

THE CROWD AROUND THE CROSS

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



WILMORE FREE METHODIST CHURCH
A COMMUNITY THAT REFLECTS JESUS' VISION AND VALUES

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders...and run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Hebrews 12:1).

According to Church tradition, today, Ash Wednesday, is a day set aside for Christ-followers to intentionally remember things. It's the first day of the season of Lent, of course, which itself calls us to remember the love and sacrifice of Jesus. In these days, we're called to remember our own sinfulness – the likes of which required God the Father to do something almost unbelievably drastic in order to save us. We're called to remember the great suffering of Jesus, equaled only by the great love of God for His lost world. We're called to remember the call of our loving God to live lives of holy love, modeled for us by Christ. We're also called to remember those around us who have yet to hear of Jesus – to pray for them and witness to them by word and deed.

There is at least one other thing we're called to remember, and that is the great company in which we stand as children of God. We celebrate those who's lives have crossed paths with ours in days past, who've invested in us, encouraged us, taught us and modeled the way of Jesus before us.

Our church family has been particularly blessed by having excellent examples of Godliness in our midst. We remember some of their words in this devotional guide. Some in these pages have moved on to other ministry purposes...some have moved on to their eternal home. But as we read their words from days past, let us remember them as part of the cloud of witnesses they are, and have been, to us...and let us give thanks. **(To help us in our recollection, we've included their original personal information. You'll notice too that those who are "still with us" have written the Sunday entries.)**

Daryl Diddle is Senior Pastor of the Wilmore Free Methodist Church.

THE GLORIOUS DECISION

The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again (Luke 24:7 NKJV).

There has always been a tension between the “cruelty of the cross” and the “love of God.” But life itself tells us that one cannot exist without the other. Someone has dared to say, “The cross is the foundation or the ground plan of the universe.” I will dare to step out of my area of expertise and say that there is an analogy within our physical bodies. During my wife’s battle with cancer we learned that the white blood cells watch for infection. When they find it they absorb it and in turn they are absorbed by the new cells. Thus death brings life. During the years that I enjoyed gardening, I learned that seeds have to die for life to spring forth. The mountain is bare of top soil so that the valley can live.

A great preacher one day took a boy into a cathedral. The boy looked up into the chancel and said, “Look, there is a cross up there.” The preacher pointed to the floor and answered that the aisles were in the form of a cross. He said, “There is a cross down here, too.”

You can go to Calvary and say, “Look, there is a cross up there, but there is a cross down here, too.”

Over the years I have watched many people die to self in order to live for Christ. It is a decision that must be made. It is painful but glorious!

Harry Stevenson is a retired United Methodist pastor. He and his wife, Ann, have lived in Wilmore since 1995.

Originally Published February 14, 2013

THE BATTLEGROUND

...for consider the one who endured such contradiction against himself by sinful ones, so that you do not grow weary, giving out in your souls (Hebrews 12:3, Rick Boyd translation).

The cross is the battleground between God's word to us and sin. God has spoken to us in Jesus within a world of contradiction. The cross is where our Pioneer perfected faith and brought it to its intended goal: everlasting joy (12:2). This is what God had in mind for humanity all along, and what He accomplished and made available through Jesus who was crowned with glory and honor and who leads us into that glory (2:5-10).

Christ's way is not the way of the world, and the contradiction is so intense that the battlefield was stained with the saving blood of the victor, the one who died for us, but who was also led up from the dead by the Father (13:20).

Paul refers to the message of the cross as foolishness to those who are being destroyed, but the power of God to us (1 Corinthians 1:18). We are the ones who are running the race with endurance, fixing our eyes on the victor (12:1-2).

When Jesus told His disciples of the impending battle and they resisted, He told them, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and be following me" (Matthew 16:21-24, Rick Boyd translation).

Though the world contradicts us, we must keep running the race that leads to the glory and honor of the children of God!

Rick and Jodi Boyd live in Wilmore and have been involved with the Wilmore Free Methodist Church for ten years. Jodi works at UK and Rick is an adjunct professor at Asbury Theological Seminary and a part-time professor at Asbury University.

Originally Published February 16, 2013

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus (John 1:35-37).

John the Baptist was a forerunner for Christ, whose job was to prepare Jesus' way. John's ministry was ordained by God and foretold in Malachi 3:1. His ministry was like a road sign arrow pointing people to Christ—their ultimate destination. Though John had several disciples, notice in John 1:35-37, that *only two* of his disciples sought Jesus once they heard John's testimony about Jesus Christ: "Look, the Lamb of God!" When John himself emphasized that Jesus was greater than he, why did only two and not more of his other disciples follow after Jesus, who was the Messiah and Savior? How unfortunate it was for those disciples who did not seek after Jesus but preferred to stay with their mentor, John the Baptist, and missed out on the blessed opportunity to learn from the true master who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Often times Christians can become so focused upon their denomination, ministry, or pastors that they forget whose followers they should truly be, especially when Christ himself is to be their final destination. We then form a personal group of our *own* disciples. Such attitudes can often go unnoticed. We should, therefore, be reminded that we too are followers of Christ and are only a road sign leading others to Jesus, not to ourselves.

So-Young Chen is an adjunct faculty member at Asbury Theological Seminary, and a happy wife of Tony and blessed mommy of Joshua Chen.

Originally Published March 25, 2013

GETHSEMANE: THE PLACE OF PRESSING

*Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane
...(Matthew 26:36 KJV).*

The name Gethsemane means “oil press, a place for squeezing the oil from olives.” By its very nature this is a place of pressure and separation. Oil came not from the olives without a great deal of pressure as they were laid between two flat stones, one on bottom and a heavier one on top. So it was that frightful night when Jesus, feeling the agony of being crushed by taking on the sins of the world, was pressed till “...his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:44).

It was there Jesus took on the pressure of our sins between the stone of sins past underneath Him and stone of future sins above Him, being crushed as the olive in order to produce a healing oil. This was the beginning of the road to Calvary. Jesus knew that a substitute must be fully identified, that for which it will substitute. It was His condition for ours: His righteousness for our wickedness. His faithfulness for our unfaithfulness. His grace for our greed. His love for our hatred. His mercy for our vengeance. His truth for our lies. His justice for our injustice. His obedience for our disobedience. His compassion for our apathy. His meekness for our pride. It was all laid on Him.

The sorrow and agony of Gethsemane that was pressed on Jesus in the garden was indeed pressed out on the cross. May we be as willing to enter Gethsemane, a little farther, that we may be pressed to the point of saying, “...nevertheless not my will, but thine be done” (Luke 22:42 KJV).

Johnson Cannon is married to Amy Cannon. They reside in Lexington, Kentucky, with their five children.

Originally Published April 5, 2012—Maundy Thursday

TEARS OF GRATITUDE

*. . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross. . . .
(Hebrews 12:2).*

I cannot forget the tears of a young Christian woman in southern Japan. We were at a church youth gathering, standing in a half-circle, and Pastor Aihara was coming around with a life-size cross, helping each of us to lay the cross on our shoulder and carry it a few steps.

I had my camera in hand, ready for some good photo moments, when I realized something was happening beside me. Miki stood there quietly with tears in her eyes, her gaze fixed on the young man in front of us carrying the cross.

Miki's tears startled me into reality. Suddenly I was transported back to that Friday in Jerusalem 2000 years ago when Jesus carried His own cross—the cross He would soon be crucified on, for the forgiveness of my sin and yours, for the salvation of all who believe.

Miki's tears made me wonder if I had ever felt the weight and glory of the cross of Christ like she seemed to be feeling it at that moment. Her tears conveyed a profound gratitude for the old rugged cross Jesus so lovingly and willingly bore for her. A longing stirred in my heart for a deeper communion with Him, too.

