



HE REIGNS

**Trembling soul, beset by fears,
Thy God reigneth.**

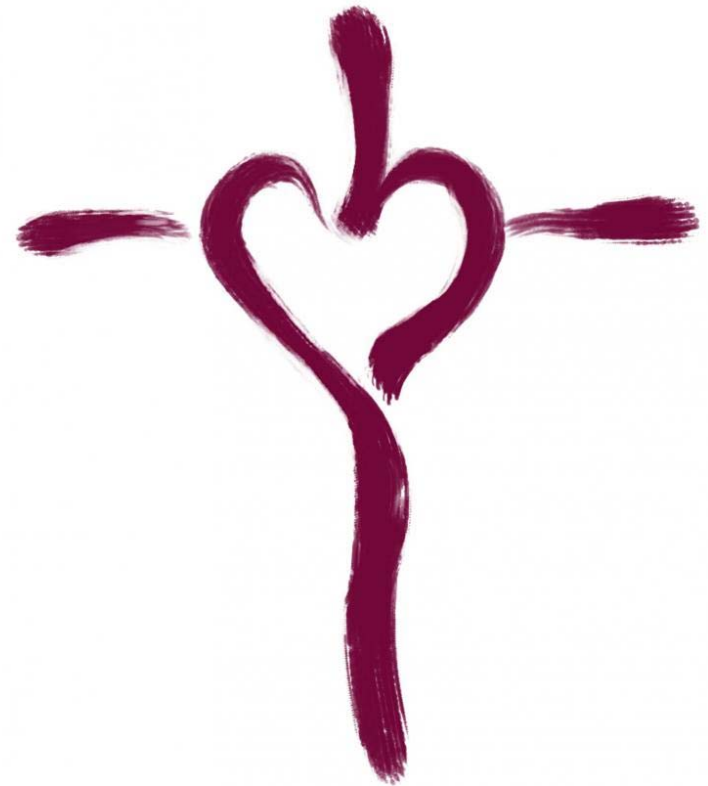
**Look above and dry thy tears,
Thy God reigneth.**

**Join ye saints, the truth proclaim,
Thy God reigneth.**

**Shout it forth with glad acclaim,
Thy God reigneth.**

Executive Editor: Martha E. Sparks

Assistant: Daryl Diddle



LOVE LIVED

2019 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

WILMORE FREE METHODIST CHURCH

A COMMUNITY THAT REFLECTS JESUS' VISION AND VALUES

Scripture: Revelation 13:8

**March 6, 2019
Ash Wednesday**

“I WILL GO,” THE SON VOLUNTEERED

By Jerry Coleman

“Excuse me, Son and Spirit,” the Father said, “I’d like to have a serious chat.”

“We’re here, Father. Let’s talk.”

The Father continued. “We all three have worked together on a creation plan. We will set up an incredible paradise for those we create in our own image. We will walk and talk and work with them.”

“True, Father, but they will listen to the lies of the Fallen One and choose to disobey and run away from us.”

“Here’s the hard part,” the Father continued with difficulty. “One of us will need to go there...personally...in human flesh.”

“That will be a most painful and difficult solution,” the Spirit expanded. “That’s a lot to ask for one of us to become like the created ones.”

“It is not only painful and difficult, but absolutely disheartening. So many will not even recognize their creator. It will have to end in an agonizing solution...a crucifixion.”

“This is a lot to ask, Father, but you are right,” the Spirit agreed. “They will not be able to fix the problem and save themselves. The problem must be fixed where the problem is. There. In human form.”

“Father, I will go,” the Son volunteered.

There was a long silence. No one spoke. The reality of it all set in. The Three-Person God would experience heart-wrenching separation. It would hurt all three. But it would bring life back to the people they would create and love.

“Son,” the Father said with tears, “when the time is right, you may go.”

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” 1 John 4:10.

HE REIGNS

By Janis Riffell

Have you ever reflected on the fact that the Lord has always reigned? He has never NOT reigned. Jesus was Lord of Lords as he lay in a humble cattle manger. On the cross he was still King of Kings. And before the very foundation of time he called himself "I AM" (present progressive tense).

Although it may not have appeared "kingly" to die on a rough-hewn cross, the truth remains that Jesus was in complete control of the

plan of salvation the entire time. To reign means to hold and exercise sovereign power. Jesus exercised his righteous sovereignty three days later when he arose from the dead; thus, paying the price for your sin and mine. At that moment, it was finished. It remains finished today and forever. It is done. It is complete. He bought us back. We are redeemed! How deeply profound and practical.

As I reflect, I take a few thoughts to heart:

1. Death is not fatal for those who call him Lord. He reigns over death itself.
2. Things are not always as they appear. He reigns in both the natural and the spiritual.
3. I can be victorious in all things. He reigns in the lives of His own.
4. I can do nothing in my own power to gain eternal life. Jesus paid it all. 2 Cor
5. Jesus really loves me...just as I am. "The wonder of it all."
6. We must never forget that the Great "I AM" reigns! Now and forever...HE REIGNS!

Say unto the peoples: The Lord reigneth from the tree"

(Psalm 96:10).

LOVE BRINGS LIBERTY

By Darlene Russell

I grew up in New York State—you know, the Empire State, the Statue of Liberty. Most of the children in our two-room school had good New England names—Barker, Nicholls, Smith, Russell, and so on. Our families had come to America before the Statue arrived in 1886. We knew America was founded on God's principles. Every morning the KJV Bible was read, prayer said and we said pledges to the flag and to the Bible. The Christmas play every year had something to do with the Bible, if it was only Tiny Tim saying, "God bless us every one."

We all knew God created our world and that he loved his creation so much that Jesus left Heaven to come to earth to restore the fellowship Adam and Eve had broken. God had told them in person to "...have dominion over every living thing" (Gen. 1:28). But they chose to believe Lucifer and eat fruit off the only tree God had told them not to eat. Their bodies began to slowly die. They had handed their dominion over to Satan. God had to do something.

God had a plan to liberate us before he laid the foundation of the earth (1 Peter 1:20, Rev. 13:8). The Son came to earth, was born of a virgin, shed his blood as the sacrificial Lamb, and then rose from the dead.

"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17).

MAY OUR LIVES BY LIKE JESUS**By Margaret Dargan**

Jesus, a Jew, demonstrated love to the Samaritan woman by speaking to her, drawing her into conversation, and ultimately revealing himself to her as the Messiah. (See John 4:4 and John 4:25, 26.) Her life was transformed because he was willing to cross cultural boundaries and extend to her respect and the love of God bringing her salvation. We are not told whether he went out of his way by going through Samaria especially to see her.

In Acts 10:34-38, Peter said to those who had come from the house of Cornelius, “I now realize ...that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and He went around doing good...because God was with Him.” To be like Jesus, we need the anointing of the Holy Spirit and power that only He can give. God has a plan and a purpose for each of us to fulfill.

Each morning, my prayer is Psalm 19:14: “*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart*, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my Strength, and my Redeemer.” The Lord has a job for each of us to do each day. It may be to spend more time in prayer, listen to someone who is hurting, or do practical deeds of kindness. If we are obedient to the nudging of the Holy Spirit, God’s love in our lives will draw others to Christ.

A prayer for today: Lord, guide me through this day. May I be led by your Holy Spirit to accomplish what you want me to accomplish and be sensitive to those around me. May I be your mouth, hands, and feet.

