorite texts. Maybe experiencing the love of his Father empowered him to begin to take on the role of stooping, bending, and loving just like his Father did. And then I wonder what it was like for Jesus to hear those words from above; could the Father or Son say or hear these words *too much*? Was it exquisite for them?

In the season of Lent, we keep our eyes fixed on the coming cross. The cross is God’s deepest expression of “I love you”. There God not only says it, but he shows it with open arms. And God has been saying it ever since. Today, listen for God’s “I love you”. And consider sharing that “I love you” with someone else today.

Prayer:

*Lord, we love you.
In all our days -
especially our forgetful ones! -
help us to remember
that you love us:
as a mother loves her child,
as a father loves his son.*

*In our moments of fear and loneliness,
remind us that you are the ideal parent
with perfect, unfailing, and bending love.
Help us to love others with that kind of love.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

- Marc Nelesen

"I Love you"

Philippians 4:12b-13 "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Philippians 1:21 "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

A client of mine gave me a gift of a yearly devotional in which each day's reading is based on a great hymn of faith. One day's entry (Aug 29), made a lasting impact on me. Even though I never heard of the song before, it made an impression on me.

"Lord, It Belongs Not to My Care"

Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.

...

My knowledge of that life is small;
The eye of faith is dim;
But 'tis enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with Him.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691). from "The One Year Book of Hymns"
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc

The author, Richard Baxter, wrote the hymn based on Philippians 1:21. And he dedicated it to his wife who had died a few years before from a long and painful illness. Baxter's life

was full of conflict and pain but he was content to leave it all in the hands of the Lord.

I am filled with such gratitude and love to God for His great love to me. God says "I love you" by promising me the strength for whatever happens in my life. And His unconditional love for me is in the promise of eternal life after death. Knowing this makes my troubles of this world fade. What really matters is knowing that Christ is always with me on this earth and knowing I will see him face to face someday.

Prayer:

*Lord, I love you.
Thank you for loving me so much
and giving me what I need each day.
Thank you for the promise of knowing
I'll spend eternity with You.*

- Karen Riemersma

God's Love

John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God has given us the present of eternal life. He gave up his son so that we who are sinners could be forgiven.

1 John 4:12 - No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

God tells us that if we love each other God will protect us and stay with us.

Psalm 106:1 - Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

God is great. His love is everlasting. He will love us forever even if we do wrong. God's love to me is surprising. I'm always doing wrong, but God is still there loving me the same way as before. I'm grateful for what he has done for me.

Prayer:

*Dear God, Your love is everlasting.
You have always been there for me.
Your love is caring and kind.
I am thankful, Lord,
for the love you have given me. Amen.*

- Johnathan Admiraal

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11

The Decision to Love

I was a junior in high school. We were crammed into a dark and musty church basement for an educational film on dating. At the time, I would have rather been someplace else. I made the best of it by sitting next to my girlfriend who would later become my wife. That night, the speaker said something I will never forget; "love is not a feeling, love is a decision." I knew then what I know now, namely, that love is both a feeling and a decision. His point rang home though, that *love is more than a feeling*.

When we say "I do" in marriage or in professing our faith, most of us have no idea what we are doing. Granted, *we think we do*, but with a few years and a little mileage, we begin to realize how little we knew about love when we spoke those three letters. Yet, the thing that gives those words adhesive power in our lives *is the decision we made*. Even in death or divorce, most people regret the pain, but many don't regret the decision they made to love.

Christ has made the decision to love. This part of Philippians 2 has been called the *Kenosis* (emptying) hymn. Many believe the early church sang it to celebrate Jesus' emptying himself (to quote the song) "of all but love." Such emptying meant being *like* a slave, such humility meant being limited in ways that God's Son would have *to choose* for it to be so. Christ's decision to empty himself is the full expression of "I love you".

When this love hits home for us, when we realize we are loved *that much*, it is hard for us not to love him back. In this season

of thinking about Jesus' emptying, we hear our Lord's decision to love. As people who are naturally inclined "to hate God and our neighbor", loving is going to take a decision on our part. Making *that* decision may take a lot of emptying on our part. *Love is not only a decision, but it is a commitment.* Loving God, loving neighbor, and even loving enemies begins by choosing to do so. Love is not just a feeling, it is a decision.

Prayer:

*Thank you dear Lord
for making the decision to love us;
through thick and thin
through our spiritual sickness and health,
through our days of wondering and wandering.*

*You O Lord,
are sturdy, faithful, and reliable.
You have made a lasting commitment to us,
and this decision has been so costly for you.
Thank you for emptying yourself
for our sake.
And thank you for loving your world enough
to die for it.
We love you Lord.
Amen.*

- Marc Nelesen

Scripture: Revelation 22:1-6

I Love You

In the long, cold and dark month of December I read “The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe” by C.S. Lewis.