After the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples, "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22). I'm thankful we live "on this side of the cross" of our resurrected Lord, and grateful to join with you in offering Him our heartfelt, joy-filled praise and thanks for all He has done for us.

Zonia Mitchell is an Asbury Theological Seminary student in the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism.

Originally Published March 19, 2013

GOD'S UNFATHOMABLE LOVE AND SACRIFICE

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16 NKJV).

Most intriguing in all the world is God's amazing love for His creation. Man was created flawlessly, put in a perfect environment, and even enjoyed walks with His Creator during the day's cool times. Yet, when temptation came, Adam and Eve chose to disobey their Creator and Friend.

Down through history, no matter what magnificent miracles God did, man readily choose gross sin over obedience to God. Man boldly insulted and rejected God.

Sinful man is like a disease-producing virus—destructive and undesirable. Who could love such a being? Yet, God unreservedly loved man. He didn't give up. God is infinite and unfathomably great. We are like protozoa in comparison.

Yet, though man was incredibly minute, extremely sinful, and hateful, Jesus willingly humbled Himself to the lowest degree. He entered this world to offer Himself for painful persecution and flogging. And most puzzling of all, Jesus, with God's complete approval, came to die in our place. Wow! With His unimaginable total self-sacrifice, He proved His marvelous, undying love for every person, including you and me. He redeemed us! He gives us eternal life. How indebted we are! We will live forever with God who loves us so! Oh, how blessed we are! Oh, what joy! How we should praise Him!

Dennis Probst and his wife, Priscilla, are the happy parents of four and grandparents of six. They recently retired after nearly 39 years of missionary service in Japan.

Originally Published March 17, 2013

LESSONS IN GODLY LEADERSHIP

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:3-5 ESV).

My father taught me many lessons in Godly leadership. One such lesson involved focusing less on trying to personally impress my supervisor and more on trying to help my subordinates succeed. “Don’t worry about trying to make yourself look good,” my father would say. “Take care of the people under your responsibility, and you will be taken care of in the process.” In this my father applied his faith.

The skeptic might accuse my father of having a self-serving, ulterior motive: to achieve his own success. In response to such accusation my father might say, “Of course I want to do well to provide for my family and myself. But the people who work for me weren’t born yesterday. They will know if my care for them is insincere. They will see right through it if it is selfish and self-serving.”

While Jesus had every right to take care of himself, He chose instead to do the will of His Father and humble himself for the benefit of those who would follow. God exalted Jesus as the leader of all leaders, that all could see and know God’s approval of Jesus’ way.

In this season of Lent, in what way is God calling you to humble yourself for the benefit of another or others?

Reed Wilbanks is married to Anne Bradley Wilbanks. They live in Wilmore, Kentucky, where Reed serves as Associate Pastor of Wilmore Free Methodist Church.

Originally Published March 3, 2013

WALKING WHERE JESUS WALKED

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24 ESV).

Peter urges the Christians to imitate Jesus' obedience to the Father and perseverance in suffering by mentioning Christ's righteous suffering (2:21-24). Peter leads his readers back to the road of Calvary where Jesus walked and to the place under the wooden cross where Jesus was hung. This historical, saving reality becomes the ultimate model for all saved Christians today. We may meditate on this verse by asking two questions. First, what has Jesus accomplished? Jesus hung on the tree (cf. Deuteronomy 21:23) not for *His* own sin but rather, He bore *our* sins in His body (Isaiah 53:4). While Peter leads us to Jesus' cross, we may see the innocent Jesus on the cross, suffering the burden of our sins. Indeed, Christ did this for us! Second, what is the result/purpose of Jesus' crucifixion? Those who are in Him may die to sin and *live* to righteousness (cf. Romans 6:3-5). Christians, having been healed by His wounds (Isaiah 53:5), now have such a new life they are able to live a righteous life with obedience and perseverance to God in this world, like their Lord Christ.

Jesus' cross is *not* a Christian religious decoration. It is what Christ's followers should live *by* and what they should live *out*. Suffering for righteousness is not meaningless or for penance. Rather, it is what our Lord did. It is the Christ-like life that Christians should live out in this sinful world. Indeed, it reflects a true Christian's Christ-converted life.

Caleb Wang is a student in the Biblical Studies PhD program at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is married to Aurora, and they have a 10-year-old son, Ian. This is their fifth year in WFMC.

Originally Published March 2, 2012

WHAT WILL I GIVE UP?

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," He said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21).

For most of my life, I've looked down on the man in this story. How could he be so foolish as to turn away from eternal life in favor of earthly riches and comfort?

"I would never make such an unwise choice," I thought.

Now I'm not so sure. When I owned no property, had nothing much to sell or give away, and held no expectation of ever owning much, it seemed relatively easy to leave all and follow Jesus.

But if Jesus confronted me today with such a demand, would I be willing to sell everything and give it to the poor in order to follow Jesus and find eternal life? Or would I, like that young man, turn away crestfallen?

Lent is about giving up something for Jesus for forty days, about living "spare, plain, or meager" for a few weeks, about identifying with Jesus as He journeys to the cross. What Jesus asks of us is a lifetime of identification with Him, a lifetime of devoting everything to Him and gaining eternal life in return.

Am I up to it? Are you?

**"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep
to gain what he cannot lose."**

-Jim Elliott

Shirley McMillan, an Indiana native, has lived in Wilmore since 1999 and is a 12-year member of WFMC. She serves on the WFMC World Mission Team and leads a writers group at the Senior Community Center at Wesley Village.

Originally Published April 14, 2012

FANTASTIC SEEKING

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”... “[W]here I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:21, 26 ESV).

John narrates Palm Sunday with several vignettes (12:1-15). What makes these vignettes intriguing is John’s highlighting of his characters’ fantasies. Judas feigned moral outrage over spilt perfume as a ruse for his thievery (12:6). The chief priests wanted to murder a man who had been miraculously raised from the dead, as well as the One who miraculously raised him (12:9-10). Next, a crowd waving palm branches greets Jesus entering Jerusalem in a docile manner. (12:12-15). The palm branch was the Jewish national symbol for their previously successful Maccabean rebellion that secured their national independence for the first time in several hundred years. The crowd crowned Jesus as king over their fantasy of achieving independence from Rome.

John’s use of fantasy highlights the duplicitous nature and ulterior motives of each of these parties seeking out Jesus. Judas worked for Jesus to steal from Him. The chief priests wanted to work Jesus over, not to defend the crowds, but to defend their popularity. The crowd eagerly greeted Jesus as their king, insofar as He would be *their* mascot for *their* kingdom.

Then Jesus is told that Greeks are seeking Him, but their motives are unknown (12:20-22). Jesus responds rather pointedly: His true followers would seek to be His servants, not seek Him to serve their lustful fantasies (12:25-26). To truly serve Jesus is to follow Him, to be where He is. Where was He going but to sacrifice Himself for the world? Why do you seek Jesus?

William Daniel is an Asbury Theological Seminary student seeking to serve Jesus in the Navy chaplaincy. He and his wife, Rebekah, have three “authentically awesome” children: Annesley, Amie, and Alister.

Originally Published April 1, 2012—Palm Sunday

JESUS IS HERE

If you had been here, my brother would not have died (John 11: 21, 32).

We are familiar with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, this little family who were some of Jesus' closest friends. Whenever Jesus came to Jerusalem, He and His disciples would often stay with them. Now we find Mary and Martha grieving over the death of their brother. Perhaps part of their grief was a disappointment that Jesus did not come to heal Lazarus. They had sent for Him but He did not come. Why did Jesus, who had healed so many, allow Lazarus to die?

Is something causing me to grieve today? Am I struggling with some puzzling concern? Am I disappointed with Jesus? Why does He not fix my situation? Why did He let it happen?