FLUTTER OF FREEDOM**By Diane Munoz**

I truly did not understand my capacity to love until I held the precious bundle of my little girl, with a head full of dark hair, in my arms for the very first time. The Wonder. The Responsibility.

There are times when I am tempted to try and “possess” her and I can hear the quiet voice of the Spirit of God nudging me: ‘She is mine.’ This quote often rang in my ears: “You have 18 years to learn to let them go.”

When I drove her away to college, I did pretty well until six bag pipes—yes, six—signaled the time to say a final goodbye and they whisked the freshmen out the door. The tears flowed. I did pretty well on the four-hour drive home until I pulled into our driveway and saw flowers a dear friend had left at the door. The tears flowed. I did pretty well until I sat on the couch and looked at our home with fresh eyes and heard the absence of her voice. The tears flowed.

Somehow a parent knows things will never quite be the same again. They’ll be different; they may even be better. The adult-child relationship transforms into an adult-adult relationship. I marvel when God enables me to hold my tongue from opinions not asked for; when space is given to make mistakes. Before my eyes a new creation is unfolding: I have everything to do with this wonder and nothing at the same time. The flutter of freedom.

How like our heavenly Father to give us space to learn His love in new and different ways all along this journey called life. It cost him something quite precious: the adorable babe in the manger.

I was the architect at His side. I was His constant delight, rejoicing always in His presence. And how happy I was with what He created: His wide world and all the human family!

(Proverbs 8: 30-31 NLT)

SUBVERSIVE LOVE

By C. Ed Bryson

Fred Rogers, Presbyterian minister and producer of the long-running PBS television show “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood,” once said, “Love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like ‘struggle.’ To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” Such active love might be considered subversive.

Countless examples of love as an active or subversive noun populate the Gospels. Consider Jesus’ subversive parable of the Prodigal Son. In that Middle Eastern culture, asking for your inheritance early was like announcing, “Dad, I wish you were dead.” Irate is the older brother’s justifiable posture. The younger son had adjusted his expectations to the cultural norms. (See verses 17-19.) To restore a wayward son was subversively counter-cultural and in Jesus’ story, the father breaks all the rules.

Most of us have been shown subversive love. Remember the times you did not deserve mercy? Someone spared you the consequences and the shame of your poor, even selfish choices. Under the rules of subversive love our only debt is to pass it on. Hear Mr. Rogers again: “If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet.”

Time and again Jesus gives us permission to love subversively. It is the redemptive catalyst of the new covenant and a manifesto of God’s Kingdom.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (Luke 15:21).

LENT’S LOVE LANGUAGE FOR LEADERS

By David J. Gyertson

The season of Lent is upon us. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, we are called to forty days of reflection, fasting, and conscious anticipation of Easter’s implications. The primary purpose of Lent is for everyone to remember the sacrifice of Christ. But for those of us who carry leadership roles at home, in the church, and beyond, it also provides opportunities to examine motives, rethink priorities, and refresh the passion for our callings.

Lent reminds me that the ultimate motivation behind my Lord’s calling was sacrificial love for those whom He came to serve. Rather than being driven by the privileges of leadership, He focused on the responsibilities that such leadership required. The scriptures refer to him resolutely turning toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). While I believe he always had Calvary in mind, it appears that he intensely focused the closing days of his earthly life on the ultimate calling—to be the Pass-over Lamb.

During Lent I want to refocus on the motivations and responsibility and not the privileges and perks that my leadership calling entails. We each have a “high calling”—not of our own making but of God’s choosing. Our leadership is effective when God sees that our primary motivation is driven by the willingness to surrender our rights, privileges, needs, preferences, and opportunities for the ultimate good of those we serve so that his kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. In this Lenten season, I am looking for those encounters where my true motives are revealed, and then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, “...not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

PEACE: A PARTING GIFT

By Marcia Burgess

One of the parting gifts of Christ to his followers was peace. Our pastor recently told the story of a challenge to paint a picture of peace. Contrary to the definition of peace as the absence of conflict or disturbance, the picture was of a nesting bird on a fragile branch in the cleft of a rock. While a storm raged, the bird remained peaceful and undisturbed on her nest. Peace is a gift from God for his followers that manifests itself in the midst of disturbance or conflict.

The call to follow Jesus had no hidden side effects. He spoke plainly about trials, tribulation, hatred and opposition. He made clear that in the midst of tribulation His followers would have His peace. It was this blessing of peace they were to share with all who welcomed them.

The reality of tribulation in the world is at our fingertips. We push a button or turn a switch and are reminded that our world is not at peace. Unfortunately we have bifurcated the meaning of peace into an inner peace and an outer peace. It is true that Christ's peace has two dimensions. The gift of an untroubled heart is within, but the evidence of such a heart is outwardly revealed. Acrostically speaking, such persons are shown to be **Patient, Equable, Amiable, Calm** and **Empathetic**.

When Jesus sent out the twelve, the first words of their gospel message was the "blessing of peace." He sends us out with this same directive to bless with the gift of peace all those who welcome the good news.

LIVING LOVE DEVINE

By Jeff Hiatt

"To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name."
– Thomas Merton

The love chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13, reveals God's perfect picture of love. Love should characterize our being, character, attitudes, thoughts, words, actions and relationships. Jesus shows us that the goal of human existence is to love God and others.

"If there is anything better than being loved, it is loving."

-- Anonymous

Love builds relationships. Love overcomes obstructions, brokenness, resentment, or betrayal. It rises above pettiness, and inspires us to become a Christ-like person. God frees us from self-absorption and love gives us purpose. Love is "the most excellent way" to live.

They know we are Christians by the way we are joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, content, humble, courteous, generous, and truthful in love. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures. "Love never fails."

"I trust in God's unfailing love forever" (Psalm 52:8b).

In a chase, the one pursuing expends on the pursued inexhaustible effort toward obtaining the prize. Pursue Jesus and his love in that way. Whatever has your attention has you. Does Jesus' love have *your* attention? Can you pray and mean it: Father, Son, Spirit fill me with love to love you and others as Jesus loves them?

THREE WAYS TO LOVE**By Patti Fiskeaux**

This scripture tells of Mary's lavish gift of perfume poured over Jesus' feet as he reclined at a dinner given in his honor at Mary's home. She was anointing him in advance of his burial.

While the gift was no doubt expensive, I think Jesus was much more interested in the love that prompted this, than the price of the gift. Mary poured out her love and devotion in a way that was not really culturally acceptable. Women didn't go in public with their hair down, or wipe feet with their hair! Jesus simply accepted the act of love as sweet perfume.

Another Mary, whose gift is recorded in Luke 7:38, poured out her perfume on Jesus with many tears. Tears can be a gift of love, also. Paul writes to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2:4), "*For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears....*" Paul was living out love with tears. As we bring those we love to God in prayer, tears will rise as a sweet perfume to him and our burden will ease.

Our prayers can also be seen as an offering of love to the heart of God. In Revelation 8:3, John writes, "*Another angel...came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints....*" Our prayers for others ascend to God's throne with incense and become sweet perfume to Him.

These then are three ways of living in love; doing acts of love, shedding tears of love and praying prayers of love. To God these are sweet perfumes!

JESUS THE MUD-MAKER**By Howard A. Snyder**

Walking along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. "Rabbi, who sinned," his disciples asked, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither!" Jesus replied. "He was born blind so God's works could be shown in him." Then Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," Jesus said. The man went, washed, and came back healed. (John 9:1-7 paraphrased).

Mud? Why? Jesus didn't need mud to heal this man.