Before Aslan came, Narnia was a land where it was always winter and never Christmas. How terrible that would be! No twinkling Christmas lights, no cheery greetings, no parties or gifts and no hope that the winter of our sin would soon be over.

I need Christmas! But I need Easter more! When Aslan entered Narnia, the sun came out, the snow started to melt, the grass grew green, flowers appeared, and the birds sang a new song. I believe that is a word picture of Easter. Following is a hymn that could have been sung in Narnia. John of Damascus, the hymn writer describes Easter in this way:

“Tis the spring of souls today! Christ has burst his prison.
And from three days’ sleep in death like the sun has risen.
All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying:
Welcome now the light of Christ, give Him praise undying.”

Alleluia! Now we cry to our king immortal,
Who triumphant, burst the bars of the tomb’s dark portal;
Alleluia! With the son, God the Father praising;
Alleluia! Yet again to the Spirit raising.”

- Carolyn Sharda

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21

How Do I Love God?

So often I say “I love you Jesus”, but what does that really mean? Do I truly love him? The following devotional is compiled from ideas and quotes from The Reflective Life, by Ken Gire.

Read: 1 John 4: 7-21

In the Old Testament, the Jews’ mission statement was the Shema: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might Deuteronomy 6:4-5). But how do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might? Jesus quoted the Shema to the Pharisees and followed it with love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39) If we love God then our love should spill over to our neighbors. John says we can not love God and hate our neighbor. How many times have I failed to love my neighbor/brother? How many times have I failed to love God?

Ken Gire states before we can love our neighbor, we must see our neighbor, and hear our neighbor. In truly seeing and hearing our neighbor we will be able to see and hear God and love Him. To passionately love God and other people, this is what matters. This is *all* that matters, and, all that God requires. But it requires our all to fulfill. (Gire)

If I truly believe that loving God and his people are all that matter, wouldn’t my life be different? Wouldn’t the world be different? Gire says we are created as an object of God’s affection. Am I living as an object of His affection?

Prayer:

*Oh Lord, I want to love you
with all my heart, soul, and strength.*

Forgive me for failing to love you so many times.

Help me to live a life pleasing to You.

Help me to love well.

*Please guide my words, actions, and reactions,
that they are done in love.*

Then those around me will see

a reflection of you.

I love you, Jesus! Amen.

- Rose Admiraal

Resurrection Sunday Preview: “Thank You”

Scripture: Nehemiah 12:31-47

*“(Nehemiah) assigned two large choirs to give thanks...
and on that day they offered...rejoicing because
God had given them great joy.”*

Do you ever wonder if we thank God enough? It sounds like a no-brainer, but how often do we actually sit down and pray to God and give thanks? God has done so much for us already! Look again at the blessings many of us have: a warm home, cars, toys, clothes, money, and the list could go on.

There are many examples in the Bible where people have given thanks. The example of Nehemiah is one of them. Another is when Noah built an altar to give thanks to God for sparing the lives of all of his family members.

Noah had great faith; enough that that he built an ark when the land was dry. God chose Noah for an important task. When God chooses us for important things, let us remember to give thanks. Let us also remember the Source of all of our good things; they come from God the Father in heaven.

- *CrossCanyon Youth Group*

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
sometimes we are like small children
who forget to say thank you.*

*Forgive us Lord, and help us to remember
that you are our Father
and the source of all good things.*

*Give us childlike faith and trust in you
that we might see that all that is good
is not “a result of fate or chance,
but comes from your Fatherly hand.”
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.*

Fourth Sunday in Lent

UpWords: “I’m Sorry”

Scripture: Psalm 55:12-14

*If an enemy were insulting me,
I could endure it;
if a foe were raising himself against me,
I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man like myself,
My companion, my close friend,
with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
as we walked with the throng at the house of God.*

Perhaps one of the deepest tragedies of sin in the world is that it hits us in the hardest places. We might expect that the last source of pain would be our churches, yet it is often there that we are most deeply injured....

Sin is more rupturing when its perpetrators call themselves people of faith. I won't offer any superficial comfort here....How can we bear these incomprehensible hurts? ...

Jesus endured everything that we do, including betrayal by one of his best friends, so that he knows our suffering. Indeed, he can stand beside us in every aspect of our loneliness and understand.

Prayer:

Gentle Jesus, you know our pain in betrayal. Your understanding is our only comfort... Amen."

- Marva Dawn. Morning by Morning. Daily Meditations from the writings of Marva J. Dawn. Pg. 97.

- Submitted by Carol Raterink

Revise Our Taking

You, you giver! ...
You have given and forgiven,
and you remember our sins no more.

And we, in response, are takers; ...
We take all that we can lay our hands on.

It dawns on us that our taking does not match your giving.
In this Lenten season revise our taking,
That it may be grateful and disciplined,
even as you give in ways generous and overwhelming.
Amen.