Mary and Martha were mistaken. Jesus **was** there. In His spirit He had been there throughout Lazarus' illness. He grieved with them; He even shed tears. He had a purpose in allowing Lazarus to die. His purpose was to raise Lazarus from the dead, bringing glory to God and even greater good to the family.

So, too, Jesus is here right now in the crisis I am facing, the struggle I am having. There is a purpose in it. Jesus, in His own time, will cry out, *Lazarus, Come forth*. He will deliver me from the power of death or bondage. God will be glorified and my life will be richer and more Christ-like because of what I face today.

Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? (John 11:40)

LORD, I BELIEVE.

Robert Erny was born of missionary parents in China. He and his wife served with One Mission Society (then called OMS International) in Hong Kong, Indonesia and OMS headquarters for more than forty years.

Originally Published February 28, 2012

LENT AND DELIGHT

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled (Mark 6:41-42 NRSV).

It occurred to me recently that the story of Jesus' feeding the multitude is not only about His power and compassion, but also about Jesus' ability to accomplish much with little.

If we imagine a situation where Jesus had, instead of five loaves and two fish, let's say 500 loaves and 200 fish, what would have happened then? Does this thought-experiment make us a little uneasy? Jesus changes people's dearth into abundance, but what can he do with our abundance? Does this show not only that God makes abundance out of scarcity, but that He prefers it?

How can God do much with our lives when we live in such luxury? When we have so much bread and so many fish that they regularly spoil in our refrigerators? Can wisdom truly speak to us when we have so much information? Can we experience deep excitement when we are entertained at every turn? Are our lives often too full to be meaningful?

Lent is thus a good opportunity to learn to be satisfied with less, so that we can enjoy it more. A few things experienced in depth matter more than a million things scratched on the surface. One deep love is more than a dozen flirts. One day on the doorstep of God's house more than thousands elsewhere.

Josef Sykora and his wife, Lynette, are Free Methodist missionaries to Europe. They have two sons, Simon and Luke. They live in Bratislava, Slovakia, where Josef pastors a church. Lynette oversees the member care for FM missionaries on the continent.

Originally Published March 5, 2012

FOLLOWING JESUS TO JERUSALEM

When the days were approaching for His ascension, He set His face toward Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51 ESV).

I found myself in a conversation about Ramadan with my majority background neighbor. She said, “It’s like when Christians give up chocolate.” “Lent?” I asked. I then joyfully explained that it’s not just about giving up chocolate, but about making room to hear Jesus’ voice and let Him call you into deeper relationship with Him. “You hear His voice,” she asked? Her question was steeped in longing that her voice could not hide.

As we approach Lent, are we filled with that same longing to hear His voice and to let His word have His way in us? Are we ready to see what it truly means that Jesus “set His face toward Jerusalem” and calls us to do the same? Only love could have motivated Jesus to draw closer to Jerusalem. He knew what would come; He knew the demands of love. Only love could have empowered Jesus to give of Himself to those who would soon reject Him. Only love could help Him hold His tongue and entrust Himself to the One who would ultimately defend Him.

As we journey with Jesus through this season of Lent, let us draw near. Let us cry out for God to do what only He can do, and let His love set our faces toward Jerusalem. Let us follow Jesus’ way of wholehearted abandonment. Let us hear Him say, “I held nothing back and I hold nothing back.” Let these compelling words win our hearts again. May we do what it takes to give Jesus time and space to speak, so that we can follow Him to the cross, stay with Him there, and learn how to live out love amidst a hurting world.

Megan Weber is a graduate of Asbury University (07). She and her husband, Dustin, are currently serving in the Middle East with Free Methodist World Missions.

Originally Published March 29, 2012

WHAT IS IT WITH “LOVES”?

[Jesus] took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me” (Matthew 26:37-38).

My knowledge of the season of Lent as a child was very limited. I would hear the kids at my public school ask other kids, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Usually a dejected response followed: “Sweets.” The “Lenten question” came up each year. I began thinking, “Maybe I should give up something. Sports? No. Sweets? Too general. I need something specific that I can do without!” My childish ways of thinking saturated my minuscule desire to sacrifice a “love” to honor the Lord in the Lenten season.

The Garden of Gethsemane resonates highly with me. I can see myself as a disciple sleeping instead of keeping watch, unprepared for Jesus’ arrest. What would have happened if the disciples had kept watch and prayed? Would it have made a difference? Instead of finding the disciples sleeping, what if Jesus heard their prayers in the midst of His agony?

Multiple times in every day, we have opportunities to give up one our “loves” to do something for Jesus. While this is noble, I’m pretty sure it’s not what Jesus had in mind for us because we could spend our whole lives choosing our mini sacrifices. We all have orientations toward things we love. Typically these point to ourselves. Encountering Jesus transforms us, including what we are oriented toward. My problem is not my “loves”—it’s me. This season, may the One who suffered and died transform us, making it possible for us to supremely love our greatest Lover.

John-David Van Valin is a fourth year Master of Divinity student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He enjoys spending time with his wife, Brianna, who is a senior at Asbury University.

Originally Published March 26, 2012

PREPARE

“The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial” (Matthew 26:11-12).

This story is repeated in all four Gospels, appearing at different points in the narrative, and with differing emphases. Matthew’s account is similar to Mark’s, but with a fuller explanation of the events transpiring. In Matthew’s account, the woman is unnamed.

The woman joins a list of New Testament figures who were empowered by the Holy Spirit to understand the nature of the Suffering Servant. Simeon prophesied Mary’s pain at Jesus’ circumcision while the Wise Men brought the infant King myrrh, a spice commonly used for burial. This woman makes no great confession as to Jesus’ nature as Peter did, yet she understands that Jesus must go to Jerusalem and suffer, something Peter could not comprehend beforehand.

While reflecting on her act of anointing Jesus, we come to the realization that we cannot do the same. We cannot prepare His body for the pain and death He would go through to save us. However, we can prepare for something the woman could not. We can prepare for the glorious return of Christ! Are we, as the body of Christ, preparing not only ourselves, but the world for His return? Are we reaching out to the poor who are with us? The sick? The oppressed? As we reflect on Lent and Holy Week, let us not forget that preparation comes in many different forms.

Steven Lane is an MA student in Theological Studies and Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and is a 2007 graduate of Asbury University. He and his wife, Mandi, have two boys, Isaac and Aiden.

Originally Published April 15, 2011

SELFLESS IN AGONY

“For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them.... I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”(John 17:8-9a, 15, 20-21ESV).

The night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed for all who believed and all would believe in Him. Though His soul was “sorrowful, even to death” (Mark 14:34), He chose to beseech His Father to protect us, and to use us to reveal Himself to the world. What a beautiful example of selflessness! Amidst His agony, Jesus had two great concerns: His believers, and His Father’s glory. What is paramount in our minds in times of trouble? Do we focus solely on our needs, or do we take time to care for others? Do we pity ourselves, or do we ask God to accomplish His will through us? Though Jesus also prayed that night “remove this cup from me,” He added, “not my will, but your will be done.” (Luke 22:42) Let us follow his example, supplicating for others as well as for ourselves, and, ultimately, desiring God’s will for our lives.

Toni Louise Toadvine is a senior music education major at Asbury University. She hopes to share both God’s love and her love of music with her future students.

Originally Published March 19, 2011

UNLIKELY BLESSING

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted
(Matthew 5:4).*

This is a statement that on the surface of it seems almost absurd. How could you call someone who is mourning “blessed”? What could Jesus mean by this? How does this fit with Paul’s command in Philippians 4:4? He says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” How can we rejoice and be mournful at the same time? However, this was apparently not a problem for Paul because he says in 2 Corinthians 6:10 that he is “...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing....” Jesus is saying here that we are blessed if we mourn over two things, mourning over our own sin, and mourning over sin in the world (Psalm 51:17). Christians are those who see how much sin has been a part of their lives and they grieve. They also look at the world, which is under the power of sin, greed and corruption, and they grieve.