Looking at Jesus' other healings, we see that his "method" varied. Sometimes a touch; sometimes a word; sometimes something more dramatic, as here. The variety in Jesus' healings undercuts any ideas of magic or surefire formulas.

In this case, there may be a deeper purpose, also. The mud is symbolic. Mud is dirt; dirt is land; land is earth. All part of God's good creation. The Bible speaks much of God's people and God's land.

What is Jesus doing here? Revealing his Messiahship. Jesus is the great healer, as prophesied. This muddy healing act is in a sense triple: immediate and physical (the man healed); historical and prophetic (hinting at Old Testament promises); and future or eschatological: The coming of God's kingdom in fullness, when everything in heaven and earth is reconciled in the New Creation (Ephesians 1:10).

Old Testament references to mud and spit are usually negative. Jesus makes a negative positive, as he often does. Jesus in effect sanctifies the mud as he heals the man. Of course the mud does not need sanctifying, unless in our own minds.

Jesus' use of mud was symbolic, and more than symbolic. It was real and physical at two levels: the blind man healed, and the promised healing of all creation through Jesus' physical incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. This healing also speaks of spiritual blindness.

Who really was blind—the man or his Pharisee critics?

HOW DO WE LOVE?

By Matt Kinnell

I don't believe that there is any segment of Christianity that would deny the fact that love is a defining element – if not THE defining element – of our faith. But I'm not sure that all of us are on the same page when it comes to what love is and what it looks like in action.

1 John 3:16 says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us." In this, through Christ's example, we see that love is self-giving. Because love is selfless, it is best expressed in our relationships with one another. Paul told the Romans to "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (12:10). John indicated the selfless nature of love when he admonished believers that if we see someone in need and have the means to help, but we ignore them, then we do not have the love of God in us (1 John 3:17). Love is selfless.

In the Upper Room, Jesus told His disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15), and 2 John 6 tells us, "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands." By these instructions we know that love requires obedience. For too many, love is a feeling – a warm sensation. But obedience does not always produce such a good feeling. Sometimes obedience is tough. There may even be times when God's commands don't make sense or seem to serve no purpose. But we obey, because obedience is what love demands.

Love one another by self-giving, and love God by obedience.

COULD YOU DO THAT?

By Kim Barnard

"And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins'" Matthew 26:27-28.

How many times have you been hurt by someone close to you in a way that felt like a betrayal? Maybe the hurt came from spiteful words, the selfish taking of possessions, or just being neglectful when the person owed you a duty of care. Would you have acted in love and kindness even if you had known in advance that the person would betray you? How would you have treated the person that you knew would give you over to the people that would physically hurt and even kill you? Jesus instructed His disciples to forgive as many times as needed. He assured them that those that harmed would be dealt with, but His disciples were to forgive (Luke 17:1-4).

Then a short time later, Jesus followed his own instructions. Jesus knew that His disciples, those who were the closest to him, would betray him the night they sat down for dinner, the dinner we now call the Last Supper. Jesus told them that Judas would betray him and that the rest of the disciples would scatter and leave Jesus in the hands of the ones that would abuse him and kill him. Amazingly, Jesus still ate with them and even blessed them. Jesus knew that Judas would receive the consequences of his actions once the events took place. And, even though the other disciples would in essence abandon him that night, he promised that once he finished his mission, he would meet up with them again.

What an act of love it was for him to forgive those that hurt him, those who should have protected him and watched his back!

NOTHING STOPS GOD

By Duane Brown

When God wants his way, God gets his way. And why not? God is the creator, sovereign Lord, and sustainer of the universe in which we live and move.

According to today's scripture reading, the religious leaders approached Pontius Pilate out of great fear and panic because of Jesus' claim that he would rise from the dead (Matthew 27:62-3). They knew that in order to kill the movement they needed to keep its leader buried.

It's interesting that they called Jesus the "deceiver." For these religious leaders sought to deceive the people by controlling the narrative about Jesus' death. With Pilate's help, the tomb was sealed and guards were placed at its entrance to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen. They thought they could stop the God of the universe dead in his tomb!

But they were wrong.

Dear reader, the foundation upon which your Christian faith is built is the truth that your leader still lives. That, even in death, God will not be stopped from getting his way with his sovereign plan to restore all creation through Jesus to a right relationship with God. The same God, with the same resurrection power, is available to you through the Holy Spirit while you encounter what seems like insurmountable obstacles. Be inspired by this truth as you pray with hope for those family and friends who are lost to eternity.

WHAT TRUE LOVE LOOKS LIKE

By Jay McCants

"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" John 15:12-13.

While it may be easy for us to envision ourselves freely giving up our life for a spouse or child, sacrificing for someone else is another matter entirely. We have all heard examples of courageous individuals laying down their lives for others, like heroes during wartime sacrificing themselves for their brothers-in-arms. Consider the account of Specialist Ross McGinnis' heroic actions during the Iraq War in 2006. After an insurgent threw a grenade into their Humvee while on patrol, machine gunner McGinnis could have jumped from the vehicle and saved himself. Instead, he realized his friends were trapped inside a locked vehicle and made the split-second decision to protect them by covering the explosive with his body. Everyone else in the vehicle survived the explosion, except for McGinnis who was only nineteen years old. The Pennsylvania native laid down his life for his friends and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.

I thought about this picture of sacrifice when I read the Scripture verses above. Our Savior lived out these words and willingly laid down his life for his friends. He also gave up his life for those who rejected and persecuted him...and for people like us. His death on the cross was necessary, not a result of anything he had done, but because of our sin. He did not deserve death; he chose it to give us life. As we celebrate the resurrection, we praise him for his sacrificial love and wonder at the thought that our God did this for us. I pray that I will learn to love others just as he loves us. May we surrender our lives completely to him and show the world what true love looks like.

Scripture: Acts 17:25

**April 14, 2019
Palm Sunday**

THE GOD WHO SERVES

By Andy Bowen

Several years ago, at the end of a year in Wilmore, on our final Sunday at Wilmore Free Methodist Church before returning to our missionary duties in Paraguay, we shared communion. Somehow I managed to get in line for gluten-free wafers. My former professor and his wife, Victor and Shirley Hamilton, served me, quoting the enduring words of Jesus, “This is my body...” The very next Sunday, back in our church in Paraguari, lay leader Alcides Alcaraz served me communion with bread he had made in his own bakery, flavored with aniseed: “...Broken for you.”

The essence of Lent for me is distilled in the moment of the Lord’s Supper. It always brings with it the reminder of Jesus’s service to his disciples: the bread, the wine, the towel. The cross. “He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7-8; see also Philippians 2:5-11.) Jesus shows us what love looks like. To love is to serve.

John’s Gospel quotes Jesus repeatedly, insisting that to know Jesus is to know the Father (John 5:19, 8:19, 14:7, for example). Despite this, I have always thought of Jesus’s actions on that Passover night and that Good Friday as if they were an aberration—a one-off. God serving and dying, when that cannot possibly be what God does! But it has slowly dawned on me that if I believe that God is love, and that God always acts consistently with His character, then Easter week is not an anomaly at all. Jesus himself reveals that the God of the Bible is the God who serves! And that’s why our need for Him is deep and persistent.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

March 14, 2019

COMFORT IN SUFFERING

By Kris Gorton

What does suffering have to do with love? We all suffer, and are all created with the capacity to love. Suffering feels so wrong, even evil. Why do we have to watch our loved ones die, see our health fail and in some instances bury our children or spouse? Must we watch our youth suffer in foreign conflicts? How could a loving God allow us to deal with these things?