- *Walter Bruggemann. Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth. Pg 154.*
- *Submitted by Marc Nelesen*

I'm Sorry

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, 27

*"If anyone would come after me,
he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. . .*

*For the Son of Man is going to come
In his Father's glory with his angels,
And then he will reward each person
According to what he has done."*

The essence of salvation is an about-face from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Resist the temptation to pursue your own goals, asking God to bless them. Rather, deny yourself and join the activity of God as He reveals it to you.

Quote taken from Henry and Richard Blackaby's devotional, Experiencing God Day-By Day, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998. Pg 48.

- Submitted by Val Snoeyink

Scripture: Matthew 27:1-10

*When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned,
he was seized with remorse
and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders.
"I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."
"What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility."*

The story of Judas is a dark and difficult one for Christians in the season of Lent. Yet, it is part of our story in this season and its layers of truth are inescapable. No matter how strong we believe our devotion to the Lord to be, self-awareness, faith and wisdom may lead us to ask the question that the other disciples seem to be asking, "Lord, is it I who will betray you?!" (Mark 14:19). Many modern scholars believe that Judas may have been the most zealous of all of Jesus' followers. His kiss of betrayal was undoubtedly a *sincere* gesture on his part and part of a regular pattern of greeting his friend Jesus. Perhaps Judas' zeal and love for Jesus blinded him so that he could not see the *possibility* that he could sell out his Master.

Since my childhood, I have found myself feeling sorry for Judas. What went wrong? How could you do this? Didn't you know what they would do to him? Were you part of a conspiracy? Were you merely a "patsy"; just one of many who were triangulating on our Lord?

Matthew tells us that some kind of realization came to Judas. Maybe when he saw Jesus shackled, or beaten, he figured out the score. At some point, he came to his senses. In the scriptures and in life this is a very important moment. It is too late for Jesus, but it may not be too late for Judas; depending on how he responds to that moment. How difficult it must have been for him to realize *that he had sinned*, that he didn't do the

right thing. How hard it must have been to hear those words, “what’s it to us, this is your responsibility.” I suspect it hit home at that moment.

The Church has traditionally believed that Jesus had enough grace to forgive Judas’ betrayal. In tradition, the key difference between Peter and Judas is that *Peter asked for forgiveness* and that Judas did not. If that’s true (and we don’t have a scripture text to verify this), then it tells us something about how our sin and guilt and shame can blind and paralyze us. For Judas, forgiveness could have been as simple as a heartfelt, “I’m sorry” aimed at Jesus. We know Jesus well enough from the scriptures that we know what the response would have been.

In the text, Judas has a “come to Jesus” moment where he fully recognizes his wrongdoing, but *doesn’t deal with it*. Instead, the acknowledged but *unaddressed* sin inside him leads to his self-destruction. When we have wronged someone, the best way to deal with it is to go directly to the one we have harmed and ask for forgiveness. The trouble is, we have step over our pride and our sense of self-preservation to do so. Facing up to this is hard for all of us. Saying “I’m sorry” and meaning it is difficult.

I believe Judas’ remorse is genuine, the trouble is, he didn’t deal with it directly with the one he harmed. How often we might be tempted to acknowledge our sin, shortcoming, or mistake with ourselves. Sometimes we will take these matters to God. How often though are we willing to face the one we have hurt and say the words that might bring healing and reconciliation with the other person *and with ourselves*. The truth of the matter is that often the person we have harmed holds an antidote to some of the poison of our own souls. Maybe healthy disciples need to regularly say, “I’m sorry” and then ask, “is it I?”

- *Marc Nelesen*

Scripture: Genesis 33

Forgiveness and the Face of God

In our home, we are trying to nurture a sensitivity to the reality that we have a tendency to hurt those we love most. This is not a comfortable understanding, but it seems to ring true.

My seven year old twins are the best of friends. They will protect each other, look out for one another, and will still know what the other is feeling *even if their parents are still guessing* as to what is wrong. Yet, these two - given the "right" conditions - will say and do things to one another that is nothing short of a "cheap shot". Knowing one another intimately is a good thing until sin distorts such knowing so that you strike your loved one's *vulnerability*.

Sometimes in our home, depending on the degree of damage, we ask one another to do more than say, "I'm sorry". We say, "will you forgive me?" Doing so is much more *vulnerable* for the person who did the damage, and this vulnerability is important. We also do not let our children respond with, "that's okay"; because whatever has been done *is not okay*. What we call one another to say is something like, "I forgive you."

It is extra work doing relationships this way, but it makes for a better life. It is too easy for us to shortcut one another by sweeping unresolved pains under the carpet. It also teaches us to deal with one another directly, rather than trying to distance ourselves from our sins. We hear celebrities and politicians doing this all the time when they say, "*well, mistakes were made*". This, it seems to me, is much less penitent than, "I screwed up - big time."