Do we mourn over sin? Perhaps we would feel ashamed if we got caught in sin, but do we mourn over it? Do we see it affecting our relationship with God? Jesus here says a person is blessed if he/she has that sense of mourning over sin. But there is a promise here as well. God’s presence is with us as we mourn over sin. He comforts us in our need. Our greatest comfort is the fact that Jesus died so that our sins can be forgiven. So, even as we mourn our sin, we can rejoice over forgiveness! Not only do we experience a measure of comfort and joy in this life, but we know that when Christ returns we will be ultimately comforted.

Ryan Cook is a student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is married to his lovely bride, Ashley, and they have two children.

Originally Published March 22, 2011

VICTORIOUS LIVING POWER

That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms... (Ephesians 1:19-20).

It was fortunate that we were only soaked with water and not with eggs and flour as we darted from building to building to get the paper work for our visas in Ecuador. Bob and I were clueless that this was “Carnival” week when people act like little devils just before Lent when behavioral change was expected in preparation for Holy Week.

During Holy Week there were daily processions carrying different statutes of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the disciples. Lines of people waited to make confessions and to kiss the feet of a statue of Jesus. They observed many “Don’ts” like no alcohol, no swearing, no chewing gum, no kicking a ball, no sewing, no washing clothes, no loud music, etc. But, on Easter Sunday, Jesus was placed back on the cross until the following year and life returned to normal with NO change of heart.

What does my life look like after I have observed Lent and Holy Week? Is the power of the resurrection at work in my life? Do others know that Jesus is alive by my daily life?

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). “...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Mary Sutherland and her husband, Robert, served with One Mission Society in Colombia, Spain, and Ecuador for 35 years. Since Bob’s death in 1998, Mary continues a correspondence ministry.

Originally Published February 13, 2013—Ash Wednesday

BRIDGING THE GAP

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, ...yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—(Colossians 1:19, 22 NAS).

As Lent approaches, our hearts are filled with sweet sorrow. The weight of reality reminds us of our desperate need for a Savior. God in His unsurpassed love and wisdom sent the One who could mediate for us with the Father.

Jesus is God's only begotten son. As C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man makes is not man." So man is only a creature – a creation of God. Yet God loves us so much that He limited Himself by sending Jesus in the flesh. This kenosis or self-emptying of God allows us a glimpse into the nature of God. God—who is omnipotent and self-sufficient— desires a personal relationship with us so much that He humbled Himself, taking on flesh in order to invite us into relationship with Him.

Christ lived as we are intended to live, a life of love, discipline, prayer, and perfection. Jesus' example allows us to be made new as we imitate and walk with Him. The innocent blood He shed washes away our sin. "By His wounds we are healed" Isaiah 53:5. Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth so that we may become like Him. May we give thanks today to Christ—the One who made possible our adoption as children of God.

Audra Goodnight is a Philosophy Major at Asbury University with an Equine and Latin double Minor. She says it has been her joy and privilege to serve the Lord and support the FM Church in Burundi, Africa and India. She enjoys playing violin and working with horses at the Equine Center.

Originally Published April 11, 2011

SENSORY STORYTELLING

While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume over his head (Mark 14:3b NLT).

The anointing of Jesus was an extraordinary event. In the Old Testament anointing was understood to be God's mark on a person and was done by God through a servant of God, a king or priest, or prophet. Here is an unnamed woman in a leper's home doing something that is normally reserved for a king or priest. She dared to break the norms of her society when she lavishly used up what cost her a year's worth of income. By doing so she declared Jesus the Messiah, the anointed one, something that only a handful of other people had done before. She acknowledged that Jesus must suffer, something that not even the disciples had accepted. Some were indignant that she had wasted this much precious perfume, a substance imported from Tibet or China in an alabaster jar that was made from calcite or onyx that would have been mined from a cave.

An exquisite gift indeed. The woman did three things in this simple yet extravagant act: she declared Jesus Messiah; she acknowledged Jesus' impending suffering; and she prepared Jesus to endure suffering with this reminder of her honoring Him and prepare His body for burial. This woman told the story of Jesus in the days leading up to the crucifixion. How can I extravagantly tell the story of Jesus in my day?

Dave Grant is in his final semester of the M.Div. program at Asbury Theological Seminary and is seeking commissioning in the Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Originally Published March 24, 2011

OPPORTUNITY TO FOCUS

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:5-6 ESV).

Perhaps this is the first year you are observing Lent. For my wife, Valerie, and me, it is! Growing up in a tradition where Lent was not observed, we did not realize what a spiritually beneficial discipline we were missing. I want to share why we are excited to be observing this season with you.

I would sum up my understanding of Lent with the word *preparation*. To benefit from the Lenten season, we need to ask ourselves what this preparation will mean for us. It meant a great deal for Jesus as He fasted in the wilderness. For someone to be effective in finishing any goal or task, his/her mind has to be focused in preparation. As we read in Romans 8:5-6, our spiritual lives depend on a right mindset. If we focus only on carnal concerns, spiritual death is our sure end. However, focusing our mind on the Spirit brings life and peace. Lent affords you the opportunity to focus your mind in preparation for forty days—not just a solitary moment in prayer. When we choose to go without something we desire during this time, our mind should immediately be reminded of the Spirit when we sense an urge for that particular want. Thinking this way brings life and peace where there would otherwise be none. So what will this Lenten season be like for you—a customary preparation for Easter, or a life-changing preparation for holiness and spiritual vitality?

Joshua Ratliff has been married to Valerie for just over a year now. They moved to Wilmore in fall, 2010, for Josh to pursue an M.A. in Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Originally Published March 25, 2011

GOD AS GARDENER

“A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7: 18-20).

As Christians, we know that we are called to bear good fruit. We admire those whose lives are a blessing to those around them. Frankly, we wonder how they do it! We forget that fruit cannot grow without nourishment. That nourishment comes from our faith in Christ through the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works to transform us from a seed into a beautiful creation, a bountiful crop for God. One of the Church fathers reminds us, “Christ is the gardener who tends the soul so that it may produce the good fruits of the Spirit. His gardening tool is the cross and He uses it to break up the hard soil of the arid soul to prepare it and plant in it the Holy Spirit’s garden of delights ... fruits sweet and pleasing to God.”

Where are you receiving nourishment? Maybe you feel like you are on your own, so you follow the ways of the world around you, yet find that you are bearing no fruit. Embrace the nourishing wellspring that comes in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you through Scripture and prayer. Allow Christ to “break up the hard soil” in your soul. Allow Him to lead you through the life you live – from the small frustrations to the huge hurts. Then good fruits will become evident in your life, fruits sweet and pleasing to God: actions and words that build up the church and provide hope to a dying world.

Scott Grow is a student in his final semester at Asbury Theological Seminary. His wife, Camille, has worked for Starbucks Coffee Company for four years. They hope to return to Texas this May to serve in youth ministry.

Originally Published March 28, 2011

I NEVER SAW HIM BEFORE

Then he [Peter] began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man" (Matthew 26:74 ESV).

I cannot help but see a portion of truth in these words of Peter, "I do not know the man." Consider the events of this night. Peter had told Jesus that no matter what, even if it meant death, he would not deny Jesus. Then at the betrayal of Jesus he seems to keep his words as he risks death, cutting off Malchus' ear (John 18:10) in an attempt to free Jesus by force. But Jesus stopped him.