The truth is we were never meant to suffer, but God allows pain in our lives because He loves us. When Adam and Eve fell from grace, they willfully disobeyed God, and we lost a piece of our true humanity. Through Christ’s love and sacrifice we are redeemed and get a taste of the joy to come. We still have to deal with our mortality, bodies that decay and people that don’t know Christ or even people who once knew Christ and have now fallen away.

The truth is, through suffering and hardship we get refined. God is able to use our trials and tribulations to develop us into more effective warriors for Christ. Trials and tribulations develop empathy, love and strengthen our hearts if we approach them with the correct attitude.

We have a chance like Job to glorify God in the midst of our trials and tribulations. Some of those who suffered the most in life have made the biggest difference in the lives of others. Consider Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic, or Mother Teresa who lived a life of poverty. Both of these women have reached hundreds of thousands for Christ.

LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

By Craig D. Saunders

Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Judas Iscariot is referred to as Jesus’ “betrayer” (Matt 10:4; 26:14-16, 25, 45-48).

As we know, he agreed to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and led the soldiers into the olive grove so they could arrest him. He is portrayed as a sinful, hypocritical person who chose evil actions against Jesus.

However, Jesus called Judas his “friend” and told him to act according to God’s will, in fulfillment of the Scriptures (Matthew 26:50-56). Even though Judas came to “betray” Jesus into the hands of sinful men, acting as his enemy, Jesus chose to call him his “friend” (his companion or comrade). He still accepted and loved him. It takes a special kind of love – a divine love, a love without limits, to call someone who intends evil towards you a “friend.” Yet, that is what Jesus did. Jesus *demonstrated* exactly what he *taught* in Matthew 5:43-45, when he said that the ethics of the Kingdom of Heaven requires that we include loving “enemies” in our Christian calling to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this way, we act as true children of our Father in heaven, overcoming evil with good. Through Jesus’ actions that night in the olive grove, Jesus overcame evil with good. He loved even his enemy; he loved without limits.

During this Lenten season, let us follow Jesus’ footsteps and choose to love *all* people – even those who mistreat, mock, persecute, and do evil acts towards us. Like Jesus, let us be counter-cultural, loving others without limits. By committing to love without limits, we truly are Christ’s presence in this world.

WHAT IS THE STATE OF MY SOUL?

By Neil Anderson

The forty weekdays and six Sundays of Lent were designed to prepare believers spiritually for Passion Week when the church vicariously lives through the suffering and death of Christ. The season of Lent developed over many years until the early 4th century when its form was fixed. The purpose of the Lenten observance however seems to have been set from near the beginning. Lent is an extended time when Christians engage in fasting, almsgiving and prayer—spiritual disciplines that redirect the focus of the soul upon matters of eternal importance.

St. Augustine (AD 354-430) wrote in a Lenten sermon that fasting and almsgiving are essential aspects of the church’s devotion during this season. Prayer, he said, adds “wings of piety” to these acts that they may fly unhesitatingly to God. The implication is that God measures the deeds of one’s hands by the intention of one’s heart. There is another kind of alms Christians have practiced during Lent—the giving of forgiveness. Followers of Christ are reminded to humble themselves in their everyday lives as Christ himself was humble. If we are to honor Christ in humility, we must learn to ask forgiveness of those we have wronged as well as give it to those who have wronged us.

Self-examination, taking stock of the state of one’s soul, is the thread that runs through Lent, affording the opportunity to set aside the encumbrances that hold us back from the full experience of salvation. *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength*, Christ commanded, *and love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:37-39). Jesus expressed a similar view when he made this a part of his model prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

REFLECTIONS OF GREATER LOVE

By Joy Dupree

My daughter is a new mother again. Only twenty months ago she held her first-born son. Now she cradles him in one arm and his little brother, so new to the world, in the other. Her face is a crease of anxiety as both of her babies struggle to breathe clearly, little noses clogged, little breaths raspy. Her mother's heart would trade places with them in an instant. Her body is weary, her emotions a muddle of sleep-deprived exhaustion, and her face a pathway for the tears that slowly trace their downward course. It is the deep watch of the night, but love doesn't tell time. She rocks them, croons to them, caresses them, and holds them tight, no matter how her arms ache with the weight. This is love lived.

How many nights have we struggled to breathe? How often has the darkness seemed overwhelming? How often have we felt the need to be held and rocked and sung to? Is there a heart that would carry our burdens? Is there a heart that holds us close? Is there a heart that would take our place? Yes. That heart belongs to one who loves us even more than a young mother loves her babies. That heart belongs to one who loved us enough to grieve, to ache, to relinquish, and to walk that agonizing walk to death itself. That was a heart that took our place in an instant, as love does. A mother's face, a newborn's gaze, these are reflections of the greater love lived for us, the love of Jesus.

"Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so." Who among us does not remember that song from our childhood? It was perhaps our first intimation that a greater love existed.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

FASTING AT LENT PREPARES THE WAY

By Jon Raymond

In the church liturgical calendar, Lent is a forty-day period of humility, personal sacrifice, self-denial, and spiritual discipline. The forty days reflect the forty years of Israel's wandering in the desert after its exodus from Egypt (Numbers 4:10-11) and Christ's fasting forty days in the wilderness prior to his Temptation by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). The benefits of fasting during Lent are centered in the blessings that occur as fasting sharpens our focus in prayer and helps us attend to God's voice.

This was true of Jesus and for saints of the early church. When Cornelius fasted he was directed by God to seek out the Apostle Peter who God used in the Centurion's salvation and that of his household. In Antioch saints first fasted before commissioning and seeing off Barnabas and Paul for their first missionary journey. That was just their beginning. While at sea, Paul fasted through a storm for several days while his ship was slowly sinking. In the early church, obedience in fasting prepared the way.

During lent our fasting prepares the way for intimacy with God and trawailing prayer. To paraphrase Jesus (Matthew 6:16-18), when you fast, don't make a public scene; no one needs to know. Your Father knows. He cares. He hears and speaks. Thanks be to God.

HEALED AT THE CROSS

By Judi Behm

After recently hearing one of my favorite songs, “The Cross” by Mercy Me, I knew my focus for my Lenten devotional would be the cross and the peace we have knowing our sins are not only forgiven but forgotten.

The words of the song focus on grace and healing. No matter how deep the wounds, how severe the pain or hurt, Jesus’s love for us and death on the cross wipes away all our sins and the hurt/pain that comes with them.

If we repent of our sins, scripture tells us that Jesus forgives us, washes us white as snow, and has thrown our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 51:7-11, Psalm 103:12, I John 1:9).

If you’re like me, you’ve made many mistakes throughout your life and Satan loves to remind us of those mistakes even though we know we’ve been forgiven. We can stand on Jesus’s promises of His love, the cross and resurrection. Knowing our sins are remembered no more can replace the sadness with peace and joy. As the song says, “The cross has made us flawless.”

We are also called to forgive and forget the sins against us (Matthew 6:14 -15, Luke 17: 3-4, 1 Corinthians 13:5). Sometimes that is more easily said than done because of the hurt that resulted from the sin, but remembering the sin and harboring the hurt holds us back and causes continual pain. When we truly forget the wrongs we have experienced by others as Jesus did with us, there is freedom and peace.