We don't get an "I'm sorry" in the Jacob and Esau story. What we do get is Jacob sending lavish gifts to his estranged brother. More than this, Jacob bows to the ground seven times before his brother - *a demonstration of profound humility*. Esau's response of open arms and tears seem to say, "all is forgiven."

To say "I'm sorry" whether it is to God or to human beings takes work, it takes discipline, and it takes practice. This is why *confession* in worship is such an important time. Worship gives us *skills for life*; life with God and life with other people. Opening ourselves to our failings with God opens up God's possibilities to use us in the world around us. Our vulnerability in the face of who we are and who God is ought to make Christians the best practitioners of "I'm sorry". The News in this text and in our life is that when we are at the "I'm sorry" point, we are best positioned to see the "face of God."

Prayer:

*O God,
open our hearts to take responsibility
for what we have done
and what we have left undone.
We are not only sorry,
but we truly want to change.*

*Give us courageous humility
that we might embrace your strength in us
because we have seen our weakness and failings.
We pray this in the strong Name of Jesus
whose blood addresses
all our sin.
Amen.*

- Marc Nelesen

Good Friday Preview: “Why?”

Once upon a time . . . these are words that we heard spoken by a parent, a teacher, a sibling.

We knew that stories that began like these were going to take us down the journey of a person’s life, where maybe a wicked witch would try to hurt them, or the evil step sisters would try to prevent true love or the big bad wolf would try to eat a little girl. We would travel with the main character experiencing their fears and anguish as our own. But we knew that in the end, they lived happily ever after, unencumbered by conflict. This happy ending made us want to hear the stories over and over again.

Our lives, however, are uncertain and troublesome. We walk through the story of our lives where we lose someone close, where marriage is hard work, where we lose a job, where our bodies deteriorate or where a friend falls away from the faith. We don’t know what the ending will be. The story does not follow the dreams we had.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” Once upon a time, God spoke these words to the exiled Israelites. He heard their uncertainty and encouraged them to trust Him and His plan for them. Now He says to us, “I have plans for you. You may not know what the next part of the journey is. You may think, ‘How can I make it another step?’ You may feel alone, unsure, afraid, unhappy, sad, restless, but I

know where you will end your story. You will end the story of your life in the safety of my arms. You may not understand why you are going through the stages of life that you are, but hold to my words that I have plans for you.”

Once upon a time, God walked with Adam and Eve. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. He wrestled with Jacob. He opened the womb of Sarah. He provided a husband for Ruth. In the end, how will God provide for you? We will not know all the answers. We may ask why did he take me down this path and He may not show us why. But, in the end, if we remain faithful, we will live happily ever after with Him.

Prayer:

*Dear God,
why are you leading me down this path?
How will I be able to handle this?
Help me to trust in your leading
and in your plans for my life.
Give me the strength to endure
and to take one day at a time.
Thank you for your presence in my life.
Amen.*

- Michelle Working

Resurrection Day Preview: “Thank You”

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

Can You Say Thank You?

Most of us are familiar with the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. After asking to be healed, only one of the ten returned to Jesus to bring his thanks and worship. The other nine continued on their way.

Thank you. These are two words that can make so much difference in our positive relationships with each other.

These simple two words can help to make our day, heal our souls, and put a smile on our face. We all like to hear them especially when they are said in a way that is genuine and heartfelt.

But the lesson from this story is that words alone are not enough. What’s in the heart is really what matters. For in the heart is where true thankfulness rests. No doubt all ten lepers were thankful when they saw the healing that was coming over their bodies. We don’t know why nine of them went on their way without thanking Jesus. One did return because he knew the source of the healing. He knew that a supernatural power made this happen.

It is one thing to say the words but another to have a heart that overflows with an attitude of thanks. Overflowing hearts will want to thank the source of the blessings. It was from such a heart that brought the one leper back to Jesus. It should be from such a heart that we give thanks to God each day for the

blessings He gives. Take the time each day to stop and go back to the source of all our blessings. Take time each day to kneel at His feet with genuine gratitude in your heart for all He has done.

- Lyle Ahrenholz

Prayer

*Dear Lord,
you have taught us that
“out of the overflow of the heart
the mouth speaks.”*

*Fill our hearts with glad thanksgiving
that our cup of gratitude overflows.
Put your joy deep within
that our lips might speak
of what our eager hearts
are longing to say.
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.*

Fifth Sunday in Lent

UpWords: “Here I Stand”

I Will Stand Tall and Walk with Jesus

Here I Stand:

I will stand tall and walk with Jesus,
I'll hold my head and hands up high and praise Him.
If I fall he will catch me and lift me back up. If I'm scared
he will let me know it's ok, because he will keep me safe.

Here I stand
day by day he will lead me and help me out when I need help
and even if I don't, he is still here for me.

Here I stand
with my hands and head up high and worship him
and praise him too, with all of days and ways I can.