Peter viewed Jesus as the hoped-for Jewish Messiah who would build a great empire here on earth and overthrow the Romans, and so he was ready to fight and die for this. This vision of the Messiah was the Jesus he had convinced himself he knew. Though he knew Jesus, having lived with him for three years, he never understood Jesus. He would not accept that Jesus as the Messiah must suffer (Matthew 16:21-23). Therefore, when these events began to unfold and the picture of the Messiah that Peter desired failed, there was no way Peter could stand with Jesus; he really did not know the man, the true Messiah.

If we want to be able to stand with Jesus, we each must ask ourselves if we know Jesus or are holding on to our own ideas of who we want Him to be. He wants nothing more than for us to truly know Him and be in relationship with Him.

Mark Landerholm is a 2007 graduate of Asbury University and a recent graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary. He has a deep love for missions and discipleship. He currently works at Kroger's and Asbury University.

Originally Published March 30, 2011

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE RISEN LORD

“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Jesus appeared to several of His followers after His resurrection with words that may have shaped their—and even Paul’s—understanding of the resurrection. John 20:10-31 records three of the encounters of Jesus with His followers after He was raised. He first appeared to Mary Magdalene who was grieving the death of her Teacher. Her grief was so deep that she did not immediately recognize Jesus but was willing to pour out her heart to this “stranger” who asked her, “Why are you weeping?” Her grief was turned to comfort upon realizing that Jesus was raised.

Hours later, Jesus appeared to His disciples who, perhaps for fear and uncertainty of what might befall them after Jesus’ death, are not able to meet together openly. The Lord appeared to them during this meeting with a message of peace and a fulfillment of His earlier promise of the Holy Spirit. We know from Acts that their fear was replaced with courage because of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

Finally, Jesus appeared to Thomas who initially doubted the reports of the other disciples. His doubts were replaced with faith when he encountered the Risen Lord who said, “Blessed are they who did not see, yet believed.”

Each of Jesus’ disciples may have had his own story to tell about the resurrection—grief replaced with comfort, fear replaced with courage, and doubts replaced with faith. But they all have one thing in common—an encounter with the Risen Lord that made all these possible!

Samson Uytanlet is a faculty-in-training of Biblical Seminary of the Philippines. He is presently pursuing his Ph.D. in New Testament with London School of Theology. His wife is Juliet.

Originally Published April 3, 2011

INTIMATE DINNER

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20 RSV).

The Jesus who entered Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, Who took a basin and a towel, and washed His disciples' feet, is the One who longs for us to open the door of our hearts and to invite Him in.

God respects the free will He has given us. He respects our personhood. He does not bang on the door of our hearts nor force entrance. Instead He says, "I stand at the door and knock."

The promise continues, "[I]f any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and eat with him, and he with me." Jesus not only wants to come into our hearts, He wants to have fellowship with us. He wants to sit down and dine with us, one-on-one, and share heart-to-heart. In many cultures eating with another is a special time to get to know someone. Jesus wants to spend time with us. That's how we grow in our relationship with Him!

Dr. Hugh Anderson said, "God visits us very often, but for the most part we are not at home."

Have you opened the door of your heart and received Him as Savior? Do you fellowship with Him as a trusted Friend?

Fran Ditto, and her husband, Tom, a retired United Methodist minister, have enjoyed living at Wesley Village for four years.

Originally Published April 16, 2011

THE CROSS STRAIGHTENED ME OUT

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

A pastor friend of mine served a church just a few miles from Ocean City, N. J. The church building was a beautiful, white classic style colonial structure set square in the middle of a bustling county seat community. My wife, Anna, and I have worshiped there many times. The building and its tall, stately, steeple and cross had been ravaged by the seashore weather for many years. The cross had actually begun to lean precariously the way of the prevailing wind.

A member of the church, whom the pastor had counseled many times about his dissolute life, agreed to straighten the cross. It was a long climb and it was not to the man's liking. Some townspeople, including the pastor, watched as the man reached the cross. He set to work and it was not long before this experienced builder set the cross straight and secured it. Then something mysterious happened. With his tools now in his belt, he stood there completely still for what seemed an eternity. Then he began the descent.

When he reached the ground he walked straight to the pastor and with tears in his eyes he said, "Something happened to me up there. I began to think of the mess I've made out of my life. I remembered what you've shared with me and I gave my life to Christ. I went up there to straighten out the cross and the cross straightened me out!"

During this Lenten period let the cross do a work in you.

Harry Stevenson is a retired United Methodist Pastor. He and his wife of 56 years live in Wilmore.

Originally Published April 20, 2011

JOIN THE CROWD

Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him" (Mark 15:12-13 NRSV)!

It's always easier to point fingers at someone else. As the oldest sibling I quickly became an expert at this. It was easier to blame my brother or sister, than accept responsibility and punishment for myself. We're also prone to look on the decisions of those in the past and think that if we were in their position we would have acted differently. For a long time I read this passage with that mentality. After all, what were they thinking? The crowds that had long supported and praised Jesus had turned against him in an instant. How dare they yell out, "Crucify him!" They were rejecting their own Messiah and sentencing him to death!

So who was responsible for the death of Jesus? Again, it's easy to point fingers. We could say the crowd was responsible, or Pilot, or the Jewish religious leaders. But what about the disciples? Where were they? Everyone had abandoned Jesus. It's easy to think that if you or I were in the position of the crowds or the disciples, we would not have turned our backs on Jesus. But the truth is, we have all shouted, "Crucify him!" many times in our lives. Any time we sin and willfully go against God's will, we are turning our backs and adding our cries of betrayal and rejection to the crowd. But praise Jesus that despite our rejection, he suffered and died, and was raised to life for us! He calls each of us to abandon our cries of rejection, and instead turn to Him in acceptance of His way day after day, in every thought, word, and deed.

Andrew Bentz is a first year student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Ashley, moved to Kentucky from Spring Arbor, MI in July 2010.

Originally Published March 21, 2011

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

And he said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robbers' den" (Matthew 21:13).

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He first focused on restoring the Temple's spiritual function—to be a house of prayer. However, at that time, the activities of selling, buying, and exchanging goods for the purpose of offering worship to God became transactions promoting a business for profit. Therefore Jesus indignantly expelled all the merchants from the temple that was intended to be place of prayer for all. Unfortunately, even though the Temple was a place filled with many people (crowded traffic), it was lacking genuine worship and sincere prayers. There were no true heartfelt praises to God. Thus Jesus' affront highlighted what the people were oblivious to regarding the Temple's function.

Today churches can easily become busy with numerous activities and events, drawing many people in and out of their buildings, but we should remember that the essential function of the church is prayer and worship. Christians need to learn to be still before the Lord, to hear His words through the still small voice of the Holy Spirit in our prayers because throughout our day we are surrounded by the distractions and opinions of the world. Our busyness or crowdedness at church can overlook the key aspect of enjoying true fellowship with our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. But through the believers' unceasing prayers and wholehearted praises to God, we can uphold a "cleansed" church to become that House of Prayer!

So-Young Chen is the wife of Tony and mother of Joshua Chen.

Originally Published March 23, 2011

THE UPPER ROOM

And He, [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment;... (John 16:8 NASB).

Many years ago, my father, C. Hoge Hockensmith, was preaching in East Africa to a tribe who was hearing the gospel for the first time. With the help of a translator, the people were told of the Loving Creator who fulfilled His promise to a fallen race by sending His Son to save us from our sin. Suddenly the whole group fell on their faces on the ground with loud groans, weeping, and wailing. Shocked, my father turned and asked the interpreter what was going on. "Pas-tore," the man exclaimed, "Dey are re-pent-ing!"

During this season, let us train our eyes on the cross and open ourselves up fully to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Let's ask Him for our hearing to be restored so that the story of redemption is vivid and fresh again, like it was to the tribespeople. While loud weeping and wailing is not really necessary, we will surely experience grief as we become aware of the things in our lives that are grieving the Lord. This is not remorse and/or groveling in one's failures but a request for true repentance to return more fully into the healing paths of righteousness and renewal.