SIMPLE LOVE

By Kayla Pritchard

Among all of the stories of Jesus’ healings, his miracles, and his teachings, the story of the woman caught in adultery stands out to me the most because of Jesus’ simple act of love. When I read this story, I imagine a woman being dragged out of her home and brought before a crowd. Her past is suddenly revealed to everyone and she is in deep trouble. The crowd has every right to stone her right then and there. Jesus himself had every right to stone her after the crowd dispersed.

But, he didn’t. Instead, he stoops down in the dust, looks her in the eye, and tells her “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus’ love is so extraordinary and in deep contrast with the Pharisees, the religious leaders, and the crowd. When the Pharisees and religious leaders saw the woman caught in adultery, they seized the opportunity to trap Jesus. To them, she was simply an object to be used and then thrown away. The crowd heard the title “adulteress” and was ready to start casting stones. They did not see the person behind the sinner. Jesus, however, saw the woman as a person and cared for her personally. He not only forgave her; he redeemed her. He gave her a new name, a new identity, a new lease on life. He didn’t want her to stay in her life of adultery. He wanted her to be free. I think this is what Jesus wants for us. He wants us to have a new life, a new name, and a new identity. He doesn’t want us to stay in our lives of sin. He wants us to be set free.

WHO WAS THE VILEST PERSON AT THE CRUCIFIXION?

By Sean Gaffney

Jesus said that there is no greater love than to give up your life for a friend (John 15:13). The problem I have when I look too closely at the cross is that Jesus fulfilled this verse in a radical way that makes my understanding of love look rather limited.

Jesus was literally dying for his friends – for Peter, and for John, and for Andrew. And for Mary, and for Nicodemus, and for Joseph of Arimathea.

And for Judas.

And for Pilate. And for Herod, and the guy who whipped Jesus, and the guys who drove the nails into His wrists and feet.

Jesus looked down from the cross at his murderers, and asked his Father to forgive them. He loved them that much – so much that they were included in the circle of friends he would die for.

Who was the vilest person at the crucifixion? It wasn't the guy that whipped Jesus – he was a beloved friend of our Lord. Or the guys that nailed him to the cross, or Pilate, or Herod, or any of the jeering crowd. They were all (all!) beloved friends of Jesus.

It's not even me, pompous in my limited love, selfish in my narrow outlook, unwilling to love extravagantly; even I am a beloved friend of Jesus. A friend he was willing to die for.

Jesus himself became for us the vilest person at the crucifixion. He soaked up into himself our pettiness, our ugliness, our hate, and returned instead to us the offer of forgiveness, of mercy, of true love.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

By Patti McPeake

While he (Jesus) was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Mark 14:3

The scripture verse above tells a very familiar story of a woman's love for Jesus and the way that she showed that love . . . it was extravagant and, in some ways, misunderstood by most who witnessed the event. Yet, in this case, the one (Jesus) who needed the ministry that she provided the most, “got it,” and applauded her efforts and actions, especially in the face of his impending death.

How do we “live love” in our daily lives to those around us?

I heard a story in Sunday school not long ago of a Christian youth basketball team who, in the course of playing the game, willingly played by the rules, used no foul language, showed care and concern for their team mates, and in general were a pleasure to be around, regardless of the outcome. After the game, the opposing team left there in shame as their behavior had not been as exemplary. During the following week, one of those opponents was so moved by the whole scene that he sought out an explanation for the team's caring behavior and in the end, gave his heart to Christ! Those boys “lived” the love of Christ and God used them in a mighty way!

We've all heard the quote, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.” The point is clear – as followers of Christ, the way that we live our lives preaches a message that will either lift the name of Jesus or deny it. Our actions **DO** speak louder than our words almost always. As we go through this Lenten season, let's take the time to examine the message that we are sending – it could really make a difference in someone's life!

LOVE LIVED IN SACRIFICE**By Shivraj K. Mahendra**

Love and sacrifice are two very powerful themes of religious life. We experience them differently in different contexts. I remember participating in the annual sacrifice at our village shrine as a child at home in India. I saw our goat being offered to the deity. The scene was traumatizing. I would ask, “Why did they kill the goat?” “It is sacrificed to the goddess, for the wellbeing of the people, to appease the deity” will be the reply. Was the deity pleased? Nobody knew. Did sickness and poverty bid farewell? Nope! Did the spirit of fear and hopelessness remain? Yes. It was obvious that the sacrifice had not been helpful to provide health and peace. There was no God who loved or cared for people, and there were no people who worshipped the true God. In fact, there was no knowledge of a living and loving God.

I also remember searching for the true God who had power over life and death. God in His grace meets those who seek Him in dreams and visions. In one such vision I saw the light of Christ during one of the darkest times of my life. Christ not only appears and talks to people who earnestly seek Him, He also reveals the loving and saving God to them. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice who replaces all other sacrifices. He is the true healer of health and heart. He is the true deliverer of the poor, needy and sinful. In Christ alone, we are loved by God, to enable us to love God and one another. In Christ alone, God’s love becomes a lived sacrifice – helping us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. May the Lord help us. Amen.

“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:10 NLT).

“I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6 NLT).

INSTRUMENTS OF GOD’S PEACE**By Lora Prochina**

We’re living in a time when toxic conflict and divisiveness seem to easily arise everywhere; between friends, in families, and sometimes, even within church families. It seems it’s impossible to discuss differing opinions or take action on important issues without introducing an atmosphere of tension, or a “you vs. me” mentality. It’s incredibly unfortunate and harmful when this happens between followers of Christ, because it truly puts a stain on our witness to a watching, suffering world that tends to act in the same way.

Truly, we shouldn’t consider one another to be the enemy but rather address *the* enemy, the true enemy, Satan. He would have us become distracted and alienate ourselves from the “other side.” Ultimately, we are each united in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, to which we must look and from which draw our wisdom and guidance.

As we spend these days reflecting on Jesus’ immense passion and sacrifice for our sins, may we remember how he chose to disrupt immoral norms *with* love and grace during his days on earth. May we reflect on how we can fight for others, testify, and show love to a dark world by being more Christ-like. By denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses. By counteracting injustice with speech/actions full of grace and genuine kindness. By listening to better understand others, not to have the most powerful last word.

May our every word and action be intentional, filled with love and compassion. May the way we express our every belief and value always reflect the compassionate, gracious, just Lord we serve.

As the beautiful hymn we often sing expresses it:

“Lord, make us instruments of Your peace.

Walls of pride and prejudice shall cease,

When we are Your instruments of peace.”

Lord, let it be so.

GOD KNOWS THE WHOLE STORY**By Katie Diddle**

I have a favorite picture of my son, Nathan, taken last summer when he was two years old. He's standing in a field, leaning over the bottom fence post, and looking at the camera with a half-smile/half-smirk. His eyes are as blue as the sky and his curls make him look like a cherub. What you cannot tell, however, by looking at the picture is that just before I took it, Nathan had just finished pooping. In fact, it was so bad that he not only required a diaper change but also a change of shirt, shorts and probably socks, too.

So if you had come along and seen cute Nathan leaning against the fence post, you wouldn't understand why I'd warn you not to come any closer. It would seem rude and harsh and unfair. But I know the whole story, and my warning is for your own good.

The same is true of obedience to God. God's omniscience sees the big picture: all of the back stories and the ulterior motives and the dead ends. Our limited perspective means that we don't know when a sweet vision will end up being a smelly, rotten reality. In his love for us, God tries to keep us from harm by commanding us to avoid those things which would hurt us and our relationship with him. Obedience to God is not about following a list of rules simply because they exist. Obedience is about trusting that God knows far more than we ever will about how the world works. Our Father knows that sometimes cherubs smell to high heaven.