~Sherry Key

Scripture: Psalm 51:1-12

Here I Stand

Here I stand
Broken and incomplete.
I need you, Lord Jesus.

Here I stand
Emptying myself before You.
All my ugly deeds and words
I lay them at Your feet.
I_m sorry, Lord Jesus.

Here I stand
Washed by Your blood.
Love and grace flow over me.
Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Here I stand at the tomb
In complete awe of your love.
I rejoice at the unspeakable gift
Given to me.
I love you, Lord Jesus.

Here I stand
Ready to serve You.
Here I am.
Send me, Lord Jesus.

Read I Corinthians 15:58

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
I need you so much.
Forgive me for the many times I have failed to live up to your
expectations of my life.
Thank you for paying for all my sins on the cross and winning
the battle of death for me. I love you.
Show me what areas I can best serve you.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

- Rose Admiraal

Scripture: Psalm 31:5

*Into your hands I commit my spirit;
Redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.*

Here I Stand

I have learned that the verb to *commit* involves more than an easy dependence arising out of desperation... It suggests more profoundly to give attention to something. When we commit our spirit into YHWH's hand, our action is carefully intentional, seeking thoroughly to entrust our whole being into his care. It is not a superficial handing over - and we don't take it back. ...

Prayer:

*God of truth, we commit ourselves to you-
knowing that in Jesus' death and resurrection you have
redeemed us from sin, death, pain, and loneliness,
to live as your beloved... Amen*

- Marva Dawn. Morning by Morning. Daily meditations from the writings of Marva Dawn.

- Submitted by Carol Raterink

Scripture: Psalm 55

Here I Stand

Psalm 55 is a prayer of David when he is in Big trouble. A close friend has turned traitor and the city is in turmoil. Danger is everywhere. Who can be trusted? Rumors, lying, threats are everywhere.

In the midst of it all, David cries out:

Psalm 55:6

*“Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest!”*

Wouldn't it be great to fly away or disappear from a situation? Some days when there is conflict at home, concern over children, pressure of a workload, and the burdens of others weigh heavy on my heart, I wish I could just fly away!

I long for peace and wish that God would take me out of the trouble or take the trouble away from me. When the storms of life come, I pray that God would calm the storms. Give me peace. Take away my troubling circumstances.

Yet, the lines of a song have changed my prayer:

*“Sometimes he calms the storm
and sometimes he calms the child.”*

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
Here I stand
In the midst of the storm.
Give me your peace.
Calm your child's fears.
Psalm 55:23 "But as for me, I trust in you."
Amen.*

- Val Snoeyink

Here I Stand

Scripture Psalm 34:8a: *"Taste and see that the Lord is good...."*

The eighth verse of Psalm 34 seems to be meant especially for those who learn best in tangible ways. The poet doesn't merely say, "Check out the goodness of YHWH." He encourages us to "taste and see that the Lord is good." The verb to taste urges us to examine by experience, to jump right into God's goodness. How can we know YHWH is noble unless we give him a try? ...

Prayer:

*God of all creation,
we praise you for your goodness.
Teach us to share our life-changing experiences
with those who have not yet
been invited to the feast...Amen*

- *Marva Dawn. Morning by Morning. Daily Meditations from the writings of Marva J. Dawn.*

- *Submitted by Carol Raterink*

Scripture: Luke 19:41-44

Good Friday Preview: Why?

Insight on God's purpose - and Why?

“As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.’”

In these verses, Jesus was asking the question “Why?”. On the day that we know as “Palm Sunday” or “Lamb Selection Day”, Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies of riding in on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9), coming from the east through the desert (Isaiah 40:3), and by coming on that particular day (Exodus 12:1-6). Jesus was asking “Why?” through his weeping. The people didn't recognize who He really was and what was really happening.

People thought Jesus was coming to save them from the Romans. They didn't know that he was the One, the Messiah, their Savior - willing to die for everyone. Jesus knew that he came to earth to fulfill God's plan, as difficult as that was.

Psalm 42:11 “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Just as Jesus did, there are times where we find ourselves asking “Why?”. We need to realize that God’s plan is often beyond our understanding, yet still a tool to furthering his kingdom. During Jesus’ time on earth, there weren’t many that understood His purpose. Jesus’ faithfulness, however, has resulted in the fulfillment of God’s plan: the gift of eternal life.

- *Aaron Tibbe*

- *Jeff Tibbe*

Resurrection Day Word Preview: “Thank You”

Scripture: Proverbs 27:5-6

*Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.*

The following is an illustration of how the words “Thank You” could be directed to God and to others. In this respect, this brief meditation is a fine illustration of what can be celebrated in friendship with others. Directed to God as a prayer, it reveals the intimacy that Christians can have with their Lord. (MN)

You sometimes tell me things I don't want to hear....
But you know I need to hear indeed.

A real true Friend will do that
and I thank you for being that kind friend.