"Breathe on me, Holy Spirit of God,
Breathe on me, and fill me anew,
Breathe on me, Holy Spirit of God,
To love what You love and to do what You do."
—John Michael Talbot

Janette Reeves directs a life transition coaching/mentoring ministry in Greenville, SC. She visits WFMC with her parents, Hoge and Nora Hockensmith, of Wesley Village, Wilmore.

Originally Published February 26, 2012

HAPPY NEW YEAR AT EASTER

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year"(Exodus 12:1-2).

The Passover feast was initiated by God for His people. He said, "This month is to be the first month of your year." Just as God set a new timeline for Israel, He calls us to align our calendar to His salvation in humble and joyous submission. Because of sin, God instituted a salvation calendar that was blended with, yet took precedence over, His creation calendar set at the beginning of time. Easter comes first. That's where the timing of our lives begins. When we set the timing of our lives to God's calendar, we are saved. In God's salvation, our life has purpose and hope. During Lent we ask, "To what time is my clock adjusted? Is my timing off? Is it adjusted to Easter?"

All the elements in the Passover Feast are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the blood sacrifice for our sins, the bread we break in fellowship with others, the joy we celebrate at deliverance from sin and Satan, and the stories we tell as we journey toward our heavenly city. The death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ are the paramount events in human history, signifying when real life begins. So, at the start of your day, your week, your month, and your year, align your schedule to God's gracious salvation. Celebrate His death and resurrection. Know His goodness and salvation. Avoid the chaos of hurry and the dullness of hopelessness. Hell, Satan, and death are defeated. New life begins.

Daniel Owsley grew up in São Paulo, Brazil, son of missionaries, Clarence and Elizabeth Owsley. Dan met his wife, Hope, while studying at Asbury Theological Seminary. They were married in 1985 in the Wilmore FMC. They have served as missionaries in Brazil since 1988. They have four adult sons.

Originally Published April 3, 2012

GOD'S LAMB—OUR LAMB

...Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing (Revelation 5:12).

A remarkable 160-foot mural adorns the interior of the Wesley Chapel foyer at Houghton College. Painted in the 1960s by the Rev. H. Willard Ortlip assisted by his wife, Aimee Ortlip, it portrays much of the biblical record from creation to the triumphant revelation of Christ. A first-time viewer is struck by the frequency of the appearance of a lamb.

God taught the first family about redemption. How else did Abel know to sacrifice a lamb?

A Hebrew family in the wilderness was taught by Moses, speaking for God, to select a perfect lamb from the flock, setting it apart to be taken care of for four days before it was sacrificed. What affection and identification must have developed. Then the father slaughtered the now-beloved lamb at twilight. This was Passover, the lamb's blood used to mark each household's door (Exodus 12:3-11).

Millennia later, as Jesus walked by, "Look!" announced John the Baptist. "There is the Lamb of God" (John 1:37 NLT)! In explaining the crucifixion, Paul declared, "...Christ our Passover [Lamb] is sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7 KJV).

Let us become increasingly grateful that He gave Himself, God's Lamb, a sacrifice for our salvation and, now glorified, acts as our Intercessor till our final triumph (Romans 8:34)!

Virginia Swauger Dongell, born in Stearns, KY, has lived in PA; Houghton, NY; NJ; and SC before returning to KY in November 2008. She and her late teacher/pastor husband, Dr. Herbert H. Dongell, had four children, including Dr. Joseph Dongell, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Originally published March 13, 2011

BECOMING POOR

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Here is another marvelous definition of “grace.” It is the movement from riches to poverty; from heavenly splendor to human limitation. In that process, Jesus gives up “equality with God” to gain “the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7).

How can this be gain? It can be gain only because it is God in Christ who is bringing about this mysterious change. This great identifying work of God is not only real but sufficient. I can therefore move as William Sleeper writes in his grand gospel song:

Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night,
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light,
Out of my sickness, into Thy health,
Out of my want and into Thy wealth,
Out of my sin and into Thyself,
Out of my shameful failure and loss,
Into the glorious gain of Thy cross,
Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come to Thee.

Through the incarnate Jesus’ self-emptying sacrifice on the cross, I can receive the grace needed to be transformed. As I allow Jesus to remold me, I can allow him to absorb the “bondage, sorrow, and night” and replace it with His “freedom, gladness, and light.” This is indeed the work of Christ on the Cross! Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Timothy Thomas, after years in the academic world, continues to teach the Wrestling with Truth Adult Bible Fellowship class, maintains a website, fixes the house, travels with his wife, Joyce, and tries to work on some writing and editing projects.

Originally Published April 7, 2012

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus" (John 12:20,21)

According to John, the conflict was mounting and Jesus knew His time was near. Raising Lazarus from the dead had created such a stir in Jerusalem "the whole world" was following him, and the Jewish leaders didn't like it.

But what intrigues me about this passage is that it was two Greeks, not Jews, who prompted Jesus to say "it is time." Up until now His ministry had been to Jews, and His followers were looking for a Jewish messiah to deliver Israel. In fact it was much later before the disciples finally comprehended that the gospel was for the Greeks and all Gentiles as well.

Jesus saw the bigger picture. He understood the promise to Abraham repeated by the prophets that through his offspring "all peoples on earth will be blessed." But He also saw the importance of the cross in order for this to happen. "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (v. 24).

Later in the passage, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (v.32). The crucifixion and resurrection opened salvation up to the world, to all peoples everywhere.

Paul Shingledeker is a World Gospel Mission (WGM) missionary working with Radio Lumière in Haiti. He is a "missionary kid" who was born and raised in Africa.

Originally Published March 6, 2012

THE LIVING MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.... And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Walking the cobble stone streets of Old Jerusalem recently, I was struck with the tension. Down the same streets Jesus once walked, everyone was walking towards places of prayer; the Jews to the Wailing Wall, Muslims to the Dome of the Rock. The tension between the groups was obvious. Distrust and strife has long separated them yet a common longing envelops them.

As I watched people pray I saw fervor in their eyes and a longing and straining for something just out of reach. Adherences to strict religious rules were falling short of fulfilling the innate desire for the peace and presence of God.

As I watched this modern religious and political tension play out, I couldn't help but imagine a scene from the *same street* 2000 years ago. Jesus was beaten and forced to carry His cross down these same streets. Religious and political tensions converged that day to result in His death.

As tension and strife divide these two groups, how interesting it is that their common longing for the presence of God holds the hope of bringing them together. Reconciliation between them lies in their reconciliation to God through Christ.

The painful trek down these streets that ended in the death of one man on a cross resulted in the opportunity for life and peace for those who walk these streets today. May our commitment be to "the message of reconciliation."

Dustin Weber and his wife Megan help lead the FM church planting initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa. They reside in the Middle East.

Originally Published March 9, 2012

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE

“Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32).

These are the words of the chief priests and the teachers of the law as the mocked Jesus hanging on the cross. But it was not just the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocking Jesus; v. 29 tells us that “Those who passed by hurled insults at him,” in the same manner as the chief priests and the teachers of the law. Yet it’s ironic that even in their mocking of Jesus, they unintentionally bore witness to Jesus’ miraculous power: “He saved others” v.31.

Right after this testimony, the religious leaders challenge Jesus to come down from the cross that they may believe. What more did Jesus have to do to prove he was their Messiah? He had already shown His power numerous times, but they wanted more proof. It’s a shame that so many people missed what Jesus’ Kingdom was truly about. They could not wrap their minds around a Messiah who would have victory through death. But the way of the Kingdom is the way of the cross.