*“Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool,
But he who walks in wisdom will be delivered”
(Proverbs 28:26).*

ARE YOU AN UNLEAVENED BATCH OF DOUGH?**By Joe Hwang**

Lenten Season is so burdensome. If I had it my way, I'd only focus on the *Joie de vivre* associated with the new life that Easter and each Lord's Day signify. But, as Paul wisely points out, the body of Christ—as a new unleavened batch—cannot celebrate the festival of resurrection while clinging to old yeast because “even a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” (v.6). We are instead to get rid of old yeast so that we may live according to our new identity.

During Lent, we counter-culturally pursue holiness and growth through repentance, fellowship, prayer, fasting, and concentration upon our baptismal covenant. We can either cut down on the nonessential aspects of our lives or recommit ourselves to a spiritual discipline. However, just like excessive training can be dangerous on the body of the novice, unrealistic spiritual goals can harm our overall well-being.

Let us discern, then, in what areas of life God commands growth. Seek out wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit. Consult a pastor, spiritual mentor, or confidant. Following through on our commitment won't be easy, but we do so on the promise of the new life that Christ has already secured for us as our paschal lamb who was sacrificed (vv. 7-8). And on each Lord's Day, the body of Christ accompanied by a heavenly cloud of witnesses will celebrate the transforming work of the Holy Spirit and take joy in the small victories experienced along the way.

LOVING THE “ONES”

By Martha Henderson

The story of humanity begins with the story of one man – Adam. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a human being” (Genesis 2:7). The number doubled when Eve was created. The God who had made galaxies now committed himself to love humans – every single one. Even when they disobeyed or hid, God pursued them with love.

Continuing on through the Old Testament we are awed by amazing stories of individual people. From Adam to Ezra, God demonstrated His faithful love through the centuries.

Then God “so loved the world, He sent His one Son.” About himself Jesus said, “The Son of man has come to save that which was lost” (Matthew 18:11). The very next verse begins the beautiful story of one lost sheep. In John, the lost sheep story is followed by the stories of one lost coin and one lost son. Instead of relating stories about multitudes, Jesus reminded us of the importance of the “ones.” Even as he was dying, he reached out to one of the criminals hanging beside him with the promise of Paradise.

Today in 2019 we live in a world of over seven billion and six hundred million “ones.” Mind boggling as it may be, our faithful God loves each one. This Lenten season we can 1) thank God for loving the “ones” and 2) ask God to show us the “one” we can help lead to Him.

LOVE DEFINES US

By David Randall

“Love” has dominated Christian life since, in the Upper Room, Christ gave his “new commandment” (John 13:34). But, in the next verse (above), Christ goes further: He *defines* His people by their loving each other. John affirms this “definition” in his letters (e.g., 1 John 4). How is it that Christ assigned “love” such a dominant focus that it literally testifies that we belong to Him? In contemplating this question, consider what almost no parent can forget: the first time their infant told them “I love you!” Mom or Dad probably realized that the child was echoing the countless times they had told that child of their love for him or her, complete with a hug or other warm affection. In fact, each parent probably realized that she/he had *taught the child to love!* How much more must we be taught “agape love”?²

But who teaches Christ’s people this extraordinary love? A little thought suggests to me that this essential task falls to the ‘Paraclete’ – the Holy Spirit – given to Christians, and only to Christians, upon their conversion. Who could be a more appropriate ‘teacher’ than the One who renders spiritual supervision to the Christian?

Such love, so I’m told, was unheard of in the Roman world, and would truly have defined a “follower of The Way.” I fear it is equally rare in today’s world and, again, defines whose—or who—we are! Truly, as we contemplate Christ’s love for us in this Lenten season, let us reaffirm our “love for one another.”

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35 NIV).

AN IRONY THAT INSTRUCTS

By David R. Bauer

The declaration in Matthew 27:54 from the centurion and the soldiers who were with him is dripping with irony. For these men who had actually nailed Jesus to the cross, who killed God's Messiah, now confess that Jesus is the Son of God. But Peter, the earliest disciple to be called (Matthew 4:18-19), whom Matthew dubs the "first" of the apostles (10:2), has repeatedly denied Jesus (26:69-75). In the face of the cross, the soldiers Matthew says killed Jesus *confess* his divine Sonship, while the chief disciple *denies* him.

This confession from the soldiers testifies to the inclusion of unlikely outsiders. Through the events of the Jesus-history, and especially those surrounding Jesus' death (27:51-54), God bears witness to the world that Jesus is the Son of God, in whom God himself is present (1:23). And even those who have committed the most heinous sins—in this case Christ-killers—can find forgiveness and restoration at the cross. One of the reasons some people are reluctant to accept the gospel is that they believe that what they have done is so loathsome and deplorable that even God cannot or will not forgive them. This passage gives assurance that absolutely no one stands outside of the saving grace of God.

But the experience of Peter gives pause to privileged insiders. It leads believers to consider what we would do if confronted with the prospect of dying for our relationship with Jesus, or what kind of shame we are willing to endure. It steers us away from boastful confidence in our own resolve (26:31-35) toward prayerful dependence upon God, for "the spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (26:41).

"When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'" (Matthew 27:54).

IT IS FINISHED

By Paul Hamann

How wonderful and marvelous is the resurrection of Jesus Christ! Grief and sadness were replaced by joy, and hopelessness suddenly was transformed into a grand celebration of great expectations. Jesus' resurrection was a marvelous capstone to the fulfillment of the Scriptures' promises of a Savior for the world. However, the resurrection was not the victory as much as it was the confirmation of the victory; the assurance that the real battle waged on the cross between Jesus and the forces of evil had been an absolute, complete, and final victory for the Son of God.

The battle must have been fierce. Creation could not be contained: the earth shook, the sky was darkened, graves gave up their dead, and the veil in the Tabernacle was rent in two as we were granted personal access to God the Father through his beloved Son. When Jesus uttered his final words, "It is finished," he was proclaiming victory, ultimate and decisive. He had accomplished, through his love for us and obedience to the Father, the purpose for which he was commissioned to Earth.

God knew what must be done to assure this ultimate victory. So great was his love for us that he gave his only begotten Son to win the battle that must be won so that we who believe need not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). By this victory, we have been justified, reconciled, and redeemed, and Jesus Christ has been glorified. Hail the Victor!

"It is finished! The battle is over!

It is finished! And Jesus is Lord!"

--Bill and Gloria Gaither

WELCOME HOME

By Charlie Payne

Even if we know little of art, we've all heard of Rembrandt, the seventeenth century Dutch painter. Even during his lifetime he was considered one of the greatest painters of Western civilization. But with success came real tragedy. Four out of five of his children died during his lifetime as did two of his wives. The women he really loved went insane. Then he went broke. As if life was trying to grind him completely away, he was even buried in an unmarked grave.

Rembrandt became a real believer in Christ and one of his most famous paintings, executed near the end of his life, is called "Return of the Prodigal Son." It captures those moments in the parable where Jesus said the father "ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him." The painting shows a son completely destitute and one who appears to have made it back barely alive. In the father's embrace, the relief at his son's return is palpable—relief because the son who was "dead but is alive again – was lost but now is found."

The way is narrow and we've all left it. We leave because our heads get turned by pride or impatience or selfishness or pain, and our feet tend to follow where our eyes lead. But like the prodigal son, when we come to our senses and return home, our Heavenly Father sees us even while we're still a long way off. And He runs to meet us with arms open wide and love in his eyes.

ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S WILL

By Mike Reynen

The other day a young man reading the Bible with me asked, "Why didn't the disciples question Jesus when he called them?" It was a thought-provoking query to me. Had those fishermen some brief exposure or prior knowledge of Jesus? Was there something about his call they found so convincing?

As readers we can't miss John revering Christ: "...the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Nor the Heavenly voice commending Jesus: "...whom I love; with you I am well pleased." We may not know precisely what moved Simon, Andrew and the sons of Zebedee. But the caliber of person Jesus was being revealed to be—in Mark's Gospel—easily warranted the full submission of these men, and us.

Submission is a spiritual discipline of acceptance of the will of God. Yet, it is more than that; more than mere duty. It is intertwined with desire for God. Recall Jesus' perfect submission, "Not my will, but thy will be done." It reflects submission, but also earnest desire for what the Father wanted. Contemplate today the One whom you desire, and what little or large service to which he may be calling you. Then see if you, too, do not find yourself leaving all else to follow him, whether questions come to mind or not.

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:17-18).

AN IMAGE OF REAL DEVOTION

By Mark (Skip) Elliott

Last summer I attended a meeting of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative in Boston. This is a group formed by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization that seeks to improve relations between Evangelical and Orthodox Christians. Meeting at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary, I was much impressed hearing a talk by Father Luke Veronis, former missionary to Albania, who teaches missions at Hol.

I personally have often been deeply moved by having the privilege of meeting Evangelical believers who endured much for their faith in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. In January, reading *The Resurrection of the Church in Albania* by Jim Forest, I came across a story by Father Luke that once again spoke to me of remarkable, enduring faith: "I have learned so much from Albanians about courage and perseverance....I recall a 98-year-old woman who heard there was a priest who would be celebrating the liturgy. Despite her age, she fasted for two days so that she could receive Communion for the first time in 30 years. It happened that we saw her coming to the church. She fell down and could not continue. We told her to return to her house and said we would bring Communion to her after the liturgy. I will never forget the joyful tears with which she received Communion. She died within a year."

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me [Jesus]....but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:9, 13).

LOVE LIVED THROUGH FORGIVENESS

By Norma Miller

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's Love. His mission was to save us from our sins, to offer us forgiveness and give us new life in him, a life abundant; outpouring in love for God and others.

Jesus said and did such amazing and wonderful things. Thus, many people chose to follow him. His words and actions communicated love, compassion and mercy towards others showing the way of the kingdom of God.

Children learn early the importance of words, like "Thank You," and "I Love You" in their homes. And once they start school and begin to form friendships, they learn the need of saying, "I am sorry." Life is a constant engagement with relationships, growth, hurts and brokenness. Daily we are reminded of the necessity of encouraging one another in love and grace to show the Love of God (I Corinthians 13).

Jesus, as a child, grew in wisdom and grace. He grew up knowing the sacrifice of God's love which would lead him to a cross. The cross which would offer the foundation of love, forgiveness, grace and holiness. It brings to mind the old hymn which affirms the truth, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me."

We all start life as sinners in need of a Savior. Life and circumstances cause us sometimes to doubt biblical teaching about having faith in God and others. We sometimes become cynical, cold or bitter towards others because of their words and actions. Yet, we must never forget where we started: Jesus' sacrifice and how much we have been forgiven.

May our hearts and lives be forgiveness as we recall Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

HALF-PRICED CROSSES**By Bob Martin**

Have you ever seen a jewelry store sign reading: "Crosses for sale, half-price"? In our culture it means very little to wear a cross. Jewelry, including crosses, is worn around the neck, on fingers, in ears, and attached to navels and noses. For many, the cross is just another piece of jewelry. Contrast this with cultures where the Christian cross can cost your life. Crosses are not cheap everywhere.

Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." *Cross* refers to suffering or sacrifice undertaken voluntarily out of love for Christ. The gift of salvation creates an inner gratitude and compulsion to carry crosses for Christ's sake.

Instead of advertising worship services, music programs and the rest, perhaps we should say: If you choose Christ as your Lord and become active in a Bible-centered church, it will cost you. You will give more money than you think you can afford; you will carve out time for serving other people for no pay; you will make others' troubles your own; you will take unpopular positions on controversial issues. You might lose friends. You will follow this new lifestyle not because you must, but because you want to. And, by the way, in the process you'll have the time of your life!

If we want to light up this world for Jesus, the cost will be sacrifice, perhaps suffering. But look what it cost our Savior on a cross.

"Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me."

(Adapted from a sermon by Bill Bouknight.)

LITANY OF LOVE**By Amy Cooper**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "litany" in several ways. Among them, it says a "litany" is a series of petitions for use in church services or processions, usually recited by the clergy and responded to in a recurring formula by the people. You might say it is a set routine.

In the Old Testament, the Lord set down many routines, or litanies, for his people. The lives of God's people in the Old Testament revolved around the seasons and feasts laid down for them by the Lord. He himself often did things in a very specific manner. Even if his people could not see it, God is a God of order.

So it is no surprise that when Jesus entered his final days of preparation for sacrificing himself for us he was right in step with the seasons, feasts, and many old testament prophecies he had already or would soon fulfill. As he followed the Via Dolorosa, the way of the cross (literally, the way of grief or the way of sorrow—the painful way), he was following his Father's ordered way.

As we contemplate this painful way that our Savior took on our behalf, let us never be afraid of any pain or suffering we may experience on his behalf. Even pain and sorrow that may come our way, simply as a part of life, can remind us that, because Jesus was willing to follow God's litany of love, our sorrows here are temporary and our joy will one day be forever!

"When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 22:14-16).

NICE ALL THE TIME

By Bonnie Gouge

As Lent approached, I studied to prepare a Lenten devotional thought to share with our missionary staff in the country where my husband and I served as missionaries. As I read, I was reminded that Lent's traditions included not only fasting, but also giving alms to the poor. Wanting to practice what I preached, in addition to fasting, I would be more generous to the needy during Lent. This can be a challenge in an emerging nation like the one where we served because of the many professional beggars. To whom do I give? Is the need genuine? I prayed for discernment and shared more freely than I thought I could really afford.

One day during Lent, I was out and about with my teenage daughter, Veronica. As we left the car, a woman approached me asking for money. I can't remember her story, but I quickly returned to our automobile where I had left extra cash to share with the needy. Here was my chance to give alms and practice the ancient customs of Lent. The woman thanked me as I gave her the gift of cash. As we walked away, I explained to my daughter, "Since it is Lent, I am trying to be nicer to people." My teenage daughter quickly responded, "Mom, you should be nice all the time."

Yes, daughter, you were right! While Lent is a time set aside to give alms, we are called to love people all the time.

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:40).

THE PLACE OF HIS CHOOSING

By Ethan Goforth

If you live long enough, you are going to experience hardship. We're human, it just happens.

What makes someone unique or special is the fashion in which they get back up. God used the fallen nature of Israel to save the Gentiles and Jews. It was a purpose for the "desert." When we stumble into our desert, have we stopped to think, "what is the purpose of this?" I believe the desert is the place of the Lord's choosing; it's the only place we'll listen. There are no distractions! Truthfully, it's the holiest place we can go. Its only you and God. Psalm 27:5 "For HE WILL hide me in HIS shelter in the day of trouble; HE WILL conceal me under the cover of HIS tent; HE WILL lift me high upon the rock." I don't read or sense any hesitation in that, HE WILL. If God says it, it's done!