- Sherry Key

The Sixth Sunday of Lent
UpWord: “Bless You”

Holy Week Words:

“What Can I Do?”

“Why”

“Thank You”

Scripture: Luke 19:29-44

*“Blessed is the king who comes in the
Name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”*

Bless You

In the scriptures, the expression “bless you” is nothing to sneeze at. Blessings, whether carried by humans or angels, come and are given with a weighty glory about them.

In Luke’s gospel, we have not heard such things since the shepherds heard the Good News. Something about Jesus connects heaven and earth. So much so, that when the crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, they did so expecting the Kingdom to appear at once (19:11). Filled with an overwhelming sense of awe and expectation, they could do nothing more than wish with joy and awe the favor of God on the coming King.

The Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem has always been hard for the Church to know how to celebrate. Did the crowds know what they were saying? Does their blessing still count if “Kingdom” and “Glory” come with the lifting of the Son of Man?

In a gripping connection, Fredrick Buechner keenly sees a correlation between the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and President Kennedy’s arrival into Dallas on Nov 22, 1963. (see Buechner’s Longing for Home. Pg 160ff).

In both stories there is much pomp and circumstance. There is much going on with noisy crowds of admirers and opponents. It seems that *no one* sees what is coming; no one except the one

viewing the tape or reading the Gospel. Viewer and reader alike are stuck with images of celebration and deep sadness. Both emotions seem to color the story. Buechner writes:

“we’ve seen it replayed over and over again as we have seen Palm Sunday played over and over again...if you are like me, even as you watch it, knowing full well the terrible thing that is only moments away from happening, you can’t help hoping against all hope...that this time it won’t happen...And with Jesus today, there is almost the same kind of crazy hope that maybe this time - somehow - Judas will be loyal, Peter will be brave, and the crowds will choose him to be spared instead of Barabbas. And the cross will not have to happen.” (pg. 162)

Maybe this is how the world works; blessings come at odd times and in odd ways. After decades of silence and animosity, a father in hospice care reaches to his son and seeks reconciliation. Both bless and are blessed by the other. Suddenly after years of living protectively, inmost being connects to inmost being and blessing emerges. The redemption on such occasions seems to reach to heaven and back to earth again.

Maybe the best way to live in the light of Palm Sunday is to keep looking for the surprising, daily appearances of Christ. Tomorrow may look different than today, but if heaven and earth resound wherever he appears, how can we not help but bless in the face of his comings?

Prayer:

*Lord God,
in Jesus you have come not by force
but in quiet simplicity.
As the crowds give mixed reviews
help us to recognize the Blessed One.
Make us a people who are a blessing
because we follow in his steps. Amen*

- Marc Nelesen

Scripture: Galatians 6:9, Acts 20:35, and II Corinthians 9:6-15

The Circle of Blessing: Blessings Come Around

In 1999, our church sent a service team to the Dominican Republic. We served by rebuilding a Christian school that was destroyed by a hurricane. But in the process we touched lives and restored hope. At the end of our time there, the local people hosted a ceremony to show their appreciation to us. Even though they had very little money, they presented each one of us with a bounty of tropical fruit and some gifts to remind us of our time in the D.R. Most of us were crying tears of joy because we didn't expect this outpouring of generosity.

Once or twice a month, my wife Rose and I travel to Muskegon to worship with the men at West Shoreline Correctional Facility. On the way, we listen to Christian music and pray that we will be a blessing to our brothers in Christ. Every time we have gone, we are blessed overwhelmingly more than the blessing that we have given. God blesses the gifts that we share with the men in the prison chapel. In turn, the men express their appreciation to us and send us off with Christian love as we already look forward to our next visit.

I work at a local running shoe store. A few months ago, a woman came to purchase a few things but also shared with me the pain that she had felt due to the death of her grandmother and the terminal illness of her pastor. She also had stopped going to church because of these things. I encouraged her and offered to pray for her. As she left the store, she turned and told me that she would pray for me too. I needed that. Isn't Christian community beautiful? We build each other up in the Body of Christ.

As Christians, we look to our future home in Heaven. In reality, the rewards of the Christian begin today. Ideally, we serve others with a selfless love that seeks nothing in return. However, often our acts of kindness are rewarded by gracious acceptance or the love given back.

Don't feel guilty when these blessings come around. The circle of blessing is part of the joy of being part of God's Kingdom. As written in the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, it is in giving to all people that we receive. Savor these sweet fruits as a little taste of Heaven that we can accept with joy.

Peace Prayer of St. Francis:

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred let me bring Your love
Where there is injury Your pardon Lord
And where there's doubt true faith in You.

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness ever joy.

Oh Master grant that I may never seek
so much to be consoled as to console
to be understood as to understand
to be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of Your peace
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

-Rick Admiraal

Scripture: Job 2:1-13

Just Being There: The Blessing of our Presence

Sometimes I feel apprehensive when I go to visitation at a funeral home. What will I say? How can my words somehow supply comfort to a grieving family? In reality, just being there is much more important than a handful of empty phrases that will soon be forgotten. Your presence in a season of suffering can provide comfort.