Maybe today you have doubts about this Jesus. How could the Messiah of not just Israel but the entire human race submit himself to such a horrendous and humiliating death? Only a Messiah who knew what was required to fulfill God’s purpose in redeeming humanity. Imagine the love that held Jesus to the cross, as he endured the mocking and the pain, knowing full well that he possessed the power to save himself—yet knowing that he must endure the suffering and humiliation in order to save you, me, and all who would follow him.

Andrew Bentz is a second year Master of Divinity student at Asbury Theological Seminary, and a Conference Ministerial Candidate in the Southern Michigan Conference, FMC.

Originally Published March 24, 2012

SURROUNDED BY DARKNESS

Then He brought me back by the way of the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces the east; and it was shut.² And the LORD said to me, "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut (Ezekiel 44:1-2 NAS).

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray" (Matthew 26:36 NAS).

Following the last supper, when Jesus retreated from Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane, He had left the noise and activity of the city behind, in favor of the quiet dark. His surroundings were a metaphor for how He surely felt: alone and surrounded by darkness. Even though He had brought His three closest disciples with Him, they were of little comfort in the suffering He knew He would soon experience.

We can follow Jesus' example in that when He was experiencing His darkest hour, He turned to His Heavenly Father. We are invited to do the same. Though well-meaning friends and family may fail us, He never will.

The Garden of Gethsemane is just to the east of Jerusalem, facing what was known as the Golden Gate, or Beautiful Gate. The traditional Hebrew understanding of Ezekiel 44:1-3 was that the victorious Messiah would one day enter Jerusalem from the East, through the Golden Gate. Little could anyone guess that this scripture was fulfilled as a bound Jesus was led from the Garden of Gethsemane to His trial that dark night.

John Crow is a third year Master of Divinity student at Asbury Theological Seminary. He plans to one day pastor a Free Methodist Church. He is married to Mindy, and has 3 boys: Sergei, Josiah, and Stephen.

Originally Published March 22, 2012

INCARNATION'S GLORY

Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains....Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress (Psalm 107:10, 13).

Stephen, a Kenyan, cried out to the Lord from prison, "Lord, if you get me out of here I will serve you." He was in for 14 counts of violent crime: caught in a stolen car, 7 million shillings, 7 guns, 135 bullets, 4 different license plates. Truth is, he was guilty! Amazingly, God heard his prayer. Day after day in trial proceedings, one charge after another was dropped. Stephen was released, though he had suffered a number of beatings along the way. Next: to see about that vow. The first pastor he contacted rejected him as an ex-prisoner. Stephen had started thinking maybe he would abandon the whole "serving God" thing, when Paul, a Free Methodist church planter, met him. Paul encouraged him not to give up. In fact, their interactions eventually led to Stephen getting involved in the church planter training that Paul was doing.

Now Stephen is planting his first church. The glory of God has truly been revealed out of an impossible and deplorable situation.

Apparently the Psalmist knew of some people like Stephen, rebels, who under pressure turned back to get help from the Lord. He took that opportunity to reveal His glory by redeeming them. Our experience might be far less dramatic. But it teaches us that tough situations and highly troubled situations are sure candidates for God's glory to be revealed. The action in the lesson is to cry out to the Lord.

Mike Reynen lives with his wife, Vickie, and son Kyle in Nairobi, Kenya. Daughters Kelly and Kenzie are in the United States. He is Africa Area Director, Free Methodist World Missions.

Originally Published April 1, 2013—Easter Monday

HE'S GONE!

He is not here. See the place where they laid him (Mark 16:6b).

On several occasions, my wife and I have had special opportunities to visit Israel. Each time that we have gone there, we have visited two very interesting places. One is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The other is the Garden Tomb. Both purport to be the site where Jesus was buried. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built around 325 AD by the mother of Emperor Constantine to protect the site that was thought to be where Jesus was buried. Dr. George Turner, one of the founding members of the Wilmore Free Methodist Church, told me that the geographical evidence is very strong that this is really the place where Jesus was buried.

The other place, the Garden Tomb, was first noted about 125 years ago by a group of British Christians who bought the site and established the Garden Tomb Association. Since then many Christians have visited this site and felt certain that this is where Jesus was laid in the grave. I must admit, the Garden Tomb was more inspiring to me and when I picture Jesus being laid in the tomb, the image that comes to my mind is the Garden Tomb.

I do not know which location is the actual site where Jesus was buried. But I am sure of this. Both tombs are empty! The grave could not hold Him. He came out victorious and left an empty tomb. Where it happened is not all that important. What is important is that He is not there! He is Risen. Thanks be to God.

Earle Bowen is a member of Free Methodist Church New South Conference. He and his wife, Dorothy, are living in Avon Park, FL, while Earle teaches at H.E.A.R.T Missionary Training Institute.

Originally Published March 31, 2017

STOP THE MADNESS

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place....After he had dismissed them, he went up into the hills by himself to pray (Matthew 14:13, 23a).

I have always understood Lent to be a time of prayer, fasting, and quiet reflection. It is a time to reexamine one's calling in life—yes, every child of God has a calling in life—a chance to focus on God's presence in one's life. In some ways, the Lenten season is a time to "be," not "do." We live in a world that is full of activity—where the doing is all important. We can easily get too busy and feel overwhelmed from being over committed, even in our endeavor to serve others for the sake of Jesus.

Lent gives us the opportunity to stop the madness, to take a deep breath, to pull away and just be, to kneel before our Lord and Savior and truly take in the depth of His love for us. Quite often the best service in ministry that we can do for others is to recognize the need for taking care of ourselves and our families in the midst of the busyness.

Jesus gives us the example many times. In the passage above, He has just learned of John the Baptist's death so He drew away to a solitary place. Yet the crowds found Him and He had compassion on them and fed them spiritually and physically. Even then, He took the time to draw away by Himself to pray. He understood His need for spiritual and physical renewal. Do we understand that need? I challenge each of us to examine our own lives with prayer and fasting this season and allow God to renew and strengthen us for His honor and glory.

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Originally Published April 9, 2011

RESURRECTION HERE AND NOW

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

I have been reading N.T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. Wright believes we do not fully understand the importance of the resurrection and its significance not only for our future hope, but also our present living—and I agree. Paul devotes 1 Corinthians 15 to the importance of Jesus' resurrection. He writes, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). Most of us agree with Paul. Without the resurrection, there is no church, no faith, no *future* hope.

But sometimes we can lose sight of the present—what Jesus' resurrection means for us here and now. We may expect Paul to conclude the chapter with an instruction to, "kick up your feet, relax, and wait." But no! His conclusion is a call to go and *do*—always giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Why? Because as we see in the life of Jesus, the work of the Lord is not something that will only take place in the future, but happens here and now. Jesus brought hope and healing into lives of brokenness. Talk about glory in unexpected places—the here and now—the messiness of human life.

God is in the process of bringing about his Kingdom presently. In light of the future hope we have, we are called to be bearers of that hope to those around us here and now—and that work is never in vain.

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Originally Published March 14, 2013

I AM HERE TO BE SEEN

"Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate.... Peter looked straight at him... [and] said, "Look at us!... In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:2-6).

Seeing beggars and cripples in foreign countries takes a toll on my heart. What should we *do* when we walk past people like that? Most people pass by without looking. *Why?* Because when you make eye contact with someone, you enter into their situation. It compels you to act.

The Zulu people of Africa understand this concept. In their native greetings, they say "*Sawubona*" which literally means "*I see you,*" and the other person responds "*Ngihkona,*" literally, "*I am here to be seen.*" We don't have a direct translation in English but the inherent meaning in the Zulu greeting is that "*by recognizing me, you brought me into existence.*" When you see a person and greet them you're really looking deep into them and acknowledging their humanity, their dignity, their personality.