Then why do we respond typically with such doubt? How should we respond? Ps. 27:6 "and now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make a melody to the Lord." Everything happens, not just for a reason, but for instruction. Phil. 1:12-18.. "all that has happened to me has really served to advance the kingdom." Paul imprisoned wrote this and yet we are free and can't find joy in our own suffering? It's bigger than us. It's all about Jesus and the relationship we have with Him! When we find ourselves "in the desert" close your eyes and be still. Find the joy of your salvation. FIND HIM and HE WILL find you!!

MISPLACED LOVE—HUMANIZATION OF PETS

By Brian Nowitzki

I love animals. More specifically, I love dogs and donkeys. They make me smile. So, you can imagine when I went to work in the pet-care industry in an office that encouraged bringing dogs to work, I was in heaven. It was a great place to work and I enjoyed the atmosphere.

As I learned more, however, I became concerned. Phrases like, “furry family members” and “pet parents” are not used simply as fun terms of endearment. Rather, they are an intentional part of a multi-decade strategic and very successful marketing campaign aimed at the “humanization of pets,” that is, projecting human characteristics and feelings to pets and elevating their status to humanhood. Watch the commercials closely and the subtle messages will become very clear. The ongoing campaign is so successful that research has shown, with the exception of infants, financially stressed shoppers cut back on the quality of food for their family before compromising on their pets’ food. That’s a sad statement.

So, should we not love our pets? To the contrary, God created them and we should care for our animals’ needs (Proverbs 12:10). However, we need to remember their place in his created order (Genesis 1:24-28). Animals are not created in the image of God; we are. God said we are to rule over them and that’s a serious responsibility. But, within God’s created order, our priority needs to be other human beings. Within God’s created order, our greatest love needs to be reserved for other children of God.

Love and care for your animals. But, be careful not to misplace your love. We are much more valuable than they (Matthew 6:26).

STAR OF HOPE

By Robert Erny

When hope lay dead,
Tormented in the night wind of man's blind callousness to man,
Killed by the deadly fervor of harsh religion practiced
without love,
Then blazed across the sky the fire of a star, symbol of birth, the lighting of
man's day,
Star of Bethlehem, Star of Hope.

When Hope lay dead, bruised, bloody, battered by soldiers' fear and jostling
mocking crowd,
A lifeless corpse discarded, useless and abandoned in an empty cave.
Then burst out on the earth
White radiant from the tomb, eternal victory loosed upon the day,
Light of Easter, Star of Hope.

When hope lay dead
Buried in the rubble of ruined plans and cherished dreams all shattered,
Burnt out, charred, a cold and blackened ember; hopeless remains of love
that used to be,
Then crept into my heart
That warmth of Love divine, lighting my life, turning my winter into spring,
Christ of my life, Star of Hope.

WE STILL HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF WORSHIPING TOGETHER

By Bonnie Lashbrook

It is 7:45 Palm Sunday morning. I eyeball the clock trying to decide if I can make it to the 8:30 service or if I should take it easy and go at 9:30. Did I forget to set the alarm? I have a new friend who will be looking for me to sit with her at 8:30, so I hit the shower, dress, skip breakfast, and drive too fast to the early service. I know that I will be a few minutes late, but perhaps I can find her and slip in while the congregation is standing to sing.

As I approach the parking lot, I'm shocked to see only a few cars. As I pull in, I notice that the sanctuary windows are dark. Something feels off, but I walk over there and open the door. There is a group of about 50 men eating breakfast as they listen to someone speak. Saturday!

I walk back to the car feeling chagrined. Then the lesson hits me: how much I take the church for granted. It's always open on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. I've never shown up on one of those times and found the lights off and the doors locked. But is that day coming in America? Do we *really* value our freedom to worship together or is church attendance just a part of the fabric of our lives that we take for granted? Psalm 122:1 comes to my mind as I drive back home.

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1).

SELFLESS LOVE

By Carol Matthews

Lent is the time when our attention is drawn to the sacrifice that Jesus made for our redemption and the redemption of creation. There are many biblical passages that clearly reveal that the compelling motivation for Jesus' supreme sacrifice was love—a love that is indescribable and unfathomable.

One of the most intriguing demonstrations of the love of Jesus during his ministry was the time surrounding the encounter on the cross just prior to his death. It is astonishing that during some of the most intense moments of insatiable thirst and pain, the thoughts and words of Jesus were focused on the needs of others. Rather than being absorbed with his own inner experience, he was concerned for his mother's well-being, as well as the well-being of the thieves who hung by his side (John 19:25-27; Luke 23:42-43).

This is a vivid demonstration of selfless love to us all. In the lives of many Christians, it is not an easy task to focus on the needs of others, given the typical fast-paced demands of everyday life. How much more challenging is it to turn our attention to the needs of others when we are facing distress, pain, or sorrow.

To mirror Jesus means that we demonstrate love to others in the middle of unexpected twists and turns.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love....Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:9, 13).

HOW IMPORTANT IS BLOOD?**By Doug Adkins**

On a daily basis, we tend to take our blood for granted in our lives and in our bodies. It is always with us. But blood is LIFE! Without it, we can't survive.

I was working as a missionary at Tenwek Hospital in Kenya in the late 1980's. My main assignment was to serve as Director of Technical Services, repairing and maintaining the technical and medical equipment at the hospital with several African co-workers. Having grown up in Kenya, I had contracted malaria twice, which meant that I could never be a blood donor in the United States because the malaria continues to live within me. However, one day one of the nurses at Tenwek asked if I might be willing to donate a unit of my blood for a young African girl who needed my type and had already been exposed to malaria. I was happy to finally be able to qualify and did so willingly. It was gratifying to know that she was able to get better because I gave something of myself!

I have often thought of how I am healed of my sins because Jesus gave His blood on the cross. I only gave a small part of my blood for this girl. He gave ALL – even his life – to heal us. In Matthew 26:28, Jesus used a cup of wine to represent his blood "...of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." In Luke 22:20, Jesus said "this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you." Romans 3:23-26 states that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But by faith in Jesus, our sins are covered by His shed blood.

Praise God! Today I am so very thankful for the blood that Jesus gave for me.

JESUS, THE CURE**By Daryl Diddle**

Ever since we moved into our home nearly 20 years ago, our master bathroom sink has drained s l o w l y, if at all. Often it doesn't...stopping up with, well, all that nasty stuff that stops up bathroom sinks. So, four times a year, I descend to the crawl space to clean out the old iron pipes, always promising myself, "Next time, I'm putting in a new drain."

But I never have. For twenty years, I've treated the symptom, but never performed the cure.

That is, until a couple weeks ago. For a total investment of three hours and \$30.00, my bathroom sink drain will never stop up again. I was so happy, I filled the sink over and over, just to watch it drain, thinking to myself, "Why didn't I cure this years ago, instead of just managing the symptom?"

Since the Fall in Eden, humanity has suffered the sickness of a self-centered heart – the problem of wanting most what we want, and not what God wants, which caused us to lose relationship with Him. In His mercy, God set up a system of sacrifices with Moses and the Israelites that allowed that relationship to be restored. It treated a symptom, but did nothing to address the core issue of the self-centered heart.

Then, when the time was just right (by God's watch) God sent Jesus, His son, to die for our sins and to be raised to life again...to cure our self-centered hearts, making them God-centered, as God intended us to be from the beginning.

Aren't you glad you know Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, and the final cure?

"I will give you a new heart...and put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees..." Ezekiel 36:26-27.