Job's friends realized this. In fact, they realized how much Job was suffering and remained silent for seven days, the biblical number of completion. They sat there without speaking, being present in solidarity with their friend who had pain beyond definition. When they finally opened their mouths there was nothing but trouble as their words infuriated Job and the eternal God.

On the second and fifth Sunday of each month, my wife Rose and I worship with the inmates at West Shoreline Correctional Facility in Muskegon. Rose often sings a solo or two; I share some Scripture and testimony. From one month to another, our specific words may be forgotten. However, our presence means much more than words to our imprisoned brothers in Christ. Through our regular visits we demonstrate Christ's love and form a bridge between the church inside and outside the prison walls.

St. Francis of Assisi encouraged us to "preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words." What does this mean for your life today?

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
May my presence be a blessing
as I seek to minister to others.*

*May my life reflect the glorious grace
of Jesus Christ.*

*Please Give me strength so
that I am able to give of myself.
Lead me to bring more of your Word
and less of my words.
More of you, less of me.*

*May your name be praised,
dear Lord and Father of us all.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

- Rick Admiraal

Bless You

Lord, who leaving home and kindred, followed still as duty led. Sky the roof and earth the pillow for the Prince of glory's head - with your grace and mercy bless sacrifice for righteousness.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (1965)

The stanza of the hymn quoted above invites us and our children to follow, as Jesus did, where duty leads in order that we, too, might sacrifice for the sake of righteousness in the world. It is an amazing answer to give children who are screaming for candy or toys to suggest that we choose not to indulge ourselves, that we sometimes sacrifice pleasures for the sake of justice for others... We don't give up certain things to be more holy, but out of our holy calling we gladly renounce some pleasures in order to contribute to the goodness of the world.

Prayer:

*Holy Spirit,
help us model for our children
a willingness to live righteously and sacrificially,
turning always toward the needs of others... Amen"*

- Marva Dawn. Morning by Morning. Daily Meditations from the writings of Marva J. Dawn.

- Submitted by Carol Raterink

Upwords: Thursday of Holy Week, April 13, 2006

Scripture: Luke 10:38-41

Maundy Thursday

What can I do?

So often I am a Martha, in fact I can hardly ever call myself a Mary. But God has been leading me in another direction. As I pray for guidance on “what can I do?” I find myself being nudged away from “Martha”. God has been teaching me to be more of a Mary through sermons, devotionals, and songs.

The music from Steven Curtis Chapman’s “Be Still and Know” spoke to me,

*Be still and know that He is God,
be still and know that He is holy;
be still, oh restless soul of mine,
bow before the Prince of Peace,
let the noise and clamor cease.*

*Be still and know that He is God,
be still and know that He is faithful.*

*Consider all that He has done,
stand in awe and be amazed,
and know that He will never change.*

Be still.

Be speechless.

*Be still and know that He is God,
be still and know He is our Father.*

*Come rest your head upon His breast;
listen to the rhythm of His unfailing heart of love
beating for His little ones,
calling each of us to come.*

Be still.

Be still.

Recently, I began reading The Reflective Life by Ken Gire. God is answering my question “what can I do?” He seems to be asking me to sit at His feet, gaze into His eyes, listen to His words, and see the reflections of Him in the lives around me, including my own.

Prayer:

*Dear Lord,
help me to quiet my soul
in the midst of the noise in my life,
so that my attitude and focus will point toward You.*

*Thank you for giving my life more stability
when I am willing to sit at Your feet.
Help me to realize it is not the busy activity that You want,
but for me to quiet myself before You
and see what You have to offer.
In Jesus' name,
Amen.*

- Rose Admiraal

The Ultimate Why?!

Most Christians know a few words of the original languages of the scriptures. Some preachers will speak some Hebrew occasionally enough so that words like *Ruah*, *Yahweh*, and *Shalom*, are somewhat common. Greek words are a different kind of commonplace for Christians. When you are looking at your *Nike* shoes, you are looking at the Greek word for “victory”. Oddly, most victors are not *looking* at their shoes, they are looking up.

Every Christian mildly familiar with the crucifixion story knows a little Aramaic too. “Gethsemane” and “Golgotha” are stock vocabulary for this weekend as much as the sentence, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*” - “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Every Christian should know that phrase because it lies at the heart of the book of Psalms and rests at the heart of the crucifixion. It is the question that is distinctively human; “why?!” “Why God have you forsaken me?” At the heart of the question is the heart of the human experience of aloneness, isolation, and abandonment.

How God *could you let this happen to me?! Therein lies the heart of our faith. Here is the moment of recognition that we are independent selves with our own identity. In these moments of self-awareness, we are also profoundly aware that there is Another. In that moment, we have a choice to trust and rest in him, or, rest in ourselves saying, “I’m it”, this is all there is.*

This is *the* moment in human experience where we either turn our heels on God, or, hold on in blind, wounded, and naked trust. It is a moment that many of us know firsthand.

When Jesus says these words on the cross, he is speaking from the place of distress that the Psalmist knows well. It is the same thing we might say in our own turmoil: “*Where are you God? Why have you left me here in this mess? Why is this wreckage my life if you are God?*”

Christ came to experience all of these human questions. And, he had the courage to ask them. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?! is not just a “Jesus question”, it is the human question. And by asking it, and by the writers sharing it, our experiences of aloneness, abandonment, isolation, and shame have been validated.*

I don’t think Jesus expected an answer, but he had to ask, he had to say it - *he had to pray it* because it was what he was experiencing. And everyone who has ever asked God, “why?, why would you let me this happen to me?” place themselves in the same faith of Jesus and the Psalm writers. And it doesn’t matter in what language you ask the question, because the experience is universally human. In the Psalms, asking the hard question “why?!” invariably leads to: “yet, will I trust him.”

On Good Friday, oddly, the story ends with the Victor looking at his feet. And then, the rest of the world finds itself *looking up to him*. Suddenly, our “why?” questions take on new meaning. When we dare ask them like Jesus did, we begin to realize that such questions can move us to his kind of trust.

- *Marc Nelesen*

What Can I Do?

Abraham was a man available to God. There were a number of occasions in his life where he, in essence, said to God, “What can I do?” Here are a few examples.

In Genesis 12, Abraham is called by God to leave his country, his people, and his father’s household to set out for a new land. Life in Ur was good for Abraham. He was prosperous. His family and friends surrounded him. Things were familiar—and comfortable. And yet, Genesis 12.4 simply states, “So Abram left, as the Lord told him.” Abraham asked no questions, he simply obeyed. He was a man available to God.

By the time we get to Genesis 13, Abraham and his nephew Lot have established themselves in Canaan and the abundance with which God has blessed them does not allow them to stay together any longer. Abraham and Lot experience growing pains and decide it’s time to separate. What does Abraham do? Does he demand his right for first pick as the senior member of their party? No. He defers to Lot and gives him first choice. Lot chooses the best land for himself, and Abraham has to settle for what is seemingly second-best.

Lot’s choice of land gets him in a bit of trouble. He settles near Sodom and Gomorrah, becomes a man of importance in Sodom, and then gets carried off into captivity during a time of war (Genesis 14). Abram catches wind of Lot’s predicament. Rather than having an “it-serves-him-right” attitude, Abraham sets out to rescue his nephew. Abraham had nothing to gain and everything to lose, and yet, being a man available to God, his response is, “What can I do?”

Finally, in Genesis 22 Abraham is tested by God and called to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Isaac was Abraham and Sarah's promised and long-awaited seed. Surely there was some mistake. Again, Abraham says, "Here I am." Now that's availability.

So why be available to God and say "What can I do?" when, based on the examples in Abraham's life, it seems so costly?

Read Hebrews 11.8-18. "By faith Abraham....." Abraham is remembered for all eternity as a hero of the faith.

Consider II Peter 1.10-11. "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I have to believe that Abraham received a rich welcome into God's eternal kingdom for his faithful walk with his God.

Hear Jesus' words in Matthew 25.21 from the parable of the talents. "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness.'" Do you think Abraham heard "Well done" at the end of his life? Will I? Will you?

- *Linda Hoekwater*

“Bless You”

The Great Vigil of Easter

Scripture: Psalm 148

*“Praise the Lord from the heavens . . .
Praise the Lord from the earth. .
You mountains and all hills,
Fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle . . .
Kings of the earth and all nations . . .
Young men and maidens,
Old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
For his name alone is exalted;
His splendor is above the earth and the heavens.”*

As I read this song of redemption from the psalms, I can imagine the whole earth one by one joining in song. It starts in the heavens, “Holy, Holy, Holy”.

The stars and planets join in. The angels lead. The sound becomes louder like an approaching siren but sweeter. As I look up, the earth begins to sing! The trees, the wind, and Lake Michigan—I can hear the voice in its roar.

The green lawn joins the harmony and all the little creatures create a descant: “Praise the Lord! Holy, Holy, Holy! Praise the Lord!”

Finally, all the people come out and gather in the streets. The sound of praise and glory resounds as the people and the creation bless God Their Creator and Redeemer!
Amen and Amen!

- Val Snoeyink

Upwords: Resurrection Day, April 16, 2006

Thank You Resurrection Morning

Let Us Talent and Tongues Employ

Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy;
Bread is broken,
the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

**Refrain: Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the
Word around: loaves abound!**

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- *Text by Fred Kaan*
- *Submitted by Marc Nelesen*