Peter and John chose to enter into one man's story. And in that moment the Kingdom of heaven invaded earth. A man who couldn't take a step could now leap and run! Something divine happens when we let others enter into our lives, when we really see them for who they are and acknowledge the image of God in them.

Christ entered into our story when He came to Earth and lived life as we do. As we enter into this Lenten season, will you remember to see others as Jesus sees you? Will you enter into another person's story?

Bethany Ury [Tonglamun] graduated from Asbury University in 2010, and has spent over a year serving in Bangkok, Thailand. She is currently fund-raising to return to Thailand with One Mission Society's human trafficking prevention ministry.

Originally Published March 16, 2013

A GIFT LIKE NO OTHER

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”(Matthew 26:28).

God created man holy and blessed him with the power of choice. However, through Satan’s wily temptation, he succumbed and sinned. What did God do? As justice demanded, He could have irrevocably sentenced mankind to eternity in hell. Or, He could have destroyed mankind, tweaked His creation model, and started over. But, no! Instead, God crafted a plan to accost, change, rehabilitate, and redeem man.

To accomplish this plan, God’s holy Son, Jesus, allowed the hate and rage of Satan to murder Him. Though in excruciating pain, He died voicing an amazing attitude: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus’ mission was to absorb with lamb-like meekness man’s extreme hostility and murderous intent. The God Who could not die, must die. Jesus’ death created the foundation for forgiveness. Every repentant, sin-confessing person could receive God’s freely-offered forgiveness by humbly requesting it.

To our knowledge, forgiveness was not offered to any other creature until mankind. Satan sinned, but was not offered forgiveness. The Bible indicates that even the angels, who are very knowledgeable concerning the activities of God, find the life and sacrificial death of the forgiving Savior marvelous. Without a doubt, we are one of a kind in the annals of eternal history. God’s great forgiveness comes from His amazing love, giving us the privilege of becoming part of His family. Thank God for this amazing gift!

Dennis Probst is happily married to Priscilla and is the father of four children. He and Priscilla have served for more than 35 years as missionaries in Japan with World Gospel Mission.

Originally Published April 4, 2011

HUMILITY

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8 RSV).

Eugene Peterson puts the Philippians truth like this: “Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.”

Jesus, in His humility and crucifixion, identifies with us. Who hasn’t suffered humiliation? What school child hasn’t felt embarrassment at not knowing an answer? What seasoned Christian hasn’t sensed deep spiritual inadequacy? Our incarnate Lord identifies with us. What comfort!

But there’s more. St. Augustine, remembering his wretchedly sinful past, says, “The way to Christ is first through humility, second through humility, third through humility.”

Mother Teresa confesses, “I am still learning.”

Therese of Lisieux, pin-pointing the pride that so easily comes with experience and learning, declares, “The closer one approaches God, the simpler one becomes.”

No wonder the Scriptures declare that the poor in spirit inherit the Kingdom (Matthew 5:3), and that the wise, given instruction, become wiser still (Proverbs 9:9).

The moments of mortification that come to us all yield rich fruit, provided we interpret them as stepping-stones to genuine modesty. Those who do, laugh at themselves and learn patience. Charles Wesley’s prayer sums it all up, “Fix in us Thy humble dwelling...”

Donald E. Demaray has taught at Asbury Theological Seminary since 1966, the same year he and Kathleen, his wife of 62 years, joined WFMC.

Originally Published March 31, 2011

A DAY OF DUST

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful..., and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster (Joel 2:12-13 ESV).

Lent is traditionally a time of mourning and grief, and I had never in my life been in a more appropriate frame of mind for the season than I was last year, 2010. My children and I were refugees, staying with my parents in Wilmore because the city where I usually live, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, was devastated by a 7.0 earthquake on Tuesday, January 12th. Although I was overwhelmed with gratitude to be alive, I was definitely mourning.

As Pastor Daryl put the ashes on my forehead at the Ash Wednesday service, he said, "Remember that you are from dust, and to dust you shall return."

Immediately I thought of that Tuesday night we spent on the soccer field at school because we were afraid to go into buildings, not knowing if they would collapse. A parent who was driving toward the school when the earthquake happened said he saw a huge cloud of dust rise from the city. It was the dust of buildings shaken and destroyed, and in that moment many human lives returned to dust as well.

Dust. It's all dust. Everything physical we value can be reduced to rubble and dust in a moment. But we who live in Haiti learned what lasts: God's grace and mercy, His steadfast love. Around the city, people gathered to praise God. In the midst of disaster, in the midst of dust, He was present.

Ruth Hersey and her husband, Steve, and their two children live in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where Ruth teaches middle school English at Quisqueya Christian School.

Originally Published March 11, 2011

LOVE THE DRIVING FORCE

After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put His own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him (Mark 15:20 NRSV).

It is hard to imagine the journey. The streets are so cluttered with shops bursting beyond their doors obstructing the passerby. Cameras everywhere. Guns hang in full view on the shoulders of barely-voting-age youth. Each step is to navigate the sea of people. And the heat! The nose draws in and dissects the information: food cooking, humanity, waste and something else, too. Distractions pull from every side and at every sense. What would drive you to push through? Why carry on when there are tee-shirts to buy, people to see and food to enjoy?

Jesus didn't encounter these modern trappings on the Via Dolorosa, but He did have distractions and detractors. He carried a burden much heavier than the wood on His shoulders and much heavier than the Jewish notion of sacrifice as a substitute for sin.

Love was the focused driving force behind each step of Jesus. God's intense desire for friendship with His creation motivated that journey. Competition for our attention is fierce, but there is more to Jesus than a passing glance affords. His loving friendship bears the burden of our sin that we cannot carry alone. His love will never let us go but continually pursues us, wooing us, never tiring, never giving up until the walls of pride, hate and indifference are down forever.

May the absolute vastness of Infinite Love arrest us, renew, focus and lead us along the Lenten journey.

Byron Skaggs loved living in Egypt for 10 years and enjoyed traveling to Israel multiple times. He resides in Wilmore with Jen, Jonathan and Aubri, and works at BEJA Environmental, Inc.

Originally Published March 27, 2012

WHEN THE RESURRECTION BECOMES REAL

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24).

All of Jesus' followers believed in the resurrection— theoretically. They were all "Bible-believing" Jews who affirmed the doctrine of resurrection, much as we do when we repeat the Apostles' Creed. Martha of Bethany answered correctly, theologically, when Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." She said, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:23-24). She believed in the concept of resurrection, but it hadn't become personal to her—yet.

One by one, the resurrection became personal to all the disciples, but each in his or her own way. At the tomb on Easter morning, the risen Jesus became real to Mary when He spoke her name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus grasped the reality when He broke bread in their home. Thomas believed when Jesus showed him His open wounds.

For Martha and Mary the doctrine became reality when Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb. It is important for all of us to affirm the doctrine of resurrection. It is more important that the resurrection becomes a personal reality in our lives. There is no set formula for this event, just as there was no standard way the first-century followers of Jesus came into a personal knowledge of the risen Lord. However, when they did experience the reality of victory over death, it changed their lives and their message. Jesus was no longer just the Teacher they admired and followed; He was the Risen Savior whom they worshipped and proclaimed.

Mike and Martha Henderson direct a mission called Heart of Africa, which is based here in Wilmore.

Originally Published March 30, 2013



THE CROWD AROUND THE CROSS

Lord Jesus, when we stand afar
And gaze upon thy holy cross,
In love of thee and scorn of self,
O may we count the world as loss!

Give us an ever-living faith
To gaze beyond the things we see;
And in the mystery of thy death
Draw us and all men after thee!

William W. How

Martha Evans Sparks, editor

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the NIV

Abbreviation WFMC = Wilmore Free Methodist